

Early American Literature

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?

Consider this while reading Native American Literature.

Early **Exploration** of the Americas

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?

Consider this while reading literature of the explorers.

Puritanism and Colonialism

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?

Consider this while reading Puritan literature.

Enlightenment and Colonialism

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

- 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

- 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?

Consider this while reading Revolution literature.

Lenses for Reading Literature

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

- 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

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

Lenses for Reading Literature

- **Literary Lens**
 - 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 Lens**
 - 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

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.

- 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

- 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?

Consider this as you read early American literature.