

American Fictionalists

It is both fun and informative to consider lists. To debate the list is a sign that you have engaged with someone who knows what she is talking about. This morning, I asked Google to find web pages that opined as to whom might be included on a list of the greatest American fictionalists (novelists, short story writers, poets, and playwrights). Google and I found a page at NoSweatShakespeare.com, which contained a list, 20 Best American Writers. I'll not quibble with the score of authors enumerated, but I might have substituted others (Jack London, Robert A. Heinlein, Ayn Rand, Robert Penn Warren, Dashiell Hammett, Robert Frost, for instances).

At any rate, these scriveners became famous because they could voice the sentiment of a people at their best. My goal is to present each of the 20, along with a quote that typifies this:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne 1804 – 1864

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a novelist and short story writer. Hawthorne's works have been labelled 'dark romanticism,' dominated as they are by cautionary tales that suggest that guilt, sin, and evil are the most inherent natural qualities of humankind. His novels and stories, set in a past New England, are versions of historical fiction used as a vehicle to express themes of ancestral sin, guilt and retribution...

No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

- Edgar Allan Poe 1809 – 1849

Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer, editor, and literary critic. He is best known for his poetry and short stories, particularly his tales of mystery and suspense. He is generally considered the inventor of detective fiction. Poe's work as an editor, a poet, and a critic had a profound impact on American and international literature. In addition to his detective stories he is one of the originators of horror and science fiction. He is often credited as the architect of the modern short story...

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

- Herman Melville 1819 – 1891

Herman Melville was an American writer of novels, short stories and poems. He is best known for the novel Moby-Dick and a romantic account of his experiences in Polynesian life, Typee. His whaling novel, Moby-Dick is often spoken of as ‘the great American novel’ vying with Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn for that title...

It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation.

- Walt Whitman 1819 – 1892

Walt Whitman was a poet, essayist, and journalist who transformed poetry around the world with his disregard for traditional rhyme and meter and his celebration of democracy and sensual pleasure. His masterpiece, Leaves of Grass, a collection of poems, is widely studied by poets, students and academics, set to music, translated into numerous languages, and is widely quoted. His influence can be found everywhere – in contemporary best seller lists to feature films and musical works, both “serious” and popular...

*... re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in
any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul ...*

- Emily Dickinson 1830 – 1886

Unknown as a poet during her lifetime, Emily Dickinson is now regarded by many as one of the most powerful voices of American culture. Her poetry has inspired many other writers, including the Brontes. In 1994 the critic, Harold Bloom, listed her among the twenty-six central writers of Western civilisation. After she died her sister found the almost two thousand poems the poet had written...

We turn not older with years but newer every day.

- Mark Twain 1835 – 1910

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, far better known as Mark Twain, was an American writer, businessman, publisher and lecturer. He progressed from his day job as pilot of a Mississippi riverboat to legend of American literature. His work shows a deep seriousness and at the same time, it is hilariously satirical, as seen in his many quotes on all aspects of life. His masterpiece is the novel, Huckleberry Finn, which is regularly

referred to as 'the great American novel.'...

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

- Henry James 1843 – 1916

Henry James is regarded as one of the key figures of 19th-century literary realism. He is noted for writing from a character's point of view' which allowed him to explore consciousness and perception. His imaginative use of point of view, interior monologue and unreliable narrators brought a new depth to narrative fiction, all of which were influential on the writing of the novelists who followed him. He was nominated for the Nobel prize for literature three times....

Cats and monkeys — monkeys and cats — all human life is there!

- T.S. Eliot 1888 – 1965

Thomas Stearns Eliot was an American-born, British, poet, essayist, playwright, critic, now regarded as one of the twentieth century's major poets. He received more rewards than almost any other writer of the past two centuries, including the Nobel prize, the Dante Gold Medal, the Goethe prize, the US Medal of Freedom and the British Order of Merit...

Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald 1896 – 1940

Francis Scott Fitzgerald was an American novelist, widely regarded as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, American writers of the 20th century. He is best known for his novel, *The Great Gatsby*, which vies for the title 'Great American Novel' with Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Fitzgerald's place on this list is justified by the fact that his great novel is actually about America...

Either you think — or else others have to think for you and take

*power from you, pervert and discipline your natural tastes,
civilize, and sterilize you.*

- William Faulkner 1897 – 1962

William Cuthbert Faulkner was a Nobel Prize laureate, awarded the literature prize in 1949. He wrote novels, short stories, poetry, and screenplays. He is known mainly for his novels and short stories set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha Country, Mississippi. Faulkner is one of the most celebrated American writers, regarded, generally as the great writer of the American South...

*Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and
compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all
over the world...would do this, it would change the earth.*

- Tennessee Williams 1911 – 1983

Thomas Lanier Williams III, known as Tennessee Williams is one of America's most popular playwrights and now regarded as one of the most significant writers of the twentieth century. He wrote more than thirty plays, some of which have become classics of Western drama. He also wrote novels and short stories but is known almost exclusively for his plays. His genius was in the honesty with which he represented society and the art of presenting that in the form of absorbing drama...

*I think that hate is a thing, a feeling, that can only exist where
there is no understanding.*

- Arthur Miller 1915 – 2005

Arthur Miller was a playwright and 'great man' of American theatre, which he championed throughout his long life. His many dramas were among the most popular by American authors and several are considered to be among the best American plays, among them the classics, *The Crucible*, *All My Sons*, *A View from the Bridge* and, above all, the iconic American drama, *Death of a Salesman*. He also wrote film scripts, notably the classic, *The Misfits*...

... life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it.

- Joseph Heller 1923 – 1999

Joseph Heller was an American writer of satirical novels, short stories and plays. Although he wrote several acclaimed novels, his reputation rests firmly on his masterpiece, the great American anti-war satire, *Catch 22*. Because of the quality of the novel and the impact it has made on American culture it has catapulted Heller into the ranks of the great American writers...

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.

- Ernest Hemingway 1899 – 1961

Ernest Hemingway was a novelist, short story writer, and journalist. He published seven novels, six short story collections, and two non-fiction works, and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. More works, including three novels, four short story collections, and three non-fiction works, were published posthumously...

Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is.

- Raymond Chandler 1888 – 1959

Raymond Chandler was a British-American novelist who wrote several screenplays and short stories. He published seven novels during his lifetime. The first, *The Big Sleep*, was published in 1939. An eighth, *Poodle Springs*, unfinished at his death, was completed by another great crime writer, Robert B Parker. Six of Chandler's novels have been made into films, some more than once...

I knew one thing: as soon as anyone said you didn't need a gun, you'd better take one along that worked.

- Toni Morrison 1931 – 2019

Toni Morrison's novels are known for their vivid dialogue, their detailed characters and epic themes. Her most famous novel is the 1987 novel, *Beloved*. She was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved*, and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993...

Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

- Vladimir Nabokov 1899 – 1977

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was a Russian-American novelist, and also a famous entomologist, specialising in butterflies, a topic on which he wrote several academic books. He wrote nine novels in Russian, but it was when he began writing in English that he achieved international recognition...

I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.

- Flannery O'Connor 1925 – 1964

Mary Flannery O'Connor wrote two novels and thirty-two short stories, and also several reviews and commentaries. Her reputation is based mainly on her short stories. She was a Southern writer and relied heavily on regional settings and typically southern characters. She was strongly Roman Catholic, which informed her exploration of ethics and morality...

The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.

- John Steinbeck 1902 – 1968

John Ernst Steinbeck was the author of 16 novels and various other works, including five short story collections. He is widely known for the novels, *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men*, and particularly, the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, his masterpiece, which is one of the great American novels: it has sold more than 15 million copies so far...

All war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal.

- John Updike 1923 – 2009

John Updike was a novelist, short story writer and poet. He was also a literary and art critic. He published more than twenty novels, numerous short-story collections, eight volumes of poetry and many children's books. He is most famous for his 'Rabbit' series – novels that chronicle the life of his protagonist, Harry Angstrom – in which Updike presented his progress over the course of several decades...

They can be wonderful bastards because they have nothing to lose. The only people who can be themselves are babies and old bastards.

- Kurt Vonnegut 1922 – 2007

Kurt Vonnegut was an American writer who published fourteen novels, three short story collections, five plays, and five works of non-fiction. He is most famous for his novel 'Slaughterhouse-Five' (1969) which has become an American classic. It's a semi-autobiographical novel based on his experience as a prisoner of war who survived the allies' bombing of Dresden...

So it goes.