

# COLLECTION OVERVIEW

## AMERICAN LITERATURE

### I. SCOPE

In American literature, the strength of the Library's collections lies in its classified holdings. Largely because of the imagination and perseverance of Ainsworth Rand Spofford (Librarian of Congress, 1865-1897), the Library's collections of American literature are unrivaled in breadth and depth. Spofford recognized the importance of copyright deposit in developing a comprehensive collection of the nation's literature and obtained Congressional approval of the Copyright Act of 1870 which centralized all copyright and deposit activities at the Library of Congress. With this Act, the Library began receiving two copies of all works deposited for copyright. And, with this Act, the foundation was laid for the world's most extensive collection of Americana. This overview, therefore, emphasizes those holdings while referring, secondarily, to manuscript, recorded, microform and electronic materials.

Although the PS classification is devoted to American literature, it is important to be aware that numerous works of or about American literature are classed elsewhere. Until the 1970s, except for works assigned to the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, the Library classed works of fiction in the English language in PZ1-PZ4 without regard to the nationality of the author; anthologies and critical or historical works which include both English and American literature are classed with English literature in PR; anthologies of the critical or historical works on the literature of several countries are classed in PN; bibliographies relating to American literature, or to literature generally, are classed in Z; some American literary magazines are classed in AP; and, scattered works of or about American literature remain in the Priority 4 (P4) collection.

*See also* CPS, Literature and Language.

### II. SIZE

According to ILS, the Library's collections in PS (American literature) numbered approximately 183,826 titles as of October 2007.

The National Shelflist Count of 1989 indicated that the Library's holdings in PZ1-4 (fiction in the English language) were 204, 200 titles. It is not possible to say how many of these PZ titles are American works, but the number is bound to be substantial. As noted above, the Library no longer classes works in PZ1-4, so the 1989 estimate is a fixed figure.

In Z1224-1234 (bibliographies of American literature), the Library holds 1,135 titles, and there are numerous additional works relating to American literature in other areas of Z used for drama, fiction, general literature, and individual authors.

In addition to the majority of works of or about American literature which are clearly identifiable and quantifiable in the discrete PS and Z1224-1234 classifications, many others are subsumed in

more broad classes as noted above, under Scope. Because these works, classed in AP, P4 (Priority 4) , PN , PR, and PZ1-4 are not readily identifiable as American literature, it is not practicable to attempt to estimate their numbers.

### **III. GENERAL RESEARCH STRENGTHS**

The main strength of the Library's collections in American literature is comprehensiveness. It long has been the Library's policy to collect all monographs by American authors whose writings are generally regarded as having literary merit, as representing important trends in serious creative writing, or as presenting significant criticism and discussion of literature as well as all periodicals whose contents consist principally of these writings.

Manuscript materials relating to American literature feature the papers of Walt Whitman and include those of other authors representative of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary movement, forms, and points of view.

Several microform collections supplement the Library's print materials relating to American literature, particularly for early and nineteenth-century books and periodicals.

### **IV. AREAS OF DISTINCTION**

The Library's collections are very strong in American fiction, drama, poetry, and criticism. Many early imprints and first editions are held by the Library, and original manuscripts of several important American authors are held by the Manuscript Division. In the Research Library Group Conspectus of collection levels for literature, the Library of Congress was rated at level 5 (the highest) or level 4 in all areas of United States literature.

The Library has many noteworthy holdings in American literature.

Rare Book and Special Collections Division: Henry James first editions; Walt Whitman first and early editions (the pre-eminent Whitman collection); Mark Twain first editions; First editions of modern American authors; Dime novel collection; Copyright deposit plays (mostly selected from deposits in the period 1880-1920); National Endowment for the Arts collection of small press books (includes all books published with NEA support); Dell Paperback Collection.

Manuscript Division: Walt Whitman papers; Copyright deposit plays (1900 to the present; collection includes all unpublished plays deposited for copyright and not selected for retention by another specialized division, such as Rare Book and Special Collections or Music).

Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division: Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature (voice and, more recently, video recordings of American literary figures from the 1940s to the present).

## **V. ELECTRONIC RESOURCES**

The Library of Congress American Memory project includes several digitized items relating to American literature. Among them are The Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress and four Walt Whitman notebooks. Also of interest for the study of American literature is the Arts and Literature section of Selected Documents Celebrating the Manuscript Division's First 100 Years.

The Library subscribes to a substantial number of electronic databases, both indexes and full-text sources, related to American literature. Lists of these resources may be found at the Library's web pages, Databases & E-Resources at the Library of Congress and Library of Congress Full Text Electronic Journal Holdings. Most of these databases have become standard at academic and research libraries around the world. Perhaps the most significant difference between the Library of Congress and other institutions which also subscribe to these electronic resources is that the Library of Congress probably holds more of the original materials referred to in these databases than does any other library. For this reason, researchers will continue to travel to the Library to examine original editions of print materials unavailable elsewhere.

*See also*, Collections Policy Committee Guideline #8: Selection Guidelines for Electronic Resources.

## **VI. WEAKNESSES AND EXCLUSIONS**

A couple of the more notable lapses in the Library's American literature holdings are: a significant absence of early science fiction titles, many of which were issued only in mass market paperback format, which until recently, were not collected by the Library; and relative weakness in holdings of books from alternative or small presses and little magazines.