

UNIT 53. THE NOVEL, THE TALE AND THE POETRY IN THE UNITED STATES: HERMAN MELVILLE, EDGAR ALLAN POE AND WALT WHITMAN.

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1. Introduction

The nineteenth century was a formative period in American literature, marked by the emergence of distinctive voices that shaped the literary identity of the United States. This unit examines three of its seminal authors: Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman. Melville is renowned for his complex novels exploring human nature and the sea; Poe for his pioneering tales of mystery and the macabre; and Whitman for his revolutionary poetic style that celebrates democracy and the self.

By exploring their works, students gain insight into the cultural, social and philosophical currents of 19th-century America, while developing their linguistic and literary competence. Key texts include Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Poe's short stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

The analysis draws upon critical studies including *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Meyers, 2010), *American Literature and Culture* (Ellis, 1998) and *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Silverman, 1991). The pedagogical section proposes strategies for integrating these authors and their historical context into the EFL classroom, in alignment with the principles established by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001).

2. Historical and Cultural Context of 19th-century American Literature

The nineteenth century in the United States was characterized by rapid expansion, social upheaval and the quest for a distinct national identity. The tensions of slavery, industrialization, westward expansion and the Civil War profoundly influenced literary production. Writers grappled with questions of freedom, morality, nature and human psychology.

Romanticism flourished in the early part of the century, emphasizing emotion, individualism and the sublime, while later movements such as Transcendentalism promoted spiritual connection with nature and self-reliance. Gothic elements introduced by Poe added a dimension of psychological horror and mystery to American letters.

This period also witnessed the evolution of American literary forms, including the novel, the short story and poetry that broke with European traditions to express uniquely American experiences and values.

3. Herman Melville: The Novel and the Sea

Herman Melville (1819–1891) was a novelist, short story writer and poet whose works interrogate human existence, morality and the struggle between man and nature. His most celebrated novel, *Moby-Dick* (1851), tells the story of Captain Ahab's obsessive quest for the white whale, symbolizing the conflict between individual will and the indifferent universe.

Melville's prose is notable for its narrative complexity, philosophical depth and rich symbolism. He draws upon biblical, mythological and literary allusions, blending adventure with metaphysical inquiry. Other works, such as *Billy Budd* and *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, explore themes of innocence, authority and alienation, highlighting Melville's preoccupation with the human condition.

Melville's work initially received mixed reviews and only achieved widespread recognition posthumously, influencing modernist writers and continuing to be a cornerstone in American literary studies.

4. Edgar Allan Poe: The Tale and the Gothic Imagination

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) is widely regarded as the master of the American short story, particularly in the genres of mystery, horror and detective fiction. His tales combine psychological insight with gothic atmosphere, exploring themes of death, madness and the supernatural.

Stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Masque of the Red Death* exemplify his skill in creating suspense and exploring the darker facets of the human psyche. Poe also pioneered the detective fiction genre with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, introducing the archetype of the brilliant investigator. In addition to his tales, Poe was a poet of great influence, with works such as *The Raven* evoking musicality, melancholy and gothic beauty.

Poe's innovations in narrative technique, symbolism and psychological depth continue to impact literature and popular culture.

5. Walt Whitman: The Poetry of Democracy and Individualism

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) revolutionized American poetry with *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a collection that celebrates the individual, democracy, nature and the human spirit. Whitman's free verse style broke away from traditional poetic forms, embodying the expansive possibilities of American life.

His poetry embraces inclusivity and the common man, reflecting the pluralistic society of the United States and championing equality and personal freedom. Themes such as the body, sexuality, spirituality and the cycle of life are explored with candidness and lyrical intensity.

Whitman's influence extends to modernist and contemporary poetry, and his work remains a central reference in the study of American literature and culture.

6. Literary Influences and Interrelations

Melville, Poe and Whitman, despite their distinctive genres and styles, share a common engagement with the complexities of the human experience in a rapidly changing America. Their works reflect overlapping concerns with identity, mortality and the relationship between individual and society.

Melville's dark symbolism and philosophical inquiries resonate with Poe's gothic preoccupations, while Whitman's optimistic vision offers a counterbalance emphasizing hope and inclusion. Collectively, they represent a broad spectrum of American literary innovation that challenged European conventions and helped define a national literature.

7. Pedagogical Applications in the EFL Classroom

Teaching Melville, Poe and Whitman in the EFL classroom provides rich opportunities for linguistic development and cultural exploration. Their varied genres support diverse activities that enhance reading comprehension, critical analysis, vocabulary acquisition and creative expression.

Suggested activities include reading and discussion of selected excerpts to practice inferencing and interpretative skills, creative writing inspired by gothic or poetic themes, vocabulary exercises focusing on literary and thematic language, multimedia presentations on historical contexts, and comparative analyses to foster critical thinking. Incorporating these authors also promotes intercultural competence and aligns with communicative and content-based approaches outlined in the CEFR.

8. Conclusion

Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman are foundational figures in American literature whose works embody the tensions and aspirations of nineteenth-century United States. Melville's complex novels explore profound philosophical themes; Poe's tales probe the depths of the human psyche through gothic narrative; and Whitman's poetry celebrates democracy, individuality and the human spirit.

Their contributions remain vital in understanding American cultural identity and literary history. Incorporating their works into EFL curricula fosters linguistic competence, critical thinking and intercultural awareness. This approach supports the objectives of the CEFR and aligns with the competencies and values promoted by the national and regional legal frameworks, such as Organic Law 3/2020, known as LOMLOE, and Order ECD/1172/2022, comprising the Aragonese Curriculum for Secondary Education.