



THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE DURING COLONIAL PERIOD

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Abstract: *This article offers an in-depth exploration of the characteristics of American literature during the Colonial period, spanning from the early 17th century to the late 18th century. It examines the historical context, religious influences, exploration narratives, oral tradition, political discourse, literary forms and genres, regional diversity, and legacy of Colonial literature. By delving into these key aspects, the article provides readers with a nuanced understanding of how the literature of this period reflected the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the emerging nation.*

Key words: *Religion, romanticism, surrealism, individualism*

The Colonial period in American literature stands as a crucial epoch in the development of the nation's literary identity. Spanning roughly from the early 17th century to the late 18th century, this era witnessed the emergence of diverse literary voices, shaped by the unique social, cultural, and political landscape of the time. From the exploration narratives of the early settlers to the revolutionary fervor of the Founding Fathers, American literature during the Colonial period reflects a fascinating interplay of tradition, innovation, and identity formation.¹

To understand the characteristics of American literature during the Colonial period, it's essential to delve into the historical backdrop against which these literary works were produced. The Colonial period in American history began with the arrival of European explorers and settlers in the New World. The earliest accounts of this period are marked by narratives of exploration, conquest, and encounters with indigenous peoples. Michael Wigglesworth - Wigglesworth's poem "The Day of Doom" (1662) is a vivid portrayal of the Puritan doctrine of predestination and the impending judgment of sinners. Written in ballad form, the poem served as a moralistic warning to readers and underscores the Calvinist beliefs that shaped much of Colonial literature.

Religious influence. Religion played a central role in shaping the literature of the Colonial period. Many of the early settlers were driven by religious motives, seeking refuge and freedom to practice their faith. Puritanism, in particular, exerted a significant influence on the literary landscape of the time.²

¹ Einhorn, Lois J. *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul* (ISBN 0-275-95790-X)

² Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 3-4



Puritan writers, such as Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, infused their works with religious themes, exploring the concepts of sin, redemption, and divine providence. Their writings often reflected a sense of moral earnestness and spiritual introspection, characteristic of the Puritan worldview. William Bradford - Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" (1630-1651) is a firsthand account of the Pilgrims' journey to America and their establishment of the Plymouth Colony. This work provides valuable insights into the challenges of colonization, including encounters with Native Americans, harsh weather conditions, and religious persecution.

Exploration and encounter narratives. The Colonial period saw a proliferation of exploration and encounter narratives, documenting the experiences of European explorers and settlers in the New World. These accounts ranged from firsthand journals and diaries to more elaborate travelogues and historical narratives. Writers such as John Smith, William Bradford, and Thomas Hariot provided vivid descriptions of their encounters with Native American cultures, the challenges of wilderness survival, and the quest for territorial expansion. Exploration narratives served not only as historical records but also as vehicles for promoting colonization and conquest. Anne Bradstreet - Known as the first American poet, Bradstreet's works, such as "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America" (1650), reflect the religious devotion and Puritan values prevalent during the Colonial Period. Her poetry often explores themes of faith, family, and the struggles of daily life in the New World.

Oral tradition and folklore. In addition to written literature, the Colonial period also witnessed the preservation and transmission of oral tradition and folklore. Native American tribes, African slaves, and European settlers all contributed to the rich tapestry of oral literature during this time. Myths, legends, folktales, and songs were passed down through generations, reflecting the diverse cultural heritage of the emerging nation. These oral narratives often provided insights into the values, beliefs, and social dynamics of the communities from which they originated. Jonathan Edwards - A prominent theologian and preacher, Edwards is known for his sermons, such as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741). His writing epitomizes the religious fervor and emphasis on spiritual awakening characteristic of the Great Awakening, a major religious revival movement during the Colonial Period.

Political discourse. As tensions between the American colonies and the British Empire escalated, literature became a powerful tool for political expression and dissent. Pamphlets, essays, and speeches circulated widely, advocating for colonial rights and independence. Figures such as Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson emerged as influential voices in the burgeoning revolutionary movement. Their writings, including Paine's "Common Sense" and Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," galvanized support for the cause of American independence and helped to shape the



course of history. Benjamin Franklin - Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanack" (1732-1758) reflects the pragmatic and utilitarian ethos of Colonial America. Filled with aphorisms and practical advice on topics ranging from frugality to industry, Franklin's almanac embodies the spirit of self-improvement and entrepreneurialism that defined the era.

Literary forms and genres. The Colonial period saw the emergence of various literary forms and genres, ranging from sermons and religious tracts to poetry and prose fiction. Puritan writers, in particular, favored didactic forms such as sermons, catechisms, and spiritual autobiographies, which sought to instruct and edify readers in matters of faith and morality. Cotton Mather - Mather's "Magnalia Christi Americana"(1702) is a comprehensive history of New England, documenting the religious and political events of the region. Mather's writing is characterized by his deep religious piety and his belief in the divine providence guiding the destiny of the American colonies.

However, secular forms of literature also began to gain prominence, as evidenced by the works of writers like Benjamin Franklin, whose "Poor Richard's Almanack" combined practical advice with witty aphorisms and humorous anecdotes.

Regional diversity. One of the defining characteristics of American literature during the Colonial period is its regional diversity. The colonies were not monolithic entities but rather comprised a mosaic of distinct cultures, languages, and traditions. The literature produced in New England differed from that of the Middle Colonies or the Southern Colonies, reflecting the unique social, economic, and environmental conditions of each region. For example, the literature of New England tended to be more austere and moralistic, influenced by Puritan values, while the literature of the Southern Colonies often celebrated the agrarian lifestyle and romanticized the natural landscape. Mary Rowlandson - Rowlandson's "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God" (1682) is a captivity narrative that recounts her experiences as a captive of Native Americans during King Philip's War. Her work offers a firsthand perspective on the hardships of colonial life and the fraught relations between settlers and Native peoples.

Legacy and influence. The literature of the Colonial period laid the groundwork for the development of American literary tradition, setting the stage for subsequent movements and epochs. Many of the themes, motifs, and literary techniques that emerged during this time would continue to resonate throughout American literature, from the exploration of identity and individualism to the critique of social injustice and inequality. Moreover, the Colonial period established a tradition of literary activism and engagement with pressing social and political issues, a legacy that would be carried forward by generations of American writers. John Winthrop - Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity" (1630), often referred to as the "City upon a Hill" sermon, articulates the Puritan



belief in America as a divine experiment and a beacon of righteousness. Winthrop's writing reflects the religious idealism and sense of mission that motivated many early settlers.

In conclusion, American literature during the Colonial period represents a dynamic and multifaceted body of work, characterized by its religious fervor, exploration narratives, political discourse, and regional diversity. Despite the challenges and contradictions of the time, Colonial writers succeeded in capturing the essence of the emerging nation and laying the foundation for the rich literary tradition that would follow.

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