

A Brief Introduction to American Literature

The collection of written works created in the English language in the United States is known as American literature. American literature was influenced by the history of the nation that created it, much like other national literatures. America was nothing more than a collection of colonies dotted around the eastern coast of the continent of North America for about 150 years, from which a few courageous individuals dared to go westward. America became the nation of the United States following a successful uprising against the motherland. This country stretched north to the 49th parallel, west to the Pacific, and south to the Gulf of Mexico by the end of the 19th century. It had also established itself as one of the world's powers by the end of the 19th century—It had established itself as one of the world's powers by the end of the 19th century as well, and because of its close ties to other countries, it was unavoidably involved in two world wars and the issues that followed in Europe and East Asia. People's lives saw numerous changes as a result of the development of industry and science, as well as shifts in attitudes and ways of thinking. The literature of the United States was influenced by all of these elements in its development.

Biographies, treatises, journey narratives, and sermons were among the 17th-century utilitarian works. Because of the pervasive bias against drama and fiction, there were not many accomplishments in these fields. The Bay Psalm Book of 1640 and Michael Wigglesworth's statement of Calvinistic belief in doggerel verse, *The Day of Doom* (1662), both featured poor but well-known poetry. At least there was some higher-level poetry. *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) featured some lyrics by Massachusetts native Anne Bradstreet that poignantly expressed her sentiments about religion and her family. A poet whose writings were not found and published until 1939 is ranked even higher by contemporary critics: Edward Taylor was a doctor and priest from England who resided in Westfield, Massachusetts, and Boston. Taylor wrote poems that demonstrated his joy in Christian belief and experience, despite being less affected by gloom than the average Puritan.

Every American work from the 17th century followed the style of British works from the same era. Bradford imitated the cadences of the King James Bible, John Smith wrote in the tradition of geography literature, and Roger Williams and the Mathers penned the era's adorned writing. While Taylor was in the tradition of metaphysical poets like George Herbert and John Donne, Anne Bradstreet's lyrical style was influenced by a long line of British poets, including Spenser and Sidney. Thus, the literature of this first century in America was distinctly English in both form and content.

Some authors, like Cotton Mather, continued the ancient traditions in America in the early 18th century. Ancient Puritan beliefs were defended in his extensive history and biography of Puritan New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, published in 1702, and his forceful introduction to the ministry, *Manuductio ad Ministerium*, published in 1726. In his stirring sermons and, most notably, in the philosophical treatise *Freedom of Will* (1754), Jonathan Edwards, the founder of the Great Awakening, a religious revival that shook the eastern seacoast for many years, persuasively defended his fervent belief in Calvinistic doctrine—of the idea that man, born completely depraved, could attain virtue and salvation only through God's grace. He provided reasoning and a connection to a sophisticated metaphysical framework to bolster his arguments.

Although she wrote eloquently about her observations and offered commentary on them from the perspective of an orthodox believer, her humorous writings revealed that she was far less ardent than the Pilgrim founders had been. William Byrd, an aristocratic plantation owner from Virginia, stood in stark contrast to his more depressing ancestors in the South. His principal writings were *The History of the Dividing Line*, which chronicled a surveying expedition in 1728, and *A Journey to the Land of Eden*, which described a visit to his frontier lands in 1733. Despite being a devoted Anglican, Byrd was as light-hearted as the Restoration because of the joy and grace of expression

that had been fostered by years spent in England, on the Continent, and among the Southern aristocracy. However, Mather and Edwards were fighting for a lost cause. A less dogmatic approach to religion was adopted by liberal New England clergy like Jonathan Mayhew and John Wise. Other changes were announced by Samuel Sewall in his humorous *Diary*, which covered 1673–1729. Despite his true religious beliefs, he demonstrated in his daily journals how New England's business culture supplanted strict Puritanism with more pragmatic outlooks. The *Mme Journal* In 1704, Sara Kemble Knight humorously described a trip that woman took to New York.

Disparities between American and British political ideas that had been developing were highlighted by the American Revolution. The colonists were influenced by a number of highly successful political writers, including loyalist Joseph Galloway and colonists Samuel Adams and John Dickinson, as they came to believe that rebellion was inevitable, fought the bitter war, and worked to establish the new nation's government. However, Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin towered over these.

Born in 1706, Franklin began publishing his works in the *New England Courant*, his brother's newspaper, as early as 1722. Through the use of simple language and useful arguments, this journal promoted the cause of the farmer and the "Leather Apron" guy. Both the well-known *Poor Richard's* almanack, which Franklin edited between 1732 and 1757 and was full of wise and humorous sayings allegedly penned by uneducated but seasoned Richard Saunders, and the author's autobiography, which was written between 1771 and 1788 and detailed his ascent from impoverished beginnings while providing practical advice for future success, made it evident that common sense was a good guide.