

Early American Literature (1620 – 1776)

I Puritan New England

John Winthrop:

“city upon a hill” – a model of ideal Christian community

- Re-enactment of the Hebrew exodus from Egyptian slavery
- The concept of a covenant (contract) between God and his elect

Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss

Puritan life ethic was based on three basic pillars:

- Industry (i.e. hard work)
- Thrift
- Piety

However, these were gradually (and quite logically) also accompanied by ambition and intense striving for success. Puritans tended to feel that earthly success was a sign of God's blessing.

The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced on Earth.

Major genres of that period:

- sermons
- conversion narratives
- religious history
- metaphysical poetry

1) **Sermons:** Jonathan Edwards: *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

2) **Puritan poetry** - offered to the service of God

Michael Wigglesworth

Anne Bradstreet - *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650)

Edward Taylor

Reflections of Native Americans

Important dynamics: Tension/ clashes between Puritan settlers and Native Americans

John Smith: Pocahontas

Pocahontas, favorite daughter of Chief Powhatan, saved Captain Smith's life when he was a prisoner of the chief. Later, when the English persuaded Powhatan to give Pocahontas to them as a hostage, her gentleness, intelligence, and beauty impressed the English, and, in 1614, she married John Rolfe, an English gentleman. The marriage initiated an eight-year peace between the colonists and the Indians, ensuring the survival of the struggling new colony.

Captivity Narratives

Mary Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)

II American Enlightenment

The 18th-century American Enlightenment:

- emphasis on rationality rather than tradition
- scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious dogma
- representative government in place of monarchy

Revolutionary Writers, 1776-1820:

Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

The political pamphlet: *Common Sense*:

“The Cause of Americans is in a great measure the cause of all mankind“, Paine wrote, expressing the idea of American exceptionalism still strong in the United States:

- Since America is a democratic experiment and a country theoretically open to all immigrants, the fate of America foreshadows the fate of the whole humankind.

Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790)

Writer, printer, publisher, scientist, philanthropist, and diplomat - the most famous and respected private figure of his time.

He was the first great self-made man in America, a poor democrat born in an aristocratic age that his fine example helped to liberalize.

Franklin was a second-generation immigrant.

In 1732 he started publishing *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

- published under the fictitious name of a man named Richard Saunders, a poor man who needed money to take care of his carping wife.

- witty aphorisms:

"Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

"A penny saved is a penny earned"

"Diligence is the Mother of Good Luck"

"A Word to the Wise is enough."

"God helps them that help themselves"

"One To-day is worth two tomorrow."

"A small leak will sink a great Ship."

Autobiography

13 virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility.

- the classic story of the self-made man

- influenced many other major American writers, such as Herman Melville (*Israel Potter*, *Bartleby*, *the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno*), Mark Twain, H.D.Thoreau (the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*), and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*), or Charles Johnson (*Oxherding Tale*).

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813)

Letters from an American Farmer