



The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning™

2019

Volume 9/Issue 1

Article 9

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Recommended Citations:

APA

Chi, D. N. (2019, January 30). [Review of the book *USA Literature in Brief*, by K. VanSpanckeren]. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 9(1), 131-132 .

MLA

Chi, D. N. Rev. of *USA Literature in Brief*, K. VanSpanckeren. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning* 30 January 2019: 9.1 (2019): 131-132.

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The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, 2019(1), pp. 131-132

USA Literature in Brief

Do Na Chi¹

VanSpanckeren, K. (2007). *USA literature in brief*. Bureau of International Information Programs: U.S. Department of State.

The book outlines major themes in American Literature throughout history from pre-colonial to present time. It brings together the views and contributions of renown representatives in different literary movements and provides its readers with a basic understanding of various literary trends in association with socio-cultural aspects of American society. Each movement is well described with illustrations of authors' works and factors which inspire their choices of literary themes.

With 7 chapters comprised in 56 pages, the book is not long but well written to form images of American society in different historical moments and how those social issues are reflected in literary works. The first chapter deals with literature of very early society of Native Americans before the colonisation, Chapter 2 presents the idea of Independence indicated through both national and literary freedom from British influences, Chapter 3 reviews a new trend of literature coming from Europe as Romanticism focusing on individual and spiritual values. The following chapter (Chapter 4) introduces a pioneering generation of novelists. Chapter 5 is seen as a more vivid reflection of social and historical moments in America aligning with urbanisation and industrialisation. Chapter 6 refers to a turning point to modern life which is seen as a break from the past and the appearance of drama in early 20th century. The last chapter revisits the issue of Individualism in modern society with a turn to contemporary literature of writers from different backgrounds.

Chapter 1, Early American Writing, provides a general picture of the social life and literature in early period on the land where Native American people reside. The theme of literature at this point is the relation between human and nature. Oral literature is an extensively popular literary form and is central to legends, myths, and songs. The book illustrates the long existence of Native American language and how it influences today's language and literature through a huge amount of vocabulary stemming from the native language. The arrival of settlers leads to a variety of literary forms and themes through diaries, letters, and journals which all focus on the idea of exploration and settlement in a new world.

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Chapter 2 starts with an introduction of American Revolution for independence from Britain. The dream of independence is also implied in literature. Recognising how much they rely on British literary models, Americans are in search of their own literary style. The chapter mentions a representative of American writers, namely James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper has his central theme of reflecting American setting as a *Garden of Eden* with European and frontier settlements and the displacement in immigrant waves.

Chapter 3 presents a new trend of literature from Germany that focuses on individual and spiritual beliefs. Romanticism values the idea of “self” and beautiful minds which inspire the creation of American poets and creative writing. A subtheme of Romanticism is also introduced as Transcendentalism as an opposition to Rationalism. Individual and aesthetic aspects are ultimate to writers represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson.

Chapter 4 reveals the great generation of novelists in America who have their aim for protagonists and heroic figures. Fictional characters of the genre are found to be loners in a diverse society known as a melting pot. A representative writer, Herman Melville, has his tragic background inspire his works through quests of adventures. The lonely traveller, despite the heroism, ends tragically. Melville’s inference is that heroic individualism is brave to challenge the unpredictable nature of the society, but the success is not ensured.

Chapter 5 is named the Rise of Realism which disposes the image of American society before, during and a particular focus on the stage after the Civil War. America is a land of development where inventions, investment, and immigration explodes in the post-war period. Urbanization and industrialisation are described with both opportunities and challenges. The two famous writers of the era are Mark Twain and Henry James. While Mark Twain’s writing refers to the rural and frontier life, Henry James gives his preferences to more cosmopolitan setting. Despite putting different focuses in their writing, the works of both create a comprehensive picture of the American developing and changing society.

Chapter 6 continues the description of postwar picture in America which is viewed as a bloom of prosperity in many aspects. However, the contradictory spot at this time is the conflict of the young being desperately against the war and the involved seniors. Ernest Hemingway is an outstanding representative whose *Old Man and the Sea* is notably valuable to indicate that somewhere in the open world, opportunities exist along with difficulties and discontent. This chapter also opens another form of literary known as drama which reflects social classes in an aesthetic attempt.

Chapter 7 again praises individualism where individual identity is noteworthy and of great value. The chapter then shifts to contemporary literature with the indication of works from writers of different backgrounds. Those writers bring their own identities into their works making those distinct from others. To name a few, Louise Glück is well-known for her tragic past which is frequently seen as losses in her poems; Amy Tan devotes much effort for writing of family values and gender roles influenced by her Asian-American heritage, and the Indian life is well described by Sherman Alexie who is of Native American identity.

In conclusion, *USA Literature in Brief* is a fine reflection of American society and literature through different times. This concisely written book covers all important elements of American literature to comprehensively inform EFL/ESL educators and learners of American literary movements.