

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Civil War Literature

By Coleman Hutchison, University of Texas at Austin

### Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Hutchison, Coleman, ed.	<i>A History of American Civil War Literature</i> . New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

### Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.   “Title,” in <i>Journal</i> ##, no. # (Date): #.
Aaron, Daniel	<i>The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War</i> . New York: Random House, 1973.
Diffley, Kathleen E.	<i>The Fateful Lightning: Civil War Stories and the Magazine Marketplace, 1861-1876</i> . Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021.
_____.	<i>Where My Heart Is Turning Ever: Civil War Stories and Constitutional Reform, 1861-1876</i> . Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.
Finseth, Ian	<i>The Civil War Dead and American Modernity</i> . New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
Fuller, Randall	<i>From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature</i> . New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
Gardner, Sarah	<i>Blood and Irony: Southern White Women’s Narratives of the Civil War</i> . Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Griffin, Martin	<i>Ashes of the Mind: War and Memory in Northern Literature, 1865-1900.</i> Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.
Marrs, Cody	<i>Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling about the Civil War.</i> Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.
_____.	<i>Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War.</i> New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
Thomas, Brook	<i>The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White.</i> Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.
Wilson, Edmund	<i>Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War.</i> New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
Young, Elizabeth	<i>Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War.</i> Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

## Organizations

Organization Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
American Literature Association	<p>The American Literature Association is a coalition of societies devoted to the study of American Authors.</p> <p>Their website is:  <a href="https://americanliteratureassociation.org/">https://americanliteratureassociation.org/</a></p>
Civil War Caucus	<p>The Civil War Caucus is a group of societies devoted to the study of the American Civil War belonging to the American Literature Association.</p> <p>Their website is:  <a href="https://americanliteratureassociation.org/directory-of-societies/#CivilWar">https://americanliteratureassociation.org/directory-of-societies/#CivilWar</a></p>

## Web Resources

## Other Sources

## Scholars

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## Topic Précis

Perhaps because of the ongoing relevance of the issues raised in and addressed by the American Civil War, scholarly and popular interest in the topic has never waned. Literary representations of the war are a particular obsession for critics and lay readers alike. For instance, the Civil War poetry of Walt Whitman (1819–1882), Emily Dickinson (1830–1885), and Herman Melville (1819–1891) are mainstays in high school and college curricula, while postwar narratives such as Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and Shelby Foote’s *The Civil War: A Narrative* (1958–1974) prove steady sellers decade after decade. This is to say nothing of works by contemporary writers like Geraldine Brooks (1955– ), James McBride (1957– ), George Saunders (1958– ), Natasha Trethewey (1966– ), and Colson Whitehead (1969– ), who continue to produce new literature about the war a century and a half after Appomattox. Thus, the Civil War remains not just a watershed historical event but also one of American literature’s great, recurrent themes.

The Civil War gave American literature a unique and seemingly evergreen topic for reflection and representation, providing both inspiration and opportunity for successive generations of writers. And the memory of the Civil War informed and inflected several major literary movements of the nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first centuries, including American literary realism, modernism, and postmodernism. While these three movements share very little in common, they do evince an abiding interest in the Civil War. Thus, despite increasing historical distance, each generation of American writers reimagines and repurposes the Civil War to fit their specific literary agenda. Such

persistence argues for the ongoing relevance of the Civil War while also underscoring its plasticity.

As this suggests, Civil War literature is ineluctably bound up with Civil War memory—that is, how it has been remembered and rewritten over time. As the conflict shifted from the field of battle to the field of cultural memory, literary texts didn't simply memorialize wartime sacrifice. For instance, having lost a physical struggle for independence, former Confederates sought to win a new, ideological struggle over the causes and costs of the war, its legacies and meanings for a newly re-United States. Such struggles are responsible for foundational American myths like the Lost Cause and the fundamentally progressive nature of the Union—myths that continue to define contemporary American life and letters.

In sum, Civil War literature encompasses a diverse and ever-expanding canon. Civil War historians, literary critics, and editors rarely limit their purview to the years 1861–1865, choosing instead to address literary works from before, during, and well after the actual conflict. This essay identifies a handful of exemplary literary texts that capture well the variety of techniques and cultural politics that have been brought to bear on the memory of the conflict.

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