

colonial period in american literature

Colonial period in American literature represents a foundational era, shaping the narratives, themes, and stylistic approaches that would define American writing for centuries to come. This period, stretching from the earliest English settlements in North America until the American Revolution, witnessed the emergence of diverse voices grappling with the challenges of a new world, religious fervor, and the burgeoning sense of a distinct American identity. Exploring the colonial American literature reveals a rich tapestry of personal accounts, religious tracts, political manifestos, and early poetry, all contributing to the evolving cultural landscape. Understanding this period is crucial for appreciating the roots of American literary traditions, from Puritan diaries to the eloquent arguments for independence. This article will delve into the key characteristics, prominent authors, and enduring legacies of literature during the colonial period in America, offering a comprehensive overview for students, scholars, and enthusiasts alike.

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The Dawn of American Writing: Early Settlers and Their Narratives

The earliest expressions of the colonial period in American literature emerged from the very individuals who ventured across the Atlantic to establish new settlements. These were not authors in the modern sense, but rather diarists, letter-writers, and chroniclers documenting their experiences, hopes, and hardships. Their writings served multiple purposes: to inform potential settlers back home, to justify their ventures to sponsors and the Crown, and to record their daily lives for posterity. These foundational texts, often characterized by practical language and a focus on

survival, laid the groundwork for a distinctly American literary voice, even as they were heavily influenced by European literary conventions.

The sheer act of documenting the unknown—the flora, fauna, indigenous peoples, and the immense challenges of carving out an existence—was a literary undertaking in itself. These early accounts, such as those by John Smith, are invaluable historical documents but also possess a narrative drive, filled with adventure, peril, and often, a degree of self-aggrandizement. They sought to capture the essence of a continent previously existing only in European imagination, translating the raw reality of the New World into forms understandable to an Old World audience.

The Puritan Influence: Piety, Providence, and Prose

Perhaps the most dominant and influential literary current within the colonial period in American literature flowed from the Puritans. Seeking religious freedom and the opportunity to establish a "city upon a hill," these devout settlers imbued their writing with a profound sense of religious purpose and divine intervention. Puritan literature is characterized by its focus on introspection, the examination of one's soul, and the belief that God's will was actively manifest in earthly events. The literature of this era often served as a moral and spiritual guide for the community, reinforcing their strict religious doctrines and societal expectations.

Plain Style and Spiritual Autobiography

Puritan writers, such as Samuel Sewall and his renowned diary, and Jonathan Edwards, favored what is known as the "plain style." This approach eschewed ornate language and elaborate metaphors in favor of direct, clear, and unadorned prose, believing that religious truth should be accessible and unambiguous. The spiritual autobiography became a significant genre, with individuals meticulously recounting their personal journeys toward salvation. These works, like Mary Rowlandson's narrative, were not merely personal accounts but public declarations of faith, intended to edify and instruct readers.

Theology and Didacticism

Theological treatises, sermons, and theological commentaries formed a substantial portion of Puritan literary output. Figures like John Winthrop, with his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," articulated the moral and communal responsibilities expected of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. These

writings were deeply didactic, aiming to educate, persuade, and enforce the religious and social order. The omnipresent theme of Providence, the belief that God's hand guided all events, permeated these texts, shaping the way authors interpreted their experiences and conveyed their messages.

Captivity Narratives: Identity and Survival in a New World

A compelling and often harrowing genre that emerged prominently in colonial American writing is the captivity narrative. These accounts detail the experiences of colonists, typically women, who were captured by Native American tribes. Beyond simply recounting their ordeal, these narratives explored complex themes of cultural encounter, identity formation, and the psychological toll of displacement and trauma. They offered readers a glimpse into the "other" and, paradoxically, helped to solidify the identity of the captives as distinctly English or American in contrast to their captors.

Mary Rowlandson: A Pivotal Example

Mary Rowlandson's "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithful Importunity of the Prayers of the Saints" (published in 1682) stands as the archetypal captivity narrative. Her vivid descriptions of her capture during King Philip's War, her time living among the Nipmuc people, and her eventual redemption provide a powerful testament to her faith and resilience. Rowlandson's narrative is a complex text, revealing both fear and a grudging, albeit temporary, understanding of her captors, while consistently framing her experiences through a Puritan lens of divine testing and deliverance.

The Role of the Captivity Narrative

These narratives were popular and widely read, serving a dual purpose. They provided thrilling accounts of frontier life and conflict, appealing to a public appetite for sensational stories. Simultaneously, they reinforced colonial anxieties about Native Americans and served to justify westward expansion and the subjugation of indigenous populations. The narratives often emphasized the barbarity of the captors and the superiority of colonial civilization, thereby contributing to the construction of a colonial identity defined in opposition to indigenous cultures.

The Enlightenment's Reach: Reason, Rhetoric, and Revolution

As the colonial period progressed, the intellectual currents of the European Enlightenment began to significantly impact American literature and thought. This era, characterized by a greater emphasis on reason, individualism, and scientific inquiry, fostered a shift away from the intense religious focus of the Puritans towards more secular concerns. The burgeoning intellectual elite began to engage with Enlightenment philosophies, leading to a flourishing of political writing, scientific observation, and eloquent arguments for liberty and self-governance.

Benjamin Franklin and the Polymath

Benjamin Franklin epitomizes the Enlightenment spirit in colonial America. His autobiography, a seminal work, details his rise from humble beginnings through industry, pragmatism, and self-improvement. Franklin's writings, including his almanacs filled with aphorisms and practical advice, his scientific papers, and his diplomatic correspondence, showcased a mind deeply engaged with the betterment of society and the application of reason to human affairs. He embodied the ideal of the self-made man and the informed citizen.

The Political Pamphleteers and the Road to Revolution

The escalating tensions between the American colonies and Great Britain provided fertile ground for political literature. Pamphlets, essays, and public letters became powerful tools for disseminating ideas and mobilizing public opinion. Figures like Thomas Paine, with his incendiary pamphlet "Common Sense," used persuasive rhetoric to articulate the case for independence, reaching a broad audience and galvanizing support for the revolutionary cause. The arguments were steeped in Enlightenment ideals of natural rights, liberty, and the social contract, fundamentally shaping the political discourse of the era.

Other significant voices contributed to this burgeoning political literature. John Adams, through his letters and essays, articulated the legal and philosophical underpinnings of colonial grievances. Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, crafted a document that masterfully blended Enlightenment philosophy with a powerful declaration of American aspirations. The emphasis was on logical argumentation, persuasive appeal, and the articulation of a distinct American political identity separate from that of Great Britain.

Poetry and the Colonial Imagination

While prose dominated much of the literary output during the colonial period, poetry also found its place, though it often retained strong ties to European models and religious themes. Colonial poets grappled with expressing their experiences in the New World, often through the lens of their faith or the social realities they faced. The forms and styles were largely inherited from England, with poets emulating the works of such as John Donne or George Herbert, adapting them to their own contexts.

Anne Bradstreet: The Tenth Muse

Anne Bradstreet is widely recognized as the first significant American poet. Her collection, "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America," published in 1650, offered a unique perspective on colonial life, domesticity, and spiritual reflection from a woman's point of view. Her poetry, while often adhering to the formal conventions of her time, revealed a keen intellect and a deep emotional landscape. She explored themes of love for her husband, the challenges of motherhood, and her personal relationship with God, all within the framework of her Puritan upbringing.

Edward Taylor: Puritan Mysticism in Verse

Edward Taylor, a clergyman and physician, produced some of the most complex and intellectually rigorous poetry of the colonial era. His works, largely unpublished during his lifetime, are characterized by intricate conceits, metaphysical explorations of faith, and a profound engagement with theological concepts. His "Preparatory Meditations" series, written before administering communion, exemplifies his attempt to bridge the earthly and the divine through masterful poetic craft. Taylor's poetry is a testament to the enduring power of religious devotion expressed through sophisticated literary means.

Key Authors and Their Enduring Contributions

The colonial period in American literature produced a constellation of influential writers whose works continue to resonate. Their contributions spanned religious discourse, historical documentation, political advocacy, and personal reflection, each leaving an indelible mark on the American literary tradition.

- **William Bradford:** His "Of Plymouth Plantation" is a foundational historical account of the Pilgrims' journey and their early struggles, offering insights into early colonial governance and religious motivations.
- **John Winthrop:** As the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" laid out a vision for a communal society guided by religious principles, becoming a touchstone for American civic ideals.
- **Edward Taylor:** His metaphysical poetry, rich in theological imagery and intellectual depth, represents a peak of colonial poetic achievement, though it was largely unrecognized until the 20th century.
- **Anne Bradstreet:** Her poetry provided a distinctly female voice in the colonial landscape, exploring domestic life, faith, and personal experience with remarkable candor and skill.
- **Mary Rowlandson:** Her captivity narrative offered a powerful, albeit biased, account of interaction with Native Americans and the enduring themes of faith and survival in colonial frontier life.
- **Benjamin Franklin:** A true Renaissance man of the colonial era, his autobiography and various essays championed reason, self-improvement, and civic virtue, profoundly shaping American identity.
- **Thomas Paine:** His impassioned pamphlets, particularly "Common Sense," were instrumental in galvanizing support for the American Revolution, demonstrating the power of accessible, persuasive prose in political discourse.
- **Jonathan Edwards:** A leading figure of the Great Awakening, his sermons and theological writings, such as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," explored the complexities of Calvinist doctrine and the human condition.

Themes and Motifs in Colonial American Literature

Several overarching themes and motifs consistently appear in the literature of the colonial period in American literature, reflecting the unique circumstances and preoccupations of the settlers. These recurring elements provide crucial insights into the mindset and challenges of the era, shaping the early identity of the nascent nation.

- **Religion and Spirituality:** This is arguably the most pervasive theme, with works deeply concerned with God's will, divine providence, salvation, and the establishment of a godly society. Puritan literature, in particular, is saturated with religious doctrine and moral instruction.
- **Survival and Hardship:** The sheer difficulty of establishing settlements in a new and often hostile environment is a constant theme. Accounts detail the struggles against nature, disease, famine, and conflict, emphasizing resilience and perseverance.
- **Identity Formation:** As colonists navigated their existence in a new land, questions of identity—religious, national, and personal—became prominent. The contrast between "civilized" colonial life and the perceived "savagery" of indigenous peoples, as depicted in captivity narratives, played a role in this process.
- **The New World vs. The Old World:** Writers frequently contrasted the promise and potential of America with the established order of Europe. This often involved a sense of mission or exceptionalism, positioning America as a land of opportunity and religious purity.
- **Community and Social Order:** The establishment and maintenance of a functioning society, often built upon religious principles, was a key concern. Works explored the responsibilities of individuals to the community and the mechanisms for maintaining social cohesion.
- **Conflict and Encounter:** Interactions with Native American tribes were a significant aspect of colonial life and, consequently, of its literature. These encounters, often fraught with misunderstanding and violence, are frequently documented, though typically from a colonial perspective.

The Lasting Impact of Colonial American Writing

The literary output of the colonial period in American literature established precedents and articulated ideals that would continue to shape American culture and its literary traditions for generations. The emphasis on personal narrative, the exploration of spiritual and moral questions, and the powerful use of rhetoric for political and social change all laid crucial groundwork for later American authors and thinkers.

The Puritan emphasis on introspection and self-examination, seen in diaries and spiritual autobiographies, fostered a tradition of individualism and psychological exploration that would be further developed by later writers. The Enlightenment ideals of reason, liberty, and self-governance, powerfully articulated by figures like Franklin and Paine, became foundational

principles of American political and literary discourse, influencing everything from revolutionary rhetoric to the democratic ideals expressed in later American novels and essays.

Furthermore, the foundational narratives of exploration, settlement, and encounter, however biased, contributed to the complex and often contested American mythology. The genres that emerged, such as the captivity narrative, would evolve and influence subsequent American literary forms. The very act of documenting and defining American experience, even under the shadow of European influence, marked the nascent stages of a distinct national literature, one that would continue to wrestle with its origins, its identity, and its place in the world.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the dominant literary genres and forms that emerged during the colonial period in American literature?

The colonial period saw the rise of several key literary forms, including personal narratives and autobiographies (like Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*), sermons and religious treatises (Puritan authors like Jonathan Edwards and John Winthrop), travel accounts and descriptions of the New World (e.g., Captain John Smith's writings), and early poetry (like Anne Bradstreet's work).

What were the primary motivations and purposes behind writing during the colonial period?

Writers were largely motivated by religious conviction, seeking to document their spiritual journey, establish religious communities, and convert indigenous populations. Others aimed to attract settlers to new colonies by providing practical information and favorable descriptions of the land, or to record historical events and personal experiences for posterity.

How did religious beliefs, particularly Puritanism, shape the content and style of colonial American literature?

Puritanism heavily influenced colonial literature. Themes of divine providence, predestination, and the struggle against sin were pervasive. The writing style often favored plainness, clarity, and a direct address to the reader, reflecting a desire to convey God's word and moral lessons without undue embellishment. Sermons were a central genre.

Who are some of the most significant and representative authors of the colonial period in American literature, and what are their key works?

Key figures include William Bradford (Of Plymouth Plantation), John Winthrop (A Modell of Christian Charity), Edward Taylor (poetry), Anne Bradstreet (poetry), Cotton Mather (Magnalia Christi Americana), and Jonathan Edwards (Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God). These authors represent various colonies and literary contributions.

What role did Native American interactions play in the literature of the colonial period?

Interactions with Native Americans were frequently documented, often reflecting the colonists' perspectives, which ranged from fear and demonization to attempts at understanding and conversion. Captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson's A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, became a popular genre, detailing experiences with indigenous peoples.

How did the different colonial regions (e.g., New England, Southern colonies, Middle colonies) produce distinct literary traditions?

New England was dominated by Puritan religious literature and historical accounts. The Southern colonies, with their agrarian economies and Anglican influence, produced more practical writings, letters, and travel accounts. The Middle colonies, with their greater diversity of peoples and religions, saw a broader range of influences and early forms of journalism.

What are the defining characteristics of 'plain style' in colonial American literature, and why was it valued?

Plain style emphasized clarity, simplicity, and directness, eschewing elaborate ornamentation. It was valued by many colonial writers, especially the Puritans, as a means of conveying spiritual truths and moral lessons effectively, mirroring the perceived purity of God's word and avoiding worldly vanity.

What is a 'captivity narrative,' and what themes does it commonly explore?

A captivity narrative is a genre that recounts the experience of being captured by an alien group, often Native Americans in the colonial context. Common themes include religious faith and divine providence as sources of

strength, the struggle for survival, the psychological impact of trauma, and the reassertion of colonial identity upon return.

How did the concept of 'providence' influence the way colonial writers understood and recorded historical events?

Colonial writers, particularly the Puritans, viewed historical events as manifestations of God's will and plan. They saw divine providence at work in their successes, failures, and encounters, interpreting events through a theological lens. This often led to the inclusion of spiritual interpretations and moral lessons within their historical accounts.

What are some examples of early American poetry from the colonial period, and what themes did these poets address?

Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor are prominent colonial poets. Bradstreet's poetry often explored domestic life, faith, and her experiences as a wife and mother. Taylor, known for his 'metaphysical' poetry, focused on theological concepts, the human condition, and the journey towards salvation, often using elaborate metaphors and intellectual wit.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the colonial period in American literature, each beginning with "I":

1. I Sing the Body Electric: Early American Verse

This anthology offers a fascinating glimpse into the poetry written by individuals navigating the early days of colonial settlement. It showcases a range of styles and themes, from religious devotion and daily life to the awe and fear inspired by the new world. The verses often reveal a strong sense of purpose, a longing for home, and the burgeoning development of a distinct American voice.

2. I Witnessed the Witch Trials: Accounts from Salem

This collection presents firsthand narratives and testimonies from the notorious Salem witch trials of the late 17th century. It provides a stark and chilling look at the mass hysteria, accusations, and subsequent legal proceedings that gripped the community. The accounts reveal the anxieties, religious fervor, and social tensions that permeated colonial Massachusetts.

3. I Ponder the Wilderness: Journals of Exploration

This compilation features excerpts from the personal journals of explorers and naturalists who ventured into the vast and often untamed American wilderness during the colonial era. These writings document encounters with

indigenous peoples, detailed observations of flora and fauna, and the sheer physical and psychological challenges of frontier life. They offer a ground-level perspective on the mapping and understanding of a continent still largely unknown to Europeans.

4. I Hear the Preacher: Sermons of Puritan Divines

This volume gathers influential sermons delivered by prominent Puritan ministers during the colonial period. These texts illuminate the core theological beliefs, moral frameworks, and societal expectations that shaped Puritan life and governance. The sermons often served as both spiritual guidance and political pronouncements, reflecting the ministers' central role in colonial society.

5. I Remember the Voyage: Narratives of Passage

This book includes personal accounts of the arduous journeys undertaken by colonists sailing across the Atlantic to reach North America. The narratives detail the cramped conditions, the ever-present dangers of the sea, and the hopes and fears associated with leaving behind familiar lives. These testimonies underscore the immense commitment and risk involved in establishing new settlements.

6. I Converse with the Natives: Early Encounters and Relations

This collection explores the written records of interactions between European colonists and various Native American tribes. It includes observations, dialogues, and differing perspectives on cultural exchanges, trade, and conflicts. The accounts offer a complex and often fraught picture of the initial relationships that would define the future of the continent.

7. I Build a New World: Colonial Architecture and Design

This work examines the architectural styles and settlement patterns that emerged during the colonial period in America. It analyzes the influences of European building traditions adapted to new environments and materials. The book illustrates how these structures reflected the social hierarchy, religious beliefs, and practical needs of the colonists.

8. I Write of Freedom: Early American Political Thought

This selection of writings delves into the nascent ideas about liberty, self-governance, and political rights that began to take root in colonial America. It includes pamphlets, essays, and correspondence that laid the groundwork for future revolutionary ideals. The texts reveal the colonists' evolving understanding of their relationship with the British Crown and their aspirations for a more equitable society.

9. I Feel the Frost: Diaries of Daily Life

This compilation presents excerpts from the private diaries of ordinary individuals living through the colonial period. These intimate records offer candid insights into the day-to-day realities of colonial existence, including domestic chores, economic struggles, social customs, and personal reflections. They provide a valuable counterpoint to more formal historical accounts, revealing the lived experiences of a diverse range of people.

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