

american colonial period literature

american colonial period literature encompasses the diverse body of written works produced in the American colonies from the early 17th century through the mid-18th century. This literature reflects the cultural, religious, and social foundations of colonial America, offering insight into the mindset and experiences of early settlers. Rooted in Puritan values and influenced by European literary traditions, the writings of this era include sermons, poetry, historical narratives, and personal diaries. The themes often revolve around faith, morality, community, and the struggle for survival in a new world. Understanding american colonial period literature is essential to grasp the historical context and evolution of American literary identity. This article will explore the defining characteristics, major authors, prominent genres, and lasting impact of colonial-era writings as well as the literary legacy that shaped subsequent American literature.

- Characteristics of American Colonial Period Literature
- Major Authors and Their Contributions
- Prominent Genres of Colonial Literature
- Religious Influence on Colonial Writings
- Impact and Legacy of American Colonial Literature

Characteristics of American Colonial Period Literature

American colonial period literature is marked by its strong connection to religious and moral themes, reflecting the Puritanical influence prevalent among early settlers. The literature served both didactic and practical purposes, aiming to instruct readers in proper conduct and spiritual devotion. Simplicity and clarity in language were prioritized over ornate stylistic flourishes, reflecting the colonists' focus on plainness and utility. Additionally, colonial literature often incorporated elements of personal experience and historical documentation, emphasizing the realities of colonial life, including hardship, community governance, and encounters with Native Americans. Overall, this body of literature reveals a worldview shaped by faith, survival, and a desire to establish a new societal order.

Plain Style and Didacticism

The plain style was a hallmark of american colonial period literature, especially among Puritan writers. This style emphasized straightforward language and avoided elaborate rhetoric to make religious and moral messages accessible. Didacticism was central, as literature aimed to teach and reinforce religious values and ethical behavior.

Themes of Faith and Morality

Faith in God and the importance of living a moral life were dominant themes. Colonial writers often explored concepts such as divine providence, sin, redemption, and predestination. These themes underscored the community's collective identity and worldview.

Reflection of Colonial Life

Writings also documented everyday life, challenges of settlement, and relations with indigenous peoples. This realistic portrayal provided insight into the social, political, and economic conditions of the colonies.

Major Authors and Their Contributions

The American colonial period literature boasts several influential figures whose works shaped early American thought and literary traditions. These authors often combined religious conviction with literary creativity, leaving a lasting mark on American letters.

Anne Bradstreet

Anne Bradstreet is recognized as the first published American poet. Her poetry reflects personal experiences, religious faith, and the challenges of colonial life. Her works, such as "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America," exhibit a blend of Puritan values and emotional depth, marking a significant contribution to early American poetry.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards was a prominent preacher and theologian known for his fire-and-brimstone sermons during the Great Awakening. His sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" exemplifies the intense religious fervor and rhetorical power characteristic of colonial religious literature.

William Bradford

As governor of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford authored "Of Plymouth Plantation," a detailed historical narrative chronicling the Pilgrims' journey and settlement. His work is a foundational document of colonial history and literature, blending historical fact with spiritual interpretation.

Edward Taylor

Edward Taylor was a poet and minister whose devotional poetry, such as "Preparatory Meditations," reveals deep religious introspection and mastery of metaphor. His poetry remained largely unpublished until the 20th century but is now recognized for its literary and spiritual significance.

Prominent Genres of Colonial Literature

American colonial period literature includes a variety of genres that served different functions within colonial society. These genres reflect the values and priorities of the time, as well as the limited publishing infrastructure available to colonial writers.

Sermons and Religious Tracts

Sermons were among the most popular and influential forms of writing. They communicated religious doctrine, encouraged moral reform, and reinforced community cohesion. Religious tracts and pamphlets also circulated to spread Puritan beliefs and support missionary efforts.

Poetry

Poetry during this period was primarily religious or personal in nature. It expressed themes of faith, divine grace, and the human condition. The poetic form allowed writers to explore spiritual questions and personal emotions within a structured artistic framework.

Historical Narratives and Diaries

Colonial literature includes historical accounts and personal diaries documenting settlement experiences, interactions with Native Americans, and colonial governance. These works provide valuable perspectives on the challenges and achievements of early settlers.

Legal and Political Documents

Colonial legal codes, charters, and political writings also constitute part of the literature, reflecting the development of colonial institutions and ideas about governance and rights.

List of Prominent Genres

- Sermons and religious writings
- Poetry
- Historical narratives and chronicles
- Personal diaries and journals
- Legal and political documents

Religious Influence on Colonial Writings

Religion profoundly influenced American colonial period literature, shaping content, style, and purpose. The Puritan worldview dominated the colonies' cultural landscape, and

literature served as an extension of religious instruction and community identity.

Puritanism and Literary Expression

Puritan beliefs emphasized human depravity, the necessity of salvation, and the sovereignty of God. These convictions permeated literature, reinforcing spiritual vigilance and communal accountability. Writers sought to inspire religious reflection and adherence through their works.

The Great Awakening's Impact

The Great Awakening, a religious revival movement in the mid-18th century, intensified religious enthusiasm and produced powerful sermons and devotional literature. This movement helped shape American religious identity and influenced subsequent literary themes and styles.

Missionary Texts and Indigenous Encounters

Religious literature also included missionary accounts aimed at converting Native Americans. These texts often combined ethnographic observations with religious appeals, reflecting colonial attitudes toward indigenous peoples and spiritual conquest.

Impact and Legacy of American Colonial Literature

The legacy of American colonial period literature extends beyond its historical context, laying the groundwork for the development of a distinct American literary tradition. Its themes, styles, and concerns influenced later writers and contributed to the cultural identity of the United States.

Foundation for American Literary Identity

Colonial literature established motifs such as individual faith, community responsibility, and engagement with the natural world, which persisted in later American literature. The emphasis on plain style and moral purpose influenced writers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Influence on Revolutionary and Early National Writings

Ideas expressed in colonial texts regarding liberty, governance, and morality informed the rhetoric of the American Revolution and early national literature. The blending of religious and political thought helped shape the emerging nation's values.

Preservation and Study

Modern scholarship has revived interest in colonial literature, recognizing its historical significance and literary merit. Collections of colonial writings continue to be studied for their insights into early American culture and the origins of national literature.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main characteristics of American Colonial Period literature?

American Colonial Period literature is characterized by its focus on religious themes, didacticism, plain style, and a strong emphasis on morality and community values. It often includes sermons, diaries, almanacs, and poetry that reflect Puritan beliefs and early American experiences.

Who were some prominent writers during the American Colonial Period?

Prominent writers of the American Colonial Period include Anne Bradstreet, the first published American poet; Jonathan Edwards, known for his sermons like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"; and Cotton Mather, a Puritan minister and author.

How did religion influence literature in the American Colonial Period?

Religion heavily influenced literature during the American Colonial Period, as many works were written to promote religious faith and morals. Puritanism shaped the themes and styles of writing, emphasizing piety, divine providence, and the importance of living a virtuous life according to Christian teachings.

What role did sermons play in Colonial American literature?

Sermons were a central literary form in Colonial American literature, serving as both religious instruction and a means to influence social behavior. They were widely read and circulated, reflecting the community's values and often addressing issues like sin, salvation, and the covenant relationship between God and the people.

How did American Colonial literature pave the way for later American literary movements?

American Colonial literature laid the groundwork for later literary movements by establishing themes of individualism, morality, and a connection to the American landscape. Its focus on personal experience, religious faith, and community values influenced the development of American Romanticism and Transcendentalism in the 19th century.

Additional Resources

1. *Of Plymouth Plantation*

This historical account by William Bradford chronicles the experiences of the Pilgrims from their departure from England to their settlement in Plymouth Colony. Written between 1630 and 1651, it offers a detailed and personal perspective on the challenges faced by early colonists, including interactions with Native Americans and the harsh New England winters. The work is considered one of the most important primary sources of early American history.

2. *Magnalia Christi Americana*

Authored by Cotton Mather in 1702, this book focuses on the religious history of New England during the colonial period. Mather, a prominent Puritan minister, provides biographies of key religious figures and an account of the spiritual and social climate of the time. The work reflects the deeply religious worldview that shaped much of colonial American literature.

3. *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*

This collection of poetry by Anne Bradstreet, published in 1650, is the first book of poetry written by a resident of the American colonies. Bradstreet's poems explore themes of faith, family, and the natural world, providing insight into the Puritan experience. Her work is notable for its emotional depth and sophisticated use of language.

4. *New England's Trials*

Written by Nathaniel Morton, this book details the legal and social challenges faced by the early settlers of New England. It covers the establishment of governance, relations with Native tribes, and the development of colonial laws. Morton's account helps illuminate the complexities of creating a new society in an unfamiliar land.

5. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

This 1682 work is a firsthand account of Mary Rowlandson's capture by Native Americans during King Philip's War. It is one of the earliest examples of captivity narratives in American literature and explores themes of suffering, faith, and cultural conflict. The narrative had a significant impact on colonial views of Native Americans.

6. *The History of the Dividing Line*

William Byrd II's diary, written in 1728, recounts the surveying expedition to establish the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. The text provides vivid descriptions of the landscape, colonial life, and interactions with Native Americans. Byrd's work is valued for its blend of humor, observation, and social commentary.

7. *Diary of Samuel Sewall*

Samuel Sewall's diary, spanning several decades in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, offers a rich personal record of colonial life in Massachusetts. Sewall, a judge in the Salem witch trials, reflects on his religious beliefs, family life, and the moral dilemmas of his time. His diary is an important source for understanding the social and cultural fabric of colonial New England.

8. *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*

This is the full title of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, emphasizing the Puritan belief in divine providence. The book illustrates how Rowlandson interpreted her ordeal as

a test from God, reinforcing the religious framework that dominated colonial thought. Its publication helped popularize the captivity narrative genre.

9. *Letters from an American Farmer*

Written by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782, these letters portray life in the American colonies from the perspective of a French immigrant. The work discusses the diversity, opportunities, and challenges of colonial society and is often credited with shaping early American identity. It provides a unique outsider's view of the colonial experience.

American Colonial Period Literature

American Colonial Period Literature

Related Articles

- [american history 1 unit 1 test](#)
- [answers to comprehension questions](#)
- [analyzing motion graphs](#)

[Back to Home](#)