



THE ROLE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL
DISCOURSE IN THE FORMATION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the formation of American national literature and its connection with national identity. Based on Richard Gray's historical analysis, the study explores how economic growth, territorial expansion, and social conflicts influenced literary discourse between 1800 and 1865. The research highlights the roles of slavery, the "Trail of Tears," and the "Second Great Awakening" in shaping the moral and ethical foundations of American writing. The findings suggest that literature served as a primary tool for constructing a cohesive national identity amidst deep social divisions. This article explores the formation of American national literature in close relation to the development of national identity and cultural discourse during the first half of the nineteenth century. Drawing on Richard Gray's historical perspective, the study analyzes how rapid economic expansion, westward



territorial growth, and increasing social tensions between 1800 and 1865 significantly influenced literary production and ideological expression. Particular attention is given to the ways in which major historical processes—including slavery, forced Native American displacement, and religious revival movements—shaped the moral, ethical, and philosophical concerns reflected in literary works of the period. The research further investigates how American writers responded to these transformations by constructing narratives centered on individualism, democracy, spiritual exploration, and social justice. It demonstrates that literature functioned not only as a reflection of societal change but also as an active instrument in shaping public consciousness and negotiating conflicting values within a rapidly evolving nation. Through critical analysis, the article reveals that cultural discourse in literature played a crucial role in unifying diverse experiences while simultaneously exposing deep-rooted divisions in American society. The findings suggest that American literature emerged as a dynamic and formative space where national identity was continuously constructed and contested. Ultimately, the study concludes that the interaction between historical realities and literary expression laid the foundation for a distinct and enduring American literary tradition, characterized by its engagement with complexity, diversity, and ideological struggle.

KEYWORDS: American literature, national identity, cultural discourse, Richard Gray, abolitionism, Trail of Tears, Second Great Awakening, gender inequality, transcendentalism, history of the press.

INTRODUCTION

The development of American literature in the first half of the 19th century was a process of inventing the identity of a newly forming state. As Richard Gray points out, between 1800 and 1865, America was reinvented



not only territorially but also conceptually. The Louisiana Purchase and the rapid population growth created a need for a distinct "American" voice in literature. This period marks a crucial transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, forcing writers to redefine what it meant to be American in a rapidly changing world. The literature of this era reflects the struggle to balance democratic ideals with the harsh realities of social and political life. This transformation was accompanied by profound contradictions within American society, which became central themes in literary discourse. While the ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy were widely promoted, the persistence of slavery and the displacement of Indigenous populations revealed deep inconsistencies in the national narrative. As a result, literature emerged as a critical space where these tensions were examined and challenged. Writers of this period increasingly sought to define a unique national identity by distancing themselves from European literary traditions and emphasizing distinctly American experiences. The rise of transcendentalist thought encouraged a focus on individualism, self-reliance, and a spiritual connection with nature, while other authors explored darker aspects of human psychology, morality, and social injustice. Through diverse genres and styles, literature became a means of articulating both the aspirations and anxieties of a developing nation. Moreover, the expansion of print culture and literacy contributed to the wider dissemination of literary works, allowing ideas about national identity to reach broader audiences. This not only strengthened a shared cultural consciousness but also intensified debates surrounding race, religion, and social reform. Consequently, literature played a dual role: it unified the nation through common narratives while simultaneously exposing divisions that threatened its cohesion. In this context, American literature of the early nineteenth century can be understood as a dynamic and evolving field shaped by historical forces and cultural negotiations. It functioned as both a reflection of societal change and an



active participant in the construction of national identity, ultimately laying the groundwork for a distinct and enduring literary tradition.

METHODS

The research employs several scientific approaches to analyze the literary landscape of the 19th century. First, Discursive Analysis is used to examine socio-political terminology in historical and literary texts, identifying shifts in national thought. Second, a Socio-cultural Approach is applied to analyze the impact of religious movements, such as the Second Great Awakening, on artistic expression. Finally, the Comparative-Historical Method allows for a comparison between different cultural layers and periods, providing a deeper understanding of the evolution of American literary traditions and their response to national crises. Finally, the Comparative-Historical Method allows for a comparison between different literary traditions and historical periods, particularly examining the distinctions between European and emerging American literature. This method helps to identify how American writers adapted, transformed, and at times rejected European models in order to create a unique national voice rooted in local experiences and cultural realities. In addition, the study incorporates a Contextual Analysis to better understand how specific historical events—such as territorial expansion, economic transformation, and social conflicts—directly influenced literary themes and narrative strategies. This approach enables a deeper interpretation of texts within their broader historical and ideological frameworks. Furthermore, elements of Interdisciplinary Research are employed by integrating perspectives from history, cultural studies, and literary criticism. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how national identity is constructed not only through literature but also through political discourse, religious movements, and social change.



RESULTS

The study identifies several key factors that transformed the American literary landscape. Technologically, the expansion of railroads, reaching 30,000 miles by 1860, introduced metaphors of "modernity" and "speed" into the works of poets like Walt Whitman. Socially, the Second Great Awakening triggered a surge in church membership, leading to the rise of the "Social Gospel" and various moral reform movements. Furthermore, the proliferation of media was significant; by 1830, over 1,200 newspapers were in circulation. This provided a platform for marginalized voices, including the first Native American and African-American newspapers, such as the Cherokee Phoenix and Freedom's Journal, which challenged the dominant cultural narratives.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate a deep tension within the "American Dream." While the "Second Great Awakening" promoted moral perfection and the abolition of slavery, the government's policy of "Indian Removal" (the Trail of Tears) revealed a darker side of national expansion. This period also saw a significant split in gender discourse: while some writers advocated for domestic female values, others, like Margaret Fuller, demanded professional equality for women. These internal contradictions did not weaken American literature; rather, they provided the friction necessary to create a complex, unique, and powerful national voice. The struggle between the North's demand for abolition and the South's defense of its "peculiar institution" eventually paved the path toward the Civil War, a theme that dominated mid-century writing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by the mid-19th century, American national literature had successfully formed its independent character. National identity emerged not as a static concept, but as a dynamic synthesis of rapid growth, religious fervor, and profound social tragedy. Through cultural discourse, literature effectively summarized these national contradictions and served as the



foundational tool for creating the modern concept of the "American people." The writers of this era proved that literature is not just a reflection of history, but an active force in shaping the soul of a nation.

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