

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Overview Latin American literature has influenced world literature in a very tangible manner, beginning with the early post-Conquest diaries, which inflamed imaginations and triggered fantastical imaginings in such works as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Michel de Montaigne's "On Cannibals." Four hundred years later, the voyages became psychological and philosophical as Latin American authors created poetry, novels, and essays that challenged world authors to embrace a method of writing that forced readers to reconfigure perception and to fuse modern, ancient, indigenous, European, and African influences in order to represent the human experience in a number of new, innovative ways.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Maya Codices: Written in Maya hieroglyphics on bark cloth with a unique, bright ink, there are four extant Maya codices. They have not been completely deciphered, but from what we know now, the content tells the story of the history of the world, and contains almanacs and astronomical descriptions. They also depict the Maya gods. Unfortunately, Spanish priests burned the majority of the codices.

Popol Vuh: Transcribed by an unknown writer, the *Popol Vuh* is an account of the Maya creation story and other important religious and mythical stories of the Quiche Maya who lived in Guatemala.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Aztec Codices: Written in colorful pictograms (as opposed to the hieroglyphics of the Aztecs), the surviving Aztec codices are written on cloth paper. They tell the story of the Aztec journey from Aztlan to the Valley of Mexico, and also they include the Aztec calendar.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (Colonial)

Letters: After the arrival of the Europeans, letters became an important form of communication, not just to inform the authorities and funding sources in Europe of conditions and needs, but to also frame a narrative that described the culture, religious rituals, architecture, food, clothing, and other important anthropological information. Needless to say, they were described from the vantage point of the writers, whose purpose was often to support a specific ideological or political agenda. So, the narratives were not at all neutral. After he returned to Spain after his first voyage, Cristobal Colon (Christopher Columbus) described the voyage, encounters with the indigenous peoples, and the culture. His goal was to obtain funding for future voyages. This letter, printed in Latin, became extremely influential. In Mexico, Hernan Cortes wrote elaborate and fascinating descriptions of Tenochtitlan and the Valley of Mexico, with their floating gardens, markets, and daily life. His letters were sent to Carlos V, with the goal of continued financial support. Bartolome de las Casas wrote to defend the rights of the Amerindians and to describe the inhumane abuses. In South America, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega chronicled the history of Peru, including the civil wars between the Spanish conquistadores of Peru.

Poetry: The Catholic Church was very wary of literature, worried about the possibility of subversion and destabilization. They held an Inquisition mindset, imported from Europe and shaped by the centuries of conflict to wrest control of the Iberian peninsula from the non-Christians. For centuries, the Moors, who were largely Muslim, had dominated the political sphere, and Sephardic Jews had dominated proto-banking. As a result, the Church and colonial government worked together to censor literature and carefully review anything that was imported or published locally. Not surprisingly, this chokehold on creative expression had a dampening effect on literary production, and only stylistically conservative work tended to be published. Thus, the accomplishments of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz are all the more remarkable, especially given that her sonnets, long poem, and philosophical epistolary essay, all chafe at the bonds / limitations of women.

Philosophical Essays: Some of the letters and treatises that were written during the Colonial period would best be described as philosophical treatises, particularly since they address the ethical treatment of Africans and Amerindians, the rights (or lack of rights) of women, the nature of reality.

Drama: Dramatic productions tended to fall into two different categories: first, the narrative performative enactments of the Church and in folkloric dance, both of which usually revolved around religion and represent a fusion of European, African, and indigenous cultures; and formal drama following European genres which were often written and performed in honor of the colonial governor or viceroy's events.

Novel: In Spain, the picaresque novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, broke new ground as the first extended narrative / novel. In Mexico, satires were considered particularly dangerous, and so when Jose Joaquin Fernandez de Lizardi wrote *El Periquillo Sarmiento* (The Mangy Parrot) as a critique of the newly independent Mexico, it was not embraced with open arms. In fact, the publication was delayed, due to controversy. It was, in many ways, a direct response to the hyper-idealistic revolutionary essays. This work straddles Colonial and the nineteenth century works from the newly independent nations.

19TH CENTURY

Romanticism: Tied closely to independence, romantic fiction and epic poetry focused on establishing a sense of identity and acknowledging the groups that were often excluded by colonial rule. Examples include Domingo Sarmiento (*Facundo*, 1845, Argentina), Jorge Isaac (*Maria*, 1867, Colombia), Euclides de Cunha (*Os Sertoes*, 1902, Brazil), and Jose Fernandez (*Martin Fierro*, 1872, Argentina).

Revolutionary Essays: The philosophy leading to the French Revolution deeply influenced Latin Americans living and studying in France. They were inspired to bring their message to the various regions of Latin America, inspiring moves to break away from Spain and form independent nations. The most influential essays were written by Andres Bello and Simon Bolivar, who started in their native Venezuela and then traveled throughout Latin America. Later, Jose Marti of Cuba became an active force for independence and a peaceful future.

Literature of Resistance: The revolutionary essays had counterparts in other genres, especially novels and poetry. The main themes were utopian; the idea of independence from Spain, access and inclusion for previously excluded groups, and a peaceful future were characteristic features. Key literary figures include Jose Marti (Cuba), Ruben Dario (Nicaragua), and Clorinda Matto de Turner (Peru).

Costumbrismo: The Latin American correlate to literary realism in Europe (particularly in France (Zola) and England (Gissing)), Latin American "costumbrismo" focused on everyday life, including the customs (hence "costumbristas"), activities, manners, attitudes, and daily life. The genre became very important in Latin America, particularly in short stories and novels, and was often used later in the century and even into the twentieth century as a rallying cry for social reform movements. Important nineteenth-century costumbristas include Esteban Echeverria, whose *El Matadero* (The Slaughterhouse) gained fame and acceptance. Other important costumbristas include Jose Milla (Guatemala), Roman Vial (Chile), Jose Manuel Marroquin (Colombia), Jose Maria Vergara y Vergara (Colombia), Ricardo Palma (Peru), and Manuel Alonso (Puerto Rico).

20TH CENTURY

Modernismo: In Latin America, the movement that came to be known as "Modernismo" actually began in the late nineteenth century. It was deeply influenced by French symbolists and fin-de-siecle writers who rebelled against what they considered to be a limiting and materialist view of life (realism). Instead, they preferred to explore the hidden, the occult, and the transcendental, in the same manner as the French symbolist poets such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud. They focused on jarring metaphors and an emphasis on decadent sensuality to explore reality in a new way. Modernismo was forged by the Nigaraguan poet Ruben Dario, and deeply influenced by the literary journal, *La Revista Azul* (The Blue Magazine). He influenced other poets, including Antonio Machado, and the writers Juan Ramon Jimenez and Ramon Maria del Valle-Inclan. Amado Nervo, who was born in Tepic, Nayarit, Mexico, wrote intensely emotional poetry in the style of Modernismo. It emphasized the quest for peace after tragic loss, and was clearly impacted by the suicide of his brother and the death of his wife. For Nervo, the Modernist style aligned with his quest for spiritual peace and understanding.

Before the Boom: The beginning of the twentieth century saw the rise of “indigenismo” which referred to literature that focused on restoring and respecting indigenous cultures. It took the “costumbrista” tradition a bit further as it sought to validate and legitimize the culture of the indigenous peoples, long devalued and forced to occupy lower rungs on the social hierarchy. Writers included Jose Marti, and the Peruvians Manuel Gonzalez Prada and Jose Carlos Mariategui.

Psychological Fiction: A type of literature that incorporated philosophical exploration was born with Jorge Luis Borges, whose works, most notably “Ficciones,” explored the nature of reality and consciousness, and aligned well with both minimalism and surrealist art trends. Other explorations of reality (of people and of civilizations) took shape in novels and short stories. They included Romulo Gallegos (Venezuela) and his novel, *Dona Barbara*. Other authors of fiction (both novels and short stories) who explored psychological states included Horacio Quiroga (Uruguay), Machado de Assis (Brazil), Juan Rulfo (Mexico), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), and Mariano Azuela (Mexico).

Boom: The “Boom” referred to the time of economic prosperity after World War II, and it ushered in a time of remarkable literary innovation. In poetry, Pablo Neruda (Chile) developed a style of poetry that brought together earth, desire, and a sense of wonderment. Gabriela Mistral (Chile) and Mario Benedetti (Uruguay) addressed social issues, while Octavio Paz (Mexico) plunged into the heart of Mexican identity and history.

Novelists of the Boom were also recognized for their stylistic innovations as well as their willingness to explore non-linear narratives and fragmentations of self and identity. The most famous, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, received many accolades for his work, especially *100 Years of Solitude*. In it, he pioneered what came to be known as magical realism. Other authors such as Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Julio Cortazar (Argentina), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay), and Jose Donoso (Chile).

Post-Boom and Beyond: While the Boom explored magical realism with the goal of exploring the limits of the phenomenal world, the Post-Boom world embraced the world, often with the goal of satirizing it, or reinforcing its essential gritty humanity. Authors include Roberto Bolano (Chile), Paulo Coelho (Brazil), Laura Esquivel (Mexico), and Luisa Valenzuela (Colombia). Authors also responded to the “dirty wars” and “disappearances” of the political dictatorships of Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay with scathing novels, often written in exile. Authors included Ariel Dorfman (Chile), Eduardo Galeanos (Uruguay), Isabel Allende (Chile), and Clarice Lispector (Brazil). Transgressive fictions were explored by authors such as Jaime Bayly (Peru) and Fernando Vallejo (Colombia).

Discussion/Questions

1. Unfortunately, the Conquistadors burned the elaborately painted paper codices because they were convinced they were of the devil. But, both the Aztec (Nahua peoples) and the Maya codices were very rich in cultural significance. They contained details about the history of the world, main beliefs and traditions. Of the few fragments that have been preserved, what are main elements found in the Aztec and Maya codices? How do we now interpret them?
2. Hernan Cortes wrote highly descriptive accounts of his experiences in the great city of Tenochtitlan and he sent them to King Carlos V in order to report to him what he had found and also to request funds. Bartolome de las Casas also wrote a diary, but his purpose was to argue for the rights of the Indians. What can we say about the objectivity of their work? What was the structure of the diaries and autobiographical writings immediately after the Europeans began invading Latin America? What were some of the topics that were covered, and what did they reveal about the author’s mindsets or rhetorical goals?
3. The desire for independence from Spain did not form in a bubble. Instead, many of the people who were involved such as Simon Bolivar had studied in France and were very influenced by both the philosophes and the early Romantic writing. When Simon Bolivar returned to Venezuela, he and others wrote with the goal of convincing people to break away. Which writings were influential, and how did they whip up enthusiasm?
4. Costumbrismo reflected an attitude of wishing to cherish and preserve the traditions of the local cultures, which was particularly pronounced after independence. Describe how costumbrismo helped countries develop a sense of idea and also of respect for their unique cultural heritage.

5. As opposed to costumbrismo, Modernismo looked forward rather than backward. Modernismo focused on the idea of positive change and the potential for transformation and industrialization. Other aspects of Modernismo focused on symbolism and a desire to find new ways to express fierce, harsh emotions in a new world of disconcerting technology and change. What were the characteristics of Modernismo? Describe the work of three different authors.

6. The economic boom in the middle of the twentieth century led to the rise of new forms of literature that brought together philosophy, ideas of reality, identity, and existence. Authors found a wildly receptive audience. Describe the Boom authors and their accomplishments.

7. Boom authors responded to military dictatorships, and many wrote their work while in exile. Many of the Cold War issues led to changes of power and also different types of repression. This change in the geopolitical and economic situation resulted in another wave of post-Boom authors, many of whom wrote to expose or resist military dictatorships and/or communism. Who were some of the main authors in the post-Boom era?

Readings

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