

**CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN  
LITERATURE**



**Georgiana-Elena DILĂ**

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**EDITURA UNIVERSITARIA**  
**Craiova, 2016**

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**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**

**DILĂ, GEORGIANA-ELENA**

**Critical perspectives on American literature / Dilă Georgiana-Elena. -**

Craiova : Universitaria, 2016

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-14-1108-5

821.111(73).09

## INTRODUCTION

American literature is one of the most studied and researched domains around the world and its variety represents one of the traits that make it so appealing to the general public. Throughout time not only the main genres have developed but what makes it even appealing is a minority literature that was created embracing diversity and having a specific focus on themes that certain groups could easily connect to.

The present study focuses on some of the most important American writers revealing unique characteristics for each author, highlighting the reason why they are considered some of the most well-known names in world literature and how their work is viewed by readers and critics. Their personal lives have also been brought into discussion as part of their work is autobiographical and many of the personal experiences have been impregnated on their literary productions.

The book takes us through different ages and styles bringing together authors that are valuable to the American legacy and that are appreciated and read by other cultures as well. Many of them are considered as part of the canon and their works are known worldwide, being studied in universities and colleges with great interest.

The writers chosen for the research are presented in a chronological order ranging from poets to playwrights and novelists embracing the American values and culture revealing their heritage as part of their living on the American continent and how this affected their personal and literary growth. All of

them chose to write about issues that concern the country, its inhabitants and, at times, the entire world.

Starting from Robert Frost and his poetry, which was considered traditionalist and pastoral, even though the writer clearly presented elements of Modernism in his work, being considered a poet which brought joy and understanding to the nation. The second author is Eugene O'Neill and his desire to make the stage a place for communication with the public on more serious matters than before his time when it was considered more a type of entertainment. His realism was associated with other great names such as Anton Chekov and Henrik Ibsen.

The book moves towards the Lost Generation where great names from the American letters manifested their disillusion with the decline of the American Dream and the social issues that were not properly approached, presenting disapproval, depression and superficiality.

F. Scott Fitzgerald revealed the world of the Jazz Age and the Roaring 20s where everything forbidden and illegal was sought by people, where the loss of values and principles was obvious and the decline of the society was imminent. William Faulkner in his daring and somehow shocking novels, which touched on topics that surprised and offended many people wanted to present the issues that should have been of great concern to the community and not ignored as it often was the case.

Ernest Hemingway was one of the writers who explored his passion for adventure and always looking for something new and challenging that could catch his attention. His work, which was considered the premier American war novel,

perfectly captures the trauma of the war and portrays characters that cannot deal with pain and so they lose connection with others and this makes their burden even heavier.

John Steinbeck explored the life of the simple, poor people and sympathized with their needs and struggles, while pointing to the flaws of the common order of things that had brought upon such a devastating situation during the Great Depression. His accurate details of the life on a farm are very helpful when it comes to positioning oneself in the story of a certain character.

The study continues with two of the most renowned playwrights of American literature – namely Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. One represents the South; while the other is part of the Northern culture as this can be observed in the fact that they have different styles and approaches. Even though they wrote in the same time period they explored social problems in personal ways. While Williams' work seemed more sentimental, Miller was considered a realist always ruling for order and for doing the right thing. The families from the plays both of them present to the audience are flawed and overwhelmed by the harsh life they have to endure, the struggle being more a psychological one. Their characters are trapped in lives they do not want to live and find escape in very tragic manners.

Truman Capote is in himself a character fascinated with nightlife and social meetings. The manner in which he introduces his characters is well-crafted and their stories are always deeply rooted in psychology revealing how generations changed and regarded life.

The last two authors of the study belong to minorities and their work has been praised for the insights they offered to the general public related to their cultural inheritance. Both Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston have explored the depth of their experiences and have had no fear in analysing their affiliation to an ethnic group. The canon nowadays also includes works of authors that unveil their American experience while belonging to two cultures and the impact such an experience has had on their personal development.

The American authors that are part of this study stand for, not only, different ages, but they have been chosen to offer a better perspective of what a variety their culture embraces and by doing so the intention was to familiarize the readers with important aspects of the American literary and cultural history.

## Robert Frost's Poetic Legacy

Robert Frost was born on 26 March 1874, in San Francisco, California where he spent the first decade of his life. His father's death of tuberculosis made his mother decide to move with her son and daughter to Lawrence, Massachusetts where the grandparents lived. Frost was a very good student and graduated first in high school alongside the young woman he loves who was to become his wife, Elinor White. He attended Dartmouth College for a short period of time and then returned home to take up jobs that offered him no satisfaction. His first poem was published in 1894 in *The Independent* and was entitled "My Butterfly: an Elegy". The success made Frost more confident and he found the courage to propose to Elinor who was in college and who turned him down because she wanted to graduate first. After a trip to Virginia he proposed again and this time she accepted so they were married on 19 December 1895 having their first child one year later.

The young man wanted to go to college as well so in 1897 he started attending Harvard University. Unfortunately, his health prevented him from staying longer than two years and so he returned to Lawrence where his wife was expecting a second baby.

In 1900 the Frost family moved to a farm in New Hampshire where they lived for 12 years. There were harsh times for the poet as his first son died of cholera, and even though Elinor gave birth to four other children the last of whom died a few weeks after being born. Frost's children had very many problems as one son committed suicide, one daughter developed mental health problems and another daughter who

died after giving birth. As if these problems were not enough for the family the farm life did not seem to fit the couple and their activities were rather unsuccessful. As time passed the poet got accustomed to the rural life and found inspiration for his poems as he set many of them in a rural area.

After 12 years on the farm the family decided to move to England hoping the poet could publish his work. His thoughts were the right ones as in a few months a publisher printed his first book of poems entitled *A Boy's Will*, followed by *North of Boston* a year later. His meetings with Ezra Pound and Edward Thomas were very important for Frost as he received encouragement from the two who observed his potential. His most famous poem "The Road Not Taken" was inspired by Thomas' long walks and his indecisions. His stay in England was very significant for the poet, but unfortunately, it was cut short as the World War I broke out and Frost was forced to return to America with his family.

The popularity he had gained in England had spread to the United States as well and Frost found a publisher who would stay with him for the rest of his life. In 1916 Frost's *Mountain Interval* was published. The poet's popularity was growing and it is even said that he sent the *Atlantic Monthly* the exact poems that they had rejected before his leaving for England.

In 1915 the Frost family moved to Franconia, New Hampshire where the poet started teaching at colleges such as Dartmouth, Amherst (where he taught for 22 years) and the University of Michigan while continuing to write. For more than forty years Frost was involved in teaching at Middlebury College, on its campus in Ripton, Vermont.