

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), Scottish novelist, essayist, and poet, won international fame as a storyteller of extraordinary power.

A sickly child, Stevenson spent much of his childhood in bed. From this past sprang his well-loved poetry collection, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, which cheerfully views his bedroom world as "the pleasant land of counterpane," but reveals as well a yearning to know the wide world outside.

When Stevenson contracted TB, he set out in search of a climate more gentle than that of Scotland. After wandering through Europe, America, and the South Pacific, he and his family finally settled in Samoa, where his health improved for a time.

As a writer, Stevenson showed a graceful style, magnificent inventive powers, and a superb mastery of the dramatic incident. *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* are among the most popular and absorbing adventure stories in English literature. Also widely read is *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the disturbing tale of a dual personality. In this work, Stevenson explores ethical problems and the darker side of humankind.

Herman Melville (1819–1891), a novelist who died in obscurity, has since his death come to be recognized as one of the great American authors.

Melville sailed to England as a cabin boy when he was 17 and fell in love with the sea. Four years later he set sail on a whaling ship bound for the South Pacific. His years on board ship and among the Polynesian islanders provided rich and exotic material for his later writing.

Two books about Polynesia, *Typee* and *Omoo*, achieved instant popularity. But Melville was not content with travel adventures, and began to write novels with a deeper symbolic significance. These were attacked by critics and ignored by the reading public. One such failure, *Moby Dick, or The White Whale*, was to become an American classic. On one level a whaling adventure, it is at the same time a profound study of two opposing spiritual forces. It follows the obsessive quest of the one-legged Captain Ahab to find and destroy Moby Dick, the great white whale that tore off his leg at the knee.

Melville's literary genius lies in his expertise as a storyteller and in the power of his symbolism. His artful books make compelling reading.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), one of America's greatest writers, is famed for his dark, mysterious tales of horror and his haunting lyric poems.

Orphaned as a young child, Poe struggled all his life with alcoholism and mental depression. He was devastated by the illness and death of his young wife, and died just two years later himself at the early age of 40.

During his lifetime, Poe received some praise but little pay for his work. His genius was recognized only much later, in light of its powerful influence on such notable French authors as Baudelaire.

As an editor of several literary magazines, Poe wrote America's first modern literary criticism. His stories of detection, including "The Gold Bug" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," are regarded as forerunners of the modern mystery genre. Among his most popular works are his skillful tales of psychological horror and suspense, "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," as well as his melancholy poetic masterpiece "The Raven."

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

"The Raven"

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is generally considered the greatest English dramatist the world has known. Little is known of his life, but he was a recognized actor and playwright in his day.

Shakespeare's plays are of three basic types. The histories, such as *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, chronicle events of his time; the comedies, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, are light, fanciful pieces. The tragedies, with their profound exploration of the human spirit, represent his most powerful drama; the finest of these are *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *MacBeth*, and *King Lear*.

Shakespeare's greatest dramatic gift is his ability to portray all types of people, from peasants to kings, from court ladies to common criminals. His vivid characters are as alive today as they were 400 years ago. Also remarkable is his eloquent use of language; no other writer is so often quoted.

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players . . .*

As You Like It, I. vii. 139

Mark Twain is the pen name for **Samuel Clemens** (1835–1910), noted humorist, newspaperman, riverboat pilot, lecturer, and one of America's greatest authors.

Twain grew up in a small town on the Mississippi River in the era of bustling, picturesque river traffic. He went west as a young man, working as a reporter while observing frontier life in the rough mining camps. Both experiences furnished colorful material for his writing.

Unsurpassed as a humorist, Twain was a master of such techniques as exaggeration and mock seriousness. *Huckleberry Finn*, widely regarded as his greatest book, probes the conflict between individual freedom and the constraints of society. Although filled with humorous anecdotes, Twain's masterpiece also embraces painful truths, disclosing a cynical wisdom and the seeds of bitterness that characterize much of his later writing.

Twain's prose was unique in its time for its use of the sounds and rhythms of everyday speech. He is credited with starting a new style of narrative, later taken up by Hemingway, Steinbeck, and a host of other modern American novelists.

Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), an English satirist and clergyman, was born and educated in Ireland. He learned about the politics of his day while serving as secretary to a retired diplomat, and wrote many political pamphlets in addition to the biting satires for which he is remembered.

Swift's first important satires were *The Battle of the Books*, which expressed contempt for the literary criticism of his day, and *The Tale of a Tub*, an allegory ridiculing insincerity in religion. With the witty Alexander Pope and several other English literary figures, Swift formed the Scriblerus Club. Together they planned to write the bogus memoirs of fictional "Martinus Scriblerus," mocking narrow-minded scholarship.

Swift's masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels*, often misread as an adventure story for children, is in fact a bitter satire on the personal, political, and social corruption of the human race. The terms "lilliputian" and "yahoo" derive from this classic work. Although much satire can be understood only in the context of history, Swift's best work remains relevant today with its blunt mockery of universal human folly.

Victor Hugo (1802–1885), a vigorous and prolific French writer, is one of the great names in all European literary history.

A lyric poet, novelist, and dramatist, Hugo was a leading figure in the rebellious Romantic movement in France. He showed an enormous capacity for work, sometimes writing as much as 10,000 words a day. In addition to his literary work, Hugo was active in politics, demonstrating an earnest love of liberty and passion for social and political reform.

Although successful in more than one genre, Hugo is best known worldwide for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables*. Both are long novels featuring colorful descriptive language, a wide range of characters, and intense, action-packed melodrama.

One dominant theme in his long novels is an emotional interest in the common people and concern for their suffering. In his will, Hugo requested that his remains be carried to the Panthéon in a pauper's hearse. This was his final expression of a feeling of unity with *les misérables*, or "the unfortunates" of the earth.

Charles Dickens (1812–1870), the most popular English writer of his time, is well-known for his satirical humor and keen sense of characterization.

Much of the material in Dickens' novels is drawn from his own unhappy childhood. With his father in debtor's prison, Dickens (still just a boy of 12) went to work in a ramshackle warehouse. Despite a rocky start, he soon made his way in the world. His first satirical sketches, including the series that came to be called *The Pickwick Papers*, met with wide success. Soon he was writing long serial novels for the popular monthly journals.

Dickens' work reflects his powers of observation, an ear for the turns of common speech, and an instinct for the drama of daily life. His caricatures, many of hideously wicked or cruel figures, were useful in his crusades for social reform and aroused public sentiment against prison inequities and the abuses of children. Such titles as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations* bring to life the bustling city streets and the country lanes of Victorian England. *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel of the French revolution, is considered his most tightly-structured dramatic work.

Jack London (1876–1916) was the highest paid and best known writer in America in his time, a spinner of spirited and exciting adventure stories.

Brought up in poverty, London went to work at an early age delivering ice and working in mills and canneries. From age 15 to 22, this daring young man lived the life of a sailor, a hobo, a gold seeker in the Klondike, and a militant Socialist. Later he was a war correspondent in Japan and in Mexico.

London's literary career began with the sale of a number of magazine stories, later collected as *The Son of the Wolf*. Much of his best fiction was drawn from his experiences in the Alaskan gold rush, including *The Call of the Wild*, which won worldwide acclaim. London's vigorous characters are primitive, brutal, and cruel; he writes with a powerful realism, revealing his socialist leanings in his sympathies for the poor. A disciplined writer who made himself write at least a thousand words a day, London completed more than 50 books in 16 years. Although his writing brought him great wealth, money slipped easily through his fingers. Plagued with alcoholism, tired and unhappy, London took his own life at the age of 40.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) is considered one of the finest literary craftsmen in American history. Born in New England, Hawthorne wrote many stories and novels exploring the Puritan spirit of his ancestors. The nature of sin and the effects of guilt and repentance are recurring themes in his work, much of which is set in the historical past.

Hawthorne, the son of a sea captain, grew up a shy and reflective child, confined for some time by illness to a gloomy old house that may have been the model for his *House of the Seven Gables*. As an adult he briefly tried communal living, but found it not to his taste. Thereafter he supported his family and his literary efforts with customs house work.

Twice-Told Tales, a collection of short fictional pieces, was Hawthorne's first important book. It was another 12 years before *The Scarlet Letter* brought him international fame. His best writing is characterized by a clear, precise style; it portrays a shadowy atmosphere with characters involved in deeply personal emotional struggles. Hawthorne's use of symbolism and allegory influenced his contemporary, Herman Melville, as well as such later American writers as James and Faulkner.

Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), a Danish writer, made his name immortal in world literature as a creator of wise and wondrous fairy tales.

Born the son of a poor shoemaker, Andersen grew up in a one-room house on an island off the coast of Denmark. Scenes from his childhood—the forests and flowers, the family garden, the black cooking pots and the pretty cups in the kitchen, the toys his father made him—all come to life again in his picturesque stories, many of which are based on folk tales he heard from his grandmother.

Andersen's first desire was to be an actor, but he had no luck in the theater. He wrote many plays, poems, travel stories, and novels, hoping to establish himself as a serious writer. His first fairy tales he considered trifling—stories told simply for the amusement of a little girl he knew. But their whimsy, their compassion, and their imaginative force struck a chord in his readers. Among the popular favorites are such sprightly, simple tales as "The Princess and the Pea," "The Snow Queen," and "The Steadfast Tin Soldier." People all over the world know and understand the perceptive moral significance of "The Ugly Duckling" and "The Emperor's Clothes."

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), novelist, moral philosopher, and social reformer, is one of the foremost Russian writers of all time.

Although born to a wealthy family (he was a Count), Tolstoy would later renounce his aristocratic title and all it stood for. He enjoyed a happy childhood, but after a stint in the army and a trip to Europe, Tolstoy grew disillusioned with the institutions of society, church, and state. For a time, he championed the education of peasant children. In his later life, Tolstoy took a vow of poverty and went to work as a simple laborer, refusing to accept any money from the sale of his books.

Much of Tolstoy's writing was moral and religious, based on a love for all humanity and freedom from hatred and violence. But it was his outstanding novels that brought him worldwide fame. Greatest of these is *War and Peace*, a monumental work portraying more than 500 characters from every social level and weaving together historical, social, and political themes to create a rich tapestry of Russian life. In another great work, *Anna Karenina*, one character's search for meaning in life echoes Tolstoy's own moral struggles.

Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) is considered one of the best American short-story writers. Strongly influenced by her Southern Catholic upbringing, O'Connor wrote many short stories and two novels: *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*.

O'Connor began writing at an early age. One of her strongest childhood memories was of a local newspaper journalist photographing her pet chicken, which could walk both backward and forward. She was interested in birds with deformities, as well as characters who were maimed and grotesque. At twenty-five O'Connor became ill with lupus, the same crippling disease that caused the death of her father. She moved to her mother's farm in rural Georgia, where she kept flocks of peacocks and wrote until her death at thirty-nine.

The characters in O'Connor's stories are misfits and religious fanatics, obsessed by their search for salvation. Often they are headed for disaster, such as the family who encounters an escaped convict in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Yet even when tragedy befalls them, Flannery O'Connor's characters come to self-understanding—or a final moment of grace.

"You know," Daddy said, "it's some that can live their whole lives without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters."

A Good Man Is Hard to Find

Willa Cather (1873–1947) is considered one of the best American writers of her time. She wrote her first five books about the Nebraska frontier, where she grew up. Of these, *My Antonia* is the most widely read. It describes the triumph of Swedish immigrants fighting to survive the harsh lands of the Great Plains in the 1890s.

Cather was educated at home until high school. Later she worked as a journalist, a high school principal, and a staff writer and managing editor of *McClure's Magazine* in New York City. Her first book, *O Pioneers!*, was published after she turned forty.

Though a very private person, Cather was driven to reveal her inner self through her stories. Many of the characters in her novels—women and men—struggled with the same problems as she did: youthful idealism versus realism, the victory of moral over material values, and the triumph of persistence over hardship. Myra Driscoll, a character in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*, says that religion "is different from everything else, because in religion seeking is finding." Willa Cather's last four books, including *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, reveal her growing belief that spiritual values are the best life has to offer.

There are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.

O Pioneers!

George Eliot (1819–1880) was the pen name of a famous novelist whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. Because Eliot's unconventional behavior during the Victorian era was often considered scandalous, she used a male pen name to "give her fiction a fair hearing." It is no accident that Eliot's best novel, *Middlemarch*, is about her main character Dorothea Brooke's deepest aspirations in conflict with a rigid society.

After her mother's death, George Eliot left school at the age of seventeen to keep house for her father. She studied at home on an estate in the English countryside. Because of her keen intellect and work as an editor, the painfully shy Eliot gradually befriended prominent literary figures. One of these men, George Henry Lewes, became her lifelong companion and encouraged development of her special gifts as a writer.

Eliot's first three novels, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*, were immediate successes. The publication of *Middlemarch* ten years later made her independently wealthy. George Eliot's popularity resulted from her ability to write about her characters with sympathy—and to show what was extraordinary in the lives of ordinary people.

If youth is the season of hope, it is often so only in the sense that our elders are hopeful about us.

Middlemarch

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851) was a British novelist who completed her best work, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, before she was even twenty years old. Written partly in response to a competition to write a ghost story, *Frankenstein* is about a scientist who creates life without concern for moral issues—and is forced to confront the monster he gives life to. It was published anonymously and became a literary sensation in London.

Mary Shelley's mother, the feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft, died giving birth to her. Shelley was raised by her father, a philosopher. When she was only fifteen, the shy and intelligent girl met her future husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. She married him at the age of nineteen. Only one of their four children survived infancy, and Mary Shelley became a widow at twenty-four when her husband drowned.

Writing to support herself and her son, Shelley overcame many obstacles. She published six novels, many short stories, and several biographies and travel books of lasting literary value. Next to *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man* is Mary Shelley's best-known work. Set in the future, it describes the destruction of the human race by plague as seen from the eyes of the last survivor.

*I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom
I had created.*

Frankenstein

Edith Wharton (1862–1937) became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Age of Innocence*. In her many stories and novels, Wharton satirized American Victorian society.

Wharton was born into a wealthy New York family. She began writing when she was about eleven—and published a volume of poetry at sixteen. Wharton later settled in France with her husband, but difficulties with the marriage caused an emotional breakdown. She turned her attention to social activities instead, receiving awards from France and Belgium for her work with refugees during World War I.

The House of Mirth established Wharton's reputation as a leading writer. Lily Bart, the main character, is a social climber who learns about unselfishness and responsibility only after she has lost everything. In this and other stories, Wharton attacked a society that encouraged women to rely on beauty alone.

One of Wharton's best books is *Ethan Frome*, a tragic love story set on a poor New England farm. Unlike her other novels, it is about the passion and suffering of simple people. All of Edith Wharton's stories, whatever their setting, reflect her belief that the true drama in life takes place within the soul.

*There are two ways of spreading light: to be
The candle or the mirror that reflects it.*

Vesalius in Zante

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was a novelist, diarist, and literary critic. She coined the phrase “moments of being” to refer to a character’s sudden awareness of emotions and memories. The publication of three major works—*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*—firmly established her literary reputation.

Even as a child, Woolf knew she would be a novelist. She studied languages and wrote articles for a weekly family newspaper. Later she married Leonard Woolf, and their home in London became the gathering place for the famous Bloomsbury Group of writers, artists, and intellectuals. This was a good atmosphere for her writing—but it still took Woolf six years to finish her first novel. In fact, she struggled with the form of the novel throughout her life. After completing each book, Woolf collapsed both physically and emotionally. At fifty-nine, she finally drowned herself in a river near her home.

Woolf is considered one of the most innovative writers of the twentieth century. She was also a passionate feminist. In *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf spoke out against the cultural barriers to being both a writer and a woman. Her letters and diaries, published after her death, are a record of the joy and pain of the creative process.

The beauty of the world has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.

The Waves

Emily Brontë (1818–1848) startled Victorian England with the tragic story of *Wuthering Heights*. Her famous novel is set on the Yorkshire moors in England. Brontë grew up near these *moors*—desolate wastelands that are often wet and cold. The intensity of her *Wuthering Heights* has become the model by which all other Gothic romances are judged.

The daughter of a poor, harsh-tempered clergyman, Brontë lived an isolated life. Her vivid imagination inspired creation of the fantasy world of Gondal, the setting for her best dramatic poems. Yet she poured all of herself into one novel, *Wuthering Heights*. To protect her privacy, she used a pen name rather than reveal her true identity. Her frank portrayal of the passionate main characters, Heathcliff and Catherine, was so shocking to reviewers they thought the author had to be a man.

Emily Brontë's sisters, Anne and Charlotte, were also writers. Together they became known as the "Brontë sisters." While Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* met with immediate success, *Wuthering Heights* was not considered a masterpiece until after Emily Brontë's death at the age of thirty.

I . . . listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.

Wuthering Heights

Zora Neale Hurston (c. 1900–1960) explored and celebrated a rich, complex African-American cultural heritage as no other author of her time. Her stories came from her experiences growing up in an all-black town in the South. She wrote: “I am not tragically colored . . . No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

When Hurston was nine, her mother died. She was forced to leave school at thirteen to care for her brother’s children. In college, she worked to pay her own way for the first few years. Later Hurston studied under the famous anthropologist Franz Boas, who profoundly influenced her work. He arranged for a fellowship for her to collect folklore in the rural South, which resulted in her first book, *Mules and Men*. Hurston’s books were controversial during her time—partly because she included African-American dialect and storytelling techniques.

Hurston’s female protagonists depend on great inner strength to survive terrible circumstances. Her popular *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of Janie, a woman who never loses sight of her own ideals while searching for love and happiness in the rural South.

Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman ought be and to do.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Jane Austen (1775–1817), an English novelist, was only 20 when she began to write the handful of novels that are now considered among the best in English literature.

The seventh child of a country clergyman, Austen lived a sheltered, domestic life completely apart from the London literary scene. Her narrow, rural, middle-class world was the subject of her novels, yet she wrote with such brilliant wit and wisdom, portraying all the subtleties and complexities of human nature, that the reader recognizes her narrow world as a microcosm of all society.

Austen published just six novels before her death at 42, including *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. Her characteristic theme is that maturity is achieved through the loss of illusions. Austen's enduring place in literature is assured by her accurate, comic portraits of ordinary people, her stylistic perfection, and her gift for creating interesting stories out of everyday affairs.

I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle.

Pride and Prejudice

Lady Murasaki Shikibu (978–1018) wrote the world's oldest novel, *The Tale of Genji*, a thousand years ago in Japan. The stories and characters were based on her keen observations of life in the royal palace, where Murasaki served as a lady-in-waiting for several years. Many critics consider *The Tale of Genji* to be the masterpiece of all Japanese literature.

Lady Murasaki was born into an eminent family and educated at home. Because her father and brother were well-known poets and scholars, she was able to learn more than was thought proper for a woman of her time. Yet in her diary Murasaki records her father's disappointment that she was not a boy.

At about the age of twenty she married a man of forty-seven and bore a daughter—but her husband died the following year. In her grief, she began work on *The Tale of Genji*. Lady Murasaki had no model to follow. She created the structure of the novel as she went along. The popularity of her manuscripts, passed around and read in handwritten notebooks, brought her fame and good standing as a royal attendant. However, because of the inferior social position of Japanese women, Murasaki Shikibu was not given the regard she deserved until many centuries later. Without *The Tale of Genji*, the details of an entire period of Japanese history would have been lost.

... it is my destiny to be solitary.

Murasaki Shikibu Nikki (Lady Murasaki's Diary)

Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) was one of the best-known experimental writers of the first half of this century. Her interest in the inner experience of her characters led Stein to develop a *stream-of-consciousness* style of writing. Thus, her stories and plays often include no punctuation or plot.

Stein's adolescence in Oakland, California was painful and lonely. Her mother died when she was sixteen, and her father when she was nineteen. Because her father was a difficult man, she experienced a sense of freedom after his death. Stein moved to Paris with her brother as soon as she could. A few years later, she began her lifelong companionship with her friend Alice B. Toklas. Their home became a literary salon and art gallery visited by Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, Thornton Wilder, and others. Perhaps Stein's greatest contribution was her encouragement of such writers and artists.

Of all Stein's novels, poems, short stories, plays, and essays, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is the easiest to read and understand. It is actually the autobiography of Stein written as she believed Toklas might have done it. *Tender Buttons* records Gertrude Stein's own meditations in verse and is a good example of her attempt to describe what she called "the living moment."

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

Sacred Emily

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873–1954) was the leading French author of her day. Few writers have revealed as much about themselves through their stories. Just as Colette did, her characters struggle with love, jealousy, and independence.

Colette spent her early years in the French Burgundy countryside. Her mother, Sido, was a remarkable woman whom Colette idealized in later autobiographical work. At twenty, Colette married a writer. He encouraged Colette to write down the stories about her childhood she'd told him—and published them under his own pen name, “Willy.” The result was the first of her “Claudine” series: *Claudine at School*.

After leaving her husband, Colette began a career on stage as a dancer and mime. She also wrote the first of her independent works, *The Vagabond*. Colette's female protagonists have strength of will, courage, and physical endurance—all considered masculine qualities at that time. *Chéri*, her best-known novel, contrasts a strong woman with a weak, younger man.

Even in old age, Colette wrote in order to live more fully. Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette was the first Frenchwoman to be given a state funeral, the highest posthumous honor a French citizen can receive.

*Whether you are dealing with an animal or a child,
to convince is to weaken.*

Le Pur et l'Impur (The Pure and the Impure)