



Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Maurice S. Lee

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The role of chance changed in the nineteenth century, and American literature changed with it. Long dismissed as a nominal concept, chance was increasingly treated as a natural force to be managed but never mastered. New theories of chance sparked religious and philosophical controversies while revolutionizing the sciences as probabilistic methods spread from mathematics, economics, and sociology to physics and evolutionary biology. Chance also became more visible in everyday life, as Americans attempted to control its power through weather forecasting, insurance policies, military strategy, and financial dealings.

Uncertain Chances shows how the rise of chance shaped the way nineteenth-century American writers confronted questions of doubt and belief. Poe's detective fiction critiques probabilistic methods; Melville's works struggle to vindicate moral action under conditions of chance; Douglass and other African American authors fight against statistical racism; Thoreau learns to appreciate the play between nature's randomness and order; and Dickinson works faithfully to render poetically the affective experience of chance-surprise. These and other nineteenth-century writers dramatize the inescapable dangers and wonderful possibilities of chance. Their writings even help to navigate extremes that remain with us today--fundamentalism and relativism, determinism and chaos, terrorism and risk-management, the rational confidence of the Enlightenment and the debilitating doubts of modernity.

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