addition to that of Marmee. The socially aspiring Meg, tomboyish Jo, frail Beth, and artistic Amy complete the family circle, but a host of other memorable characters populate the novel — Aunt March, Professor Bhaer, Laurie, and old Mr. Laurence. These individuals have endeared the book to millions of readers. However, it is worth noting that the most appealing character to modern readers is Jo, who has been praised as a "unique creation" as well as a "miracle." Why? Because she may be the only young woman in nineteenth-century fiction who refuses to give up her autonomy as payment for being born a woman — and who gets away with it. Admittedly, Jo does marry Professor Bhaer rather than remain single, as Alcott would have preferred. She favored leaving Jo single, showing an alternative to her readers by presenting Jo as a successful career woman. Despite requests from her publisher and readers to have Jo marry the romantic Laurie, Alcott refused to yield, and later wrote in the character of Professor Bhaer as eventual husband for Jo. Thus Jo does marry, but she becomes a "matriarch" rather than a submissive helpmate: mistress of the professor's school, mother of several sons, and a resourceful manager in every way.

Successive generations of readers will likely re-interpret Little Women according to their own value systems, yet they will continue to love the characters who inhabit this novel. Louisa May Alcott has succeeded in presenting a family whose joy, pain, and despair we all share, and in raising valid questions about roles and options for women. Surely a novel which achieves such goals is more than a children's book.

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The "American Renaissance" theme and materials were developed by Dr. Jennifer Kidney, director of "Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma"; Dr. Linda Thornton, professor of composition and literature at Oklahoma City Community College, and Dr. Lewis Parkhill, Chair of the Liberal Arts Division at Murray State College. Development of this theme and materials was made possible by a grant to the Oklahoma Library Association from the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma

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Introducing:

Woman in the Nineteenth Century
by Margaret Fuller

The Blithedale Romance
by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Walden
by Henry David Thoreau

The Confidence Man
by Herman Melville

Little Women
by Louisa May Alcott
Less than a century after the American Revolution, Ralph Waldo Emerson perceived a disturbing complacency and materialism among his countrymen. Although we threw off the political and economic shackles of Europe, the national intellect and spirit were still imprisoned by European mentors and models. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," Emerson says in *The American Scholar* (1837). In his public addresses and published essays, Emerson called for a new kind of revolution. He urged iconoclasm and self-reliance. He called for recognition of the soul or spirit which pervades and connects all things in nature, all events, and all persons and for recognition of man's ability to perfect himself and his world. He called for a body of thought and literature that were uniquely American and suggested that the time had come "when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, of long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close" (*The American Scholar*). He called for a poet who "knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose pictures he so much admires in Homer" (*The Poet*, 1844).

Many heeded his call. Walt Whitman took Emerson’s *The Poet* to heart and presented Emerson with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Emerson at first was enthusiastic ("I greet you at the beginning of a great career..."), but later was doubtful, calling the book "a nondescript monster which yet had terrible eyes and buffalo strength, and was indisputably American." Others used Emerson’s arguments for self-reliance and definitions of transcendentalism to promote women’s rights and abolition of slavery, although Emerson himself was skeptical of activists.

Among the most effective writers involved in the creation of the "American Renaissance" envisioned by Emerson were his own friends and associates in Concord, Massachusetts. This reading and discussion series focuses on five authors who have in common their acquaintance with Emerson as well as "their devotion to the possibilities of democracy" (F.O. Matthiessen, *The American Renaissance*, p. ix). Of these five authors, we recognize Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott as authors of "classic" American literature. Of the five books in the series, only *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and *Little Women* were best sellers in their day.

All of the books selected deal specifically with the mid-nineteenth century social milieu in America—with women’s lack of social, economic, and political rights; with the questions surrounding slavery and rumors of the Civil War; with the founding of Utopian societies and the popular interest in mesmerism and other psychic phenomena (an unfortunate offspring of transcendentalism); with attitudes towards the Native American Indian population, westward expansion, and Jacksonian policy; and with nineteenth-century industrialization, prosperity, materialism, and complacency at the expense of natural resources and human dignity. And yet, all of these books contain ideas, insights, and human situations which seem strikingly contemporary.

1845

**Woman in the Nineteenth Century**

by Margaret Fuller

Unlike most of her female contemporaries, Margaret Fuller was subjected to a rigorous classical education by her father and was encouraged to read widely. From an early age, she was motivated by a need for self-fulfillment and vocation rather than by the need for fulfillment within the family circle, which was—in fact—an economic necessity and the only available option for most nineteenth-century American women. At the age of twelve, Fuller determined to be "bright and ugly," and her adult personality and intelligence were, apparently, both powerfully attractive and repellent. Emerson attributed the following statement to Fuller: "I now know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own."

Her father’s death when she was twenty-five was perhaps fortuitous in enabling her to pursue the goals of vocation and self-fulfillment. She was forced to find employment, first teaching at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School and then at Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island. Although an influential teacher, especially for her female students, Fuller felt that formal teaching was too restrictive for her expansive nature and invented her own mode of teaching—a series of "Conversations," for women. Based on her belief that women should treat their responses to each other as seriously as their obligations to family and society, the "Conversations" covered not only women’s concerns, but also fine arts, ethics, education, and other topics.

When the Transcendental Club, of which Fuller was the only fully-participating female member, decided to publish a journal, she was selected as the first editor. The essay which was the basis for *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was first published in *The Dial* in 1843.

Although she is claimed as the first American feminist, Fuller never identified herself as primarily a feminist or with any feminist movement or group. At least part of the impetus behind the writing of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was her need to examine and explain her own position—she herself is most likely "Miranda" in the book. But her experiences in teaching, in the "Conversations," on a trip west in 1843, and as a journalist in New York City for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* convinced her that all women deserved equality in every aspect of life.

*Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is a remarkable, seminal work comparable to landmark feminist publications of our own century such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *The Second Sex*. Using mythology, history, and literary examples to show precedents for women’s equality, she provides us with a blueprint for contemporary feminist criticism and psychology.

The style of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* may strike the contemporary reader as too dense with metaphors and lengthy quotations and the organization as rather rambling. But much of the book reads like conversation, and the imaginative dialogues inserted throughout to exemplify her points ring true to our ears.

Applying our founding fathers’ belief that all men are created equal and the arguments of the anti-slavery movement to her argument for the equality of women, Fuller attempts to extend the American Revolution from the political and economic spheres to everyday life. She exhorts women to be self-dependent, examines how marriage is degraded when viewed as a social and economic expediency, and extols singleness! While praising and elevating the feminine, she also refutes the male and female stereotypes which continue to pervade Western culture, arguing that human nature is more appropriately perceived as androgynous.

One thousand copies of Fuller’s book were sold in the first week after its publication in 1843, and among its admirers was Edgar Allan Poe, although he said, "...the conclusions reached are only in part my own." Whether or not we agree with Fuller’s conclusions, the debate she presents continues in our own time. While women’s rights to be educated, to own property, to vote, and to work are unquestioned in the United States today, demands for the human rights of equality, nonconformity, and self-possession still often meet with controversy, protest, or even violence.
1852

The Blithedale Romance
by Nathaniel Hawthorne

A major concern for Nathaniel Hawthorne for much of his life was how to find lucrative employment which would allow him time to write. This concern became particularly crucial in 1840 when he decided to marry Sophia Peabody. An intriguing solution offered itself with the opening of Brook Farm that same year.

The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education was founded by George Ripley after he became disillusioned with the organized church and resigned his ministry. Originally, Brook Farm was to provide its residents an opportunity to work and think outside society’s restrictive and competitive institutions. No more formal than the principles of transcendentalism bound the residents together: the belief that persons from different walks of life could live together in harmony, that each would naturally find appropriate employment to benefit the community, that living close to nature would enlighten them and spiritualize their toil. Like Miles Coverdale in The Blithedale Romance, however, Hawthorne soon discovered that hard physical labor and the earthiness of farm life were incompatible with spiritual or literary endeavors. Hawthorne joined the community in April of 1841, but he left before the end of the year.

The Blithedale Romance was written ten years after his experience at Brook Farm; but, as Hawthorne points out in his "Preface" the utopian community provided him with a setting "a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel" which allowed him to write of his own times "without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives." Hawthorne’s other major works tend to be set in the distant Puritan or revolutionary past or in other countries, enabling him to engage our "willing suspension of disbelief" and use the magic tricks associated with the romance.

The Blithedale Romance richly represents the mid-nineteenth century milieu in which we might encounter Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Hawthorne himself. Appearances of mediums and ecstatic speakers such as the "Veiled Lady" were popular amusements of the day. The descriptions of the salon in Chapter XXI and of the lycceum-hall in Chapter XXIII show us real places visited by Hawthorne in the Boston area. It has also been suggested that the major characters in the novel were based on real people of Hawthorne’s acquaintance, notably that Zenobia is based on Margaret Fuller. Although Hawthorne’s friendship with Fuller cooled to the point of repugnance and he was willing to believe the worst about her after her death in 1850, by mentioning her by name in the novel, he tries to dispel any comparison. And Fuller was neither beautiful nor rich, although some of Zenobia’s speeches may remind the reader of "Woman in the Nineteenth Century."

The book, however, is a romance and the major characters are at once romance stereotypes (Dark Lady, Fair Maiden, Evil Magician), stock figures of nineteenth-century New England (feminist, seamstress-medium, philanthropist, confidence man, effete gentleman-poet), and larger than life. As in Hawthorne’s other works, the use of symbolism helps delineate character and unfold the plot, as with Priscilla’s knitted silk purse with its secret opening or Zenobia’s exotic hothouse flower. The recurrent motifs of the theatre, tableaux vivants, and masquerades let us know that Coverdale, at least, views the world as his stage.

Henry James admired The Blithedale Romance more than any other work by Hawthorne, and, indeed, this novel — in many ways an innovation for Hawthorne — may be viewed in the tradition of American realism. The dramatized narrator — Miles Coverdale — represents the only first-person narrator of Hawthorne’s major work and allows him free play with irony and ambiguity. As a character, Coverdale is often dense, shockingly lacking in self-knowledge, and downright rude! This narrative technique enables Hawthorne to unfold a mystery while allowing the reader to anticipate the solution and cast judgement. Even "Miles Coverdale’s Confession," which gives the unreliable narrator the last word, urges the reader to re-evaluate all that has gone before. The Blithedale Romance raises provocative questions about friendship, family, romantic love, privacy, and our responsibility for our fellow beings, but ultimately leaves the answers to the reader’s imagination.

1854

Walden
by Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau is best known as Emerson’s greatest disciple, a writer who not only preached non-conformity, but lived it as well. Fifteen years younger than Emerson, he was born in Concord, Massachusetts, and returned there after leaving Harvard to take up residence with his master. Emerson urged him to keep a journal as a daily exercise in self-reflection and record-keeping. In his late twenties, Thoreau built himself the famous cabin at Walden Pond. He moved in on July 4, 1845, and lived alone there for two years and two months, recording his experiences as he commuted with nature. Thoreau left his cabin at Walden in September 1847, claiming later, "I had several more lives to live and could not spare any more for that one." However, it was at Walden Pond that he had begun his greatest work, Walden. After polishing and expanding it for several more years, Thoreau managed to have it published in 1854. Walden sold poorly during Thoreau’s lifetime, but later generations, particularly twentieth-century readers, found his ideas both profound and relevant. He is now more widely read and more vastly influential than any other transcendentalist, including Emerson.

Thoreau’s appeal to modern generations stems from his power with words along with the relevance of his ideas. His celebration of nature and his call to "simplify" have inspired countless readers who yearn to escape from the demands of a fast-paced, materialistic lifestyle. When Thoreau laments that "men have become the tools of their tools" or that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," he strikes a common chord in the hearts of all reflective readers. We cannot deny the truth of his observations or the sincerity with which he penned them. Thoreau cared profoundly how his fellow man lived, and Walden exhorts us even today to live simply and wisely, recognizing that "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."

Although it is possible to grasp the central themes of Walden without taking too much note of its poetic structure, it is far more illuminating to notice the organic unity which makes this book superior to Thoreau’s other works which present almost identical themes. On the surface, Walden appears to be simply a collection of eighteen essays recounting Thoreau’s experiences at Walden Pond from July 4, 1845, to September 6, 1847. However, both the "I" of the narrator and the world he describes should be distinguished from the real Thoreau and the world that he inhabited while writing Walden. The book is an "imaginative creation," not a strict "autobiography" in the sense that we normally use that word. It should never be forgotten that seven years separated the actual experience at Walden Pond and the publication of Walden. Thus, the "I" is an older Thoreau’s representation of the spiritual fulfillment he felt when he was younger. Likewise, the organic form of the book, its seemingly "natural" shape growing out of Thoreau’s journals, is the result of years of painstaking revision on the author’s part. The inspiration and sense of wholeness that
Thoreau derived from nature are aptly reflected in the careful crafting of *Walden*.

Thoreau was unable to solve the social ills of his day, just as no single person has been able to reverse the adverse social trends that we observe today. Yet, through the spiritual insights and poetic words of *Walden*, he possessed the power to shape and define the quality of human life. For this reason, each year *Walden* "seems to gain a little headway, as the world loses ground."

1857
**The Confidence Man**
by Herman Melville

America began as an act of faith. In the language of the Puritans, the voyage to these shores was a sacred "errand" to establish a "City on a hill," above the deprivations of the old world. The confidence that God ordained the venture contributed powerfully to its success — and to some of its excesses. Earlier in his authorship, in the confident voice of one participating in the American Renaissance, Melville himself extolled the sacred myth. He wrote: "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people — the Israel of our times."

By 1856 Melville had changed, and *The Confidence Man* was his response to a changed America. The promised land had been extended into the vast American west, and "manifest destiny" proclaimed nineteenth-century confidence in the righteousness of the venture no matter what peoples already populated the land. "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating" is one of Melville's chapter titles, and one character in the novel seeks donations for the Seminole Widow's and Orphan's Asylum.

Indeed, under President Andrew Jackson, the removal of Native Americans from their tribal lands opened the west for white settlement, and westward expansion spawned an economic revolution. In the nineteenth century, America was transformed from a household society of subsistence agriculture, household manufacture, and family welfare into a market society with people, goods, and money in motion to develop and to exploit the west. *The Confidence Man* is critical of this transformation.

The setting is the most American of all the novels of Herman Melville, the newly opened American west with its "helter-skelter" enterprise. Readers join the passengers of a Mississippi riverboat, the "Fidelé," bound for New Orleans, and encounter a dizzying variety of American character types: "Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth hunters and still keener hunters after all these hunters."

Melville's apparent celebration of American diversity and industry ends with a veiled, ironic warning about the keenest of all American hunters, those who prey upon all the other hunters — confidence men who manipulate the beliefs and confidences of others for gain.

In episode after episode, *The Confidence Man* presents readers with con-game after con-game, leaving readers in the same boat as characters in the book, wondering who is real and what may be trusted. Should we rely upon the Christian message of love and trust from Corinthians as cited by one passenger ("Charity thinketh no evil."") Or should we rely upon the cynical, contradictory sign posted by the boat's barber which declares "NO TRUST"?

Words are not reliable on the Fidelé. The words of religion ("charity," "faith") still survive on the Fidelé ("fidelis" is the Latin word for "faithful"). But the words are voiced and printed by con-artists after a buck as well as by true believers. On the Fidelé, Christian injunctions bump hard against predatory enterprises, and, indeed, are manipulated to support such institutions as slavery and such practices as Native American removal (a quaint euphemism). It is a world which twentieth-century readers recognize.

Published in the same decade as Thoreau's *Walden* and Emerson's *Representative Men*, *The Confidence Man* also challenged the idealistic optimism of American transcendentalism. Five chapters (36-41) treat transcendentalist ideas skeptically and offer what many readers see as satirical treatments of both Emerson and Thoreau in the characters of the "mystic," Mark WInsome, and his "practical disciple," Eben W. Winsome.

In an age of expansion and optimism, Melville was closer to the tragic vision of his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne who explored the sins of our fathers in "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*. Although he began his literary career as author of popular sea stories, Melville was never content with entertaining acceptance of what met and satisfied the popular eye. What he wrote in praise of Hawthorne aptly describes both the intent and method of *The Confidence Man*:

"In this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and the other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth— even though it be covertly, and by snatches."

1868
**Little Women**
by Louisa May Alcott

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has been hailed as "the most popular girls' book ever written" and duly consigned to the stack of sentimental juvenile fiction often pressed into young hands by hopeful mothers. While deserving the tribute paid to its popularity, never having been out of print since its publication in 1868, *Little Women* has proved to be far more than a children's novel. When read within the context of the author's life and times, it illuminates the ideals of mid-nineteenth century America as portrayed by strong and resilient characters who are determined to survive against the odds.

As a young woman, Alcott preferred spending time at her writing desk rather than working at other jobs commonly undertaken by women during those times, such as teaching or sewing. However, the primary burden of supporting the family fell upon her since her father, Bronson Alcott, preferred the philosophical and spiritual realms to the realistic one. Calling herself the "Child of Duty," Alcott yielded to her publisher's request to write a book for girls. The assignment was the turning point in her fortunes, as the book she subsequently wrote and modeled after her own family became an immediate success and enduring classic.

Just as Alcott remained bound to her family by a deep sense of affection and responsibility, so do her characters in *Little Women* value family unity above all else. The family circle of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, along with Mr. and Mrs. March, is a force which helps each individual survive against the odds of war, poverty, selfishness, and social change. It is a microcosm of stability and security set against the unpredictability of the larger world. Everyone may struggle, suffer, or even die, but the family endures. Impossible to ignore is the woman at the center of this family unit — Marmee. Mrs. March has often been unjustly classified as a saccharine figure who does little more than write wholesome notes to her daughters. In reality, she is a strong and resourceful woman who manages to hold her family together even when divided by war and other trials. Marmee personifies Alcott's vision of the capable woman — not a sweet, idealized figure, but a genuine human being with courage and tremendous vitality.

*Little Women* abounds with other fine characterizations in