

# Early American Literature

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1200 – 1700's

# Native American Experience

- Native Americans have been living in the Americas for tens of thousands of years before Europeans knew.
- Millions of people lived in the Americas when Europeans arrived – as many as lived in Europe at that time.
- More than 300 Native American cultures and over 200 Native American languages flourished prior to 1600.
- Due to disease and **genocide**, most of the literature and the people did not survive after contact with Europeans.  
However, surviving literary works show Native American diversity, reverence for nature, and reverence for many gods (**polytheism**).



# Native American Experience

- Native Americans had no written languages, so legends and myths were entrusted to memory and passed from generation to generation through oral traditions.
- Storytelling was common among all Native American cultures.

*“When you write things down, you don’t have to remember them...All that we are [is] alive within each of us...living in our blood”*

Native American Holy  
Woman

# Native American Experience

- Various literary **genres** (types of writing) existed in the Native American culture.
- A few common genres that reflect the oral tradition are listed below:
  - creation stories
  - Fairy tales
  - Lyrics
  - Chants
  - Healing songs
  - Histories



# Native American Experience

- Native American literature
  - stems from an oral tradition.
  - explores common themes like a reverence for nature and the worship of many gods (polytheism).
  - is culturally diverse.
- It explores the essential question, “Who owns the land?”
- Native Americans regarded themselves as caretakers of the land. Europeans, however, laid claim to the land and believed in ownership.
- What entitles people to claim land as their own?
- Native Americans were usually cooperative with Europeans until the Native Americans were forced off the land.

# What does it mean to be an American?

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Consider this while reading Native American Literature.

# Early Exploration of the Americas

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1400 - 1600



# Exploration

- While some Native American literature still exists, much of our understanding of the Americas comes from first-person accounts of early European explorers, settlers, and colonists.
- Much of their writings were non-fictional texts in the genres of journals, diaries, letters, and historical narratives.



# Exploration

- Christopher Columbus
  - He is the early American explorer credited with “discovering America.”
  - He did not realize the significance of his travels.
  - He died disappointed, convinced that he barely missed the cities of gold described by Marco Polo.
- Álvar Núñez Cabeza De Vaca
  - He wrote about Florida, Texas, and Mexico.
  - He described the animals and landscape he encountered.
- Samuel De Champlain
  - He wrote about **New England** and the **Iroquois**.
- Thomas Harriot
  - He wrote about the resources, Native American ways of life, and how to build a colony.
  - His writings were published in 1588 and helped English settlers form their first clear picture of North America.

# Exploration

- What makes an explorer?
- Early European explorers had various purposes:
  - To gain glory for themselves or their country.
  - To find gold or other riches.
  - To discover new routes for travel and trade.
- The uncertainty of exploration is not worth the risk.  
What is it that causes people to seek the unknown?



# What does it mean to be an American?

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Consider this while reading literature of the explorers.



# Puritanism and Colonialism

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1600 - 1700

# Puritanism and Colonialism

- The first colony was in Jamestown, Va.
- The colonists were initially loyal to Britain.
  - The colonists had no representation in British Parliament.
  - The colonists supported Britain economically by exporting raw materials to Britain and importing manufactured goods.
- Britain offered protection to the colonists from the French and Native Americans who tried to drive the British colonies out of America.
  - The British fought the French Indian War from 1759 – 1763 to defend the colonies.
  - The British tried to recoup their losses from the war through taxing the colonists.
  - This is referred to as “taxation without representation [in British Parliament].”
- Eventually, the colonists partnered with the Iroquois to fight on their own.
- The colony retaliated against Britain’s taxation without representation in writing and eventually wrote the Declaration of Independence and later, the U.S. Constitution.



# Puritanism and Colonialism

- Many early settlers were Puritans- English Protestants who sought to purify the Church of England.
- These Puritan settlers were persecuted in England for their religious beliefs and sought freedom in America.
- Puritans saw human struggle with sin as a daily mission and believed the Bible would help them through weakness.
- Puritans thought that although everyone is sinful, some, the “elect,” would be spared from hell by God’s grace.
- Puritans wrote of thriving/growth of colonies and their role in God’s plan for a better society.



# Puritanism and Colonialism

## Puritan Tradition

- The Puritan purpose in writing was to help people understand the Bible and guide people in their daily lives.
- Hard work, thrift, and responsibility were morally good and a sign God was working within.
- The thriving settlements and financial success from those qualities were thought to be a mark of God's approval.
- Puritans were intolerant of other viewpoints as demonstrated in the Salem witchcraft trials.

## Puritan Writers

- Jonathan Edwards wrote the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" to warn of the dangers of sinful ways.
- Anne Bradstreet shows the role of women in a male-dominated society through her poetry.
- Olaudah Equiano wrote about his harsh capture from his African home and the brutal and "un-Christian" treatment as a slave in the West Indies.

# Puritanism and Colonialism

- Puritan writing values logic, clarity, and order over beauty and adornment.
- The direct, powerful, plain language of much American literature stems from the Puritans.
- Puritans used vivid imagery from nature and their everyday life.
- Puritan writing has many familiar, down to earth metaphors.
- Often present are melodramatic contrasts between good and evil.
- A moral lesson is often present in Puritan literature.
- Puritan poetry is often an exploration of the relationship between the individual and God.



# Puritanism and Colonialism

- Are people basically good?
- Puritans believed people were sinful creatures doomed to burn in hell unless they are saved by the grace of God.
- Others during this colonial period celebrated the power of reason and believed people are intrinsically good.
- Are people destined to struggle with their instincts?
- Or, are people good and capable of becoming better?



# What does it mean to be an American?

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Consider this while reading Puritan literature.

# Enlightenment and Colonialism

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1600 - 1700

# Enlightenment and Colonialism

- Enlightenment coexisted with Puritanism in the early British colonies.
- While Puritanism was religious-based, Enlightenment was logic-based.
- The Enlightenment Period is also known as the Age of Reason because of the reliance on reason and logic.
- This is a shift from faith or religious-based explanations.
- Enlightenment questioned the truths about government.
  - It pointed toward government limitations in exchange for protection of rights and liberties.
  - It gave colonists a philosophical basis for the American Revolution.



# Enlightenment and Colonialism

## Revolution Writers

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- Existed with Puritan writers
- **Focused on government**, not religion
- **Expressed** the following ideas:
  - Political writing
  - **Natural law** – the idea that people are born with rights and freedoms. It is the function of government to protect those freedoms.
  - Human rights
- **Key for the creation of a new nation**
- **Primarily wrote pamphlets**, or “little books,” cheaply made and quickly disbursed
- Topic of **discontent** with British rule
- **Also believed**, like Puritans, that America had a special destiny to be a model for the world

## Revolutionary Writers

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- Phyllis Wheatly – wrote poetry expressing the natural rights of blacks and the discrepancy between the colonists “cry for freedom” and their enslavement of blacks
- **Thomas Paine** – wrote “**Common Sense**” which helped propel the colonists to **revolution**. He concluded by saying America gives freedom a place in the world, welcoming the world to its society.

# Enlightenment and Colonialism

- Puritans pushed against Enlightenment with the First Great Awakening.
- Puritans were concerned that their values were being lost.
- Reason (Enlightenment) versus emotionalism (religion)
- Enlightenment and Puritanism caused a breakdown in British rule.
  - Both movements caused people to question traditional British authority .
  - Both movements were movements towards democracy.



# Enlightenment and Colonialism

- Who has the right to rule?
- European kings and queens ruled because people believed it was their God-given right.
- During the era of Enlightenment, people began to question this **assumption**.
- As a **precursor** to the current democracy that exists in America, people began to question, “Who has the right to rule?”

# What does it mean to be an American?

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Consider this while reading Revolution literature.



# Lenses for Reading Literature

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Critical Literary Perspectives

# Lenses for Reading Literature

- The writing of every time period reflects its unique historical context.
- The subject matter (topic), attitude, style of writing, and form (genre) of writing combine to create a **literary movement**.
- Major movements have defined the nation's literature.
- Major movements in literature emerge from a historical context.



# Lenses for Reading Literature

## Critical Lenses

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- Critical lenses, or lenses of the mind, allow the reader to notice details he/she might otherwise have missed.
- This helps the reader to develop greater insight about a writer and his or her work.
- **Critical lenses enable the reader to see beyond his or her perspective.**
  - Think of how a prism enables a person to see the colors present in white light.
  - Think of how a microscope enables a person to see the life forms that live in pond water.
  - Think of how a camera impacts the way we view people.

## Types of Critical Lenses

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- Literary
- Historical and Cultural
- Biographical
- Psychological
- Social
- Political
- Philosophical/Moral

# Lenses for Reading Literature

- Literary Lense
  - Focus on style and literary elements such as plot structure
  - A sample question is, “What is unique about the author’s style?”



# Lenses for Reading Literature

- Historical and Culture Lense
  - Focus on how history and culture influence the author or writing
  - A sample question is, “How is the author’s attitude about a historical event expressed in the writing?”

# Lenses for Reading Literature

- Biographical Lense
  - Considers a writer's heritage, experiences, and economic circumstances
  - A sample question is, "Does the culture/heritage of the writer shape the writer's attitude?"



# Lenses for Reading Literature

- Other Lenses
  - Psychological
    - Remember the id, ego, and superego?
    - What is the motivation of a character?
  - Social
    - Whose voice is heard in the writing?
    - What is the social environment of the story?
  - Political
    - To what extent does the writer seem biased?
    - Whose interests are served with this writing?
  - Philosophical/Moral
    - Are the character's actions ethical and honest?

# Reading American Literature

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Strategies



# Strategies for Reading Early American Literature

- Various fictional genres, including poetry, essay, and novel are a part of early American literature.
- Many non-fictional primary sources, such as histories, documents, letters, and journals, are also a part of early American literature.

# Strategies for Reading Early American Literature

- Consider the context
- Think about the following:
  - Format
  - Author's purpose
  - Author's audience
  - Author's perspective (viewpoint)
- To see beyond your perspective, use the following strategies.



# Strategies for Reading Early American Literature

## S.M.E.L.L.

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- S = sender/receiver
- M = message or main idea
- E = emotion
- L = language
- L = logic
- Through which lense does S.M.E.L.L. enable a reader to view literature?

## SOAPSTone

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- S = subject
- O = occasion
- A = audience
- P = purpose
- S = speaker
- Tone = author's feeling
- Through which lense does SOAPSTone enable a reader to view literature?

# Strategies for Reading early American Literature

- S.M.E.L.L. enables a reader to view literature through a literary lense.
- SOAPSTone enables a reader to view literature through a historical/cultural lense or a political lense.



# Strategies for Reading Early American Literature

Some Questions to clarify SOAPSTone

- **What is the Subject?**  
(Just a few words. What are you talking about?)
- **What is the Occasion?**  
(How does your knowledge of the larger occasion and the immediate occasion affect what you are writing about?)
- **Who is the Audience?**  
(What are the characteristics of this group? How are they related to you? Why are you addressing them?)
- **What is the Purpose?**  
(Explain to yourself what you hope to accomplish by this expression of opinion. How would you like your audience to respond?)
- **Who is the Speaker?**  
(Who are you? What details will you reveal? Why is it important that the audience know who you are?)
- **What is the Tone?**  
(What attitude[s] do you want your audience to feel? How will your attitude[s] enhance the effectiveness of your piece? Choose a few words or phrases that will reflect a particular attitude.)

# Strategies for Reading Early American Literature

- Learn the language
- Language may include
  - words no longer used.
  - words with different meanings from how they are used today.
  - dialect.
  - unfamiliar sentence structure and style.
- The language of early American writing sounds formal.
- Dialects can be understood with context clues and should be read aloud.



# Strategies for Reading Early American Literature

- Sentences are made up of simple parts, so break them down and rearrange them if necessary.
- **Chunk the sentences from punctuation to punctuation.**
  - Some sentences may be long.
  - To chunk in longer sentences, treat commas and semicolons like periods.
  - Summarize or paraphrase each chunk of the sentence.
  - Put all the summaries together to get the meaning of the sentence.
- **Identify the type of sentence and break it down accordingly.**
  - A simple sentence just consists of an independent clause.
  - A compound sentence consists of two independent clauses separated by a comma plus a conjunction or a semicolon.
  - A complex sentence consists of a dependent clause and an independent clause. Both clauses are separated by a comma.
  - A compound complex sentence consists of a dependent clause and two independent clauses.
- As you can see, commas and semicolons are important when chunking sentences to understand meaning.
- **Identify the subject, predicate, and the details in the sentence.**

# What does it mean to be an American?

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Consider this as you read early American literature.