

Colonial American literature

Colonial American literature is writing that emerged from the original U.S. colonies during the period from 1607 to the late 1700s. It was largely influenced by British writers, and was created to inform people about colonial life, religious disputes and settlement issues. Many of the characteristics of Colonial American literature can be found in the poems, journals, letters, narratives, histories and teaching materials written by settlers, religious figures and historical icons of the period. Colonial American literature includes the writings of Mary Rowlandson, William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet and John Winthrop.

American Puritanism

The term Puritan was first used by the opponents of those English and American Protestants who desired to reform (though not necessarily separate from) the Church of England in worship, doctrine, and polity. In theology, Puritans followed Calvin rather than Luther, though their particular emphasis on experiential conversion and personal piety often distinguished them from Scottish and other European Calvinists. Scholars link Puritanism to English and American concepts of morality, politics, religion, education, business, and the arts. Puritanism has been associated, favorably or unfavorably, with most modern philosophies and movements in politics and religion. What is uniquely Puritan in England is not always easy to discern. But Puritan (also called Pilgrim) thought has uniquely influenced America since the foundation of her first colonies. The Puritan vision of America as a “city on a hill” has uniquely shaped the American view of life and politics and continues to influence what Sacvan Bercovitch calls “the American self.”

The term Puritan has typically been used as a term of derision intended to communicate an overly zealous reformist spirit. Those conservatives who have focused on the Puritans’ revolutionary character have tended to scorn Puritanism. In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), for example, Eric Voegelin elaborates on the criticisms of Richard Hooker and labels the Puritans gnostic revolutionaries. But other conservatives see Puritan traits as inherently conservative. In *The Roots of American Order* (1974), for example, Russell Kirk sees Puritanism in America as a bulwark against moral revolution and the modern spirit. Kirk also sees the “Puritan inheritance” as integral to understanding American political thought. Regardless of the intent or consequence of Puritan reforms, Puritan views on society, church, and state have become integral to the British and American worldview, especially the Puritans’ pessimism towards human nature and their hope for the victory of the church in history.

Puritan worship services took place in buildings devoid of traditional ornamentation and were neither ceremonial nor liturgical. Exegetical and expository preaching rather than the sacraments formed the center of Puritan worship. Puritan church leaders rejected the traditional church calendar and its holidays as interfering with a simple and spiritual worship style that emphasized personal knowledge of the Bible and the pious duties of the laity. While the Puritans saw their efforts as the restoration of worship in the spirit of the early church, critics have charged that their reforms inevitably led from piety to rationalism. Whether this rationalism led to Unitarianism and transcendentalism in America is a subject of lingering debate.

In church governance, Puritans rejected formal and extensive hierarchy as “Popish.” Instead, Puritan churches favored a Congregational or Presbyterian structure that gave congregations varying degrees of autonomy and emphasized the leadership of ruling and teaching elders within the local church. Church members were expected to have a close knowledge of the Bible and to attend worship regularly. The Puritans’ emphasis on congregational autonomy and personal religious experience has led many to see them as a source of the democratic spirit in American politics. But such a claim must also take into account the Puritans’ emphasis on “calling” and their distrust of democratic civil government and antinomian theology. The Puritans did require education for all, but their requirement for the extensive training of clergy in particular discouraged the

egalitarianism more characteristic of Methodists and Baptists. Indeed, the Puritans' emphasis on higher education inspired them to found Harvard, Princeton, and other famous institutions.

English Puritans confronted questions about political liberty and religious tolerance in the Putney and Whitehall debates in 1647 and 1648 during the Puritan Revolution. American Puritans debated similar questions in famous controversies surrounding Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. In *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville writes about the importance of Puritanism to the American spirit and suggests that Puritanism was as much a political theory as a religious doctrine. He suggests that Puritanism encouraged both a republican and a democratic virtue and has enabled the kind of civic responsibility necessary for limited and federal government.

The Puritan Jonathan Edwards is considered by many to be America's greatest theologian. Together with Puritan George Whitefield, Edwards was also instrumental in inspiring American revivalism and its emphasis on personal virtue. The Mathers—Increase, Cotton, and Richard—embody a rich multigenerational history of American intellectual thought. In England, John Milton is associated with Puritanism in literature, while Oliver Cromwell is famous for his revolution against Charles I. English Puritan John Bunyan is famous for his enormously influential *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Finally, the political ideas of Puritans John Winthrop and William Bradford are essential for an understanding of America's colonial experience.

Puritan Beliefs

Puritans believed many things.

- They believed in salvation - the fate of individual souls was predetermined by God.
- Salvation was a personal matter between God and the 'Elect'. Elects or Saints were the ones who were saved and the ones who weren't were 'wicked'.
- By reading the Bible the individual also entered a direct relationship with God.
- To become an Elect and have God's salvation they do a Covenant of Grace, a contract that asks forgiveness of sins and for salvation.
- Elect Puritan has to follow Christ and practically devote their life to him.
- To do this they could go to Voluntary associations in congregations and churches.

Puritan beliefs were filled with paradoxes. The puritans rebelled against others in order to create the perfect World, a utopia that did not allow for rebellion. Their beliefs and goals created a tension filled paradoxical dilemma.

Man was not to sin, but he would sin anyway. Man was required to forgive, but evil was ever present. Man was a seeker of salvation, but was helpless against evil. He was to live in hopes of eternal salvation, but he may not have been predetermined by God for salvation.

John Calvin established their basic beliefs of original sin, predestination and the belief that Jesus Christ died for man's sins. Their belief of original sin is that Eve led Adam to sin, and that sin tainted all of mankind, and their concept predestination is that select individuals have been determined by God for salvation before their birth.

- In the Puritan discipline, dancing was acceptable, but sexual dancing was not.
- Drinking alcohol was also acceptable but becoming a drunkard was not.
- The Puritans believed very strongly in marriage and were opposed to illicit sexual activities.
- Adultery was punishable by death, and fornication was to be punished by whipping.
- They wanted to "purify" the Church of England and put an end to the hierarchy that led to corruption.

They believed that the church should follow the scriptures exactly. There was a dislike of the Pope's practice of selling indulgences and the massive ornamentation of the Church.

The puritans were just normal people, they were not supermen. They were not monks; they did not shrink from life. The puritans were also neither prohibitionists, nor sexual prudes. They were very open minded for the time. They had the view that they had to live in the world, but not become worldly.

The Dilemma of Puritan living affected individual puritans differently. Some went about their daily lives living in uncertainty whether God had selected them for eternal salvation or condemned them to eternal damnation. Tensions must have been tough on those who worked hard for success but under the Puritan doctrine never daring to enjoy their wealth and success.

1. Total Depravity - through Adam and Eve's fall, every person is born sinful - concept of Original Sin.
2. Unconditional Election - God "saves" those he wishes - only a few are selected for salvation - concept of predestination.
3. Limited Atonement - Jesus died for the chosen only, not for everyone.
4. Irresistible Grace - God's grace is freely given, it cannot be earned or denied. Grace is defined as the saving and transfiguring power of God.
5. Perseverance of the "saints" - those elected by God have full power to interpret the will of God, and to live uprightly. If anyone rejects grace after feeling its power in his life, he will be going against the will of God - something impossible in Puritanism.

In the relation of churches to civil power, Puritans believed that secular governors are accountable to God to protect and reward virtue, including "true religion", and to punish wrongdoers. They opposed the supremacy of the monarch in the church (Erastainism), and argued that the only head of the Church in heaven or earth is Christ.

The idea of personal Biblical interpretation, while central to Puritan beliefs was shared with Protestants in general. Puritans sought both individual and corporate conformity to the teaching of the Bible, with moral purity pursued both down to the smallest detail as well as ecclesiastical purity to the highest level. They believed that man existed for the glory of God; that his first concern in life was to do God's will and so to receive future happiness.

Like some of Reformed churches on the European continent, Puritan reforms were typified by a minimum of ritual and decoration and by an unambiguous emphasis on preaching. Calvinists generally believed that the worship in the church ought to be strictly regulated by what is commanded in the Bible (the regulative principle or worship), and condemned as idolatry many current practices, regardless of antiquity or widespread adoption among Christians, against opponents who defended tradition. Simplicity in worship led to the exclusion of vestments, images, candles, etc. They did not celebrate traditional holidays which they believed to be in violation of the regulative principle.

Religious Dissent in Colonial New England

dissent began with the first generation of settlers, who believed they had left controversy back in England only to find that they had brought the seeds of their discontent along with them. Governor John Winthrop and other Puritan founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony did not wish to share the religious liberty they had obtained for themselves but rather tried to create a theocracy, a state ruled by God, with themselves, ministers and magistrates, in charge as the sole interpreters of God's word. By exercising strict control, they hoped to prevent the devil from insinuating himself into the new colony.

ROGER WILLIAMS

Roger Williams found himself in disagreement with Puritan authorities. Williams disapproved of any relationship between church and state; he felt that the two should be separated. People should be free to worship in whatever way they pleased; membership in a particular church should not affect civil rights. Williams was so outspoken on this issue that he was banished from Massachusetts. He established the colony of Providence, Rhode Island, in 1636. When Rhode Island was granted a royal charter in 1644, Williams insisted on a guarantee of religious freedom for all the colony's inhabitants.

The ideas of religious freedom and fair dealings with the Native Americans resulted in Roger Williams' exile from the Massachusetts colony. This 1936 postage stamp commemorates his founding of Rhode Island.

Two ideas got him into big trouble in Massachusetts Bay. First, he preached separation of church and state. He believed in complete RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, so no single church should be supported by tax dollars. Massachusetts Puritans believed they had the one true faith; therefore such talk was intolerable. Second, Williams claimed taking land from the Native Americans without proper payment was unfair.

Massachusetts wasted no time in banishing the minister.

In 1636, he purchased land from the NARRAGANSETT Indians and founded the colony of RHODE ISLAND. Here there would be complete religious freedom. Dissenters from the English New World came here seeking refuge. Anne Hutchinson herself moved to Rhode Island before her fatal relocation to New York.

America has long been a land where people have reserved the right to say, "I disagree." Many early settlers left England in the first place because they disagreed with English practice. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were two brave souls who reminded everyone at their own great peril of that most sacred right.

Shortly before Williams established his colony, a woman named Anne Hutchinson arrived in Boston in 1634. Although women could not be ordained ministers, she became an unofficial religious leader soon after her arrival. In her home, she led discussions of the Bible and of the sermons of the leading ministers of the city. These meetings were widely popular, especially among women. However, many Bostonians believed that Hutchinson's growing influence threatened the authority of the ministers. As time passed, and Hutchinson became more and more critical of the ministers who ran the city, she was arrested on a charge of weakening their authority. Hutchinson put up a spirited and logical defense of her actions, but lost her case. She found sanctuary in Rhode Island.

Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer

Two women were the focus of religious dissent: Anne Hutchinson and, some years later, Mary Dyer. The Antinomian Controversy, which swirled around Hutchinson, was an intense eruption that lasted from October 1636 to March 1638; it involved virtually all of the ministers and most of the magistrates and church members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The colony's extreme reaction showed that much more was at stake than an obscure doctrinal point.

In 1634 Anne Hutchinson of Lincolnshire, aged 43 and deeply rooted in Elizabethan Puritanism, sailed from England on The Griffin with her husband, William, and their children to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She was following her pastor and religious mentor, John Cotton, whose dissenting views had forced him to flee England. After being admitted to the First Church of Boston, where Cotton was teacher, she began to conduct weekly meetings in her Boston home to instruct women on Scripture by interpreting Cotton's sermons. These meetings grew to include men, among them leading merchants and the young governor Henry Vane. Questions of Hutchinson's orthodoxy and her right to conduct religious meetings arose, especially when it was said that she accused many Massachusetts Bay clergymen of not being able ministers of the Gospels. She preached, as did Cotton, the covenant of grace, also called the doctrine of free grace, by which she meant that the Holy Spirit may dispense grace to believers irrespective of good works or merit obtained through good works. An individual could thus gain salvation through a direct experience of God's grace, rather than through the mediating offices of church authority. The potential political ramifications of this doctrine, in its inevitable weakening of church authority, alarmed ministers and magistrates alike. Moreover, the fact that Hutchinson was a woman giving public lectures was regarded as dangerously disruptive by the male establishment. In a social storm that prefigured the Salem witch trials more than half a century later, Hutchinson was twice brought to trial. In November 1637, with Governor Winthrop presiding (newly restored to power after Vane's ouster), the General Court convicted her of heresy and sentenced her to imprisonment, then exile. A church trial in March 1638, declared her excommunicated and anathema.

Scholars have not reached a consensus as to whether or not Hutchinson actually held heretical doctrinal views. The trial transcripts suggest that her positions never differed from those of Cotton, who was himself interrogated by his fellow ministers but managed to pass muster with them. The theological idea that the covenant of grace exempts the elect from moral accountability to church law has a long history that can be traced back to Paul's epistles. In New England, antinomianism became an issue completely intertwined with Hutchinson's refusal to submit to Massachusetts Bay authorities; it denoted the conflict between man's works, regarded as synonymous with church authority, and the saving grace dispensed by the Holy Spirit. Hutchinson denied that she was an antinomian, since to her, as to most Puritans, the term implied licentious behavior and religious heterodoxy. In her trials she argued brilliantly for her orthodoxy, citing Scriptures that supported her interpretations. She was at first upheld by Cotton, but he turned against her later, possibly out of fear for his own position. Many passages in the record show that Hutchinson was on trial not only for her doctrinal views

but for being a disturber of the peace, a woman who refused to submit to church authority and to confine herself to a conventional female domestic role. Hutchinson did not make her gender an issue, but her male accusers did.

With Hutchinson's exile in 1638, the authority of Puritan magistrates and ministers was restored. After she left Boston, Hutchinson helped to establish the first democracy in North America, the Aquidneck colony in Rhode Island, where she resumed her public lectures and created such a stir in the Massachusetts Bay Colony that a delegation of ministers was sent to try to silence her, in which mission they failed. After her husband died in 1642, Hutchinson left Rhode Island and moved to a Dutch settlement on Pelham Bay in New York, where she and five of her children who had accompanied her were massacred in an Indian raid in late summer 1643. Her youngest daughter, Susannah, was taken hostage by the Indians.

Hutchinson created a paradigm for women's religious rights through her insistence on defying church authority in order to speak publicly on doctrine in accordance with her own conscience. Her purpose was not to free herself from male religious authority, for she was an avid supporter of Cotton and of the minister John Wheelwright, her brother-in-law and fellow exile. She did not define herself essentially through her relationship to men but was rather primarily focused on fulfilling her spiritual aspirations as an independent human being. Her essential identity lay in her sense of herself, from which center she related directly to her Maker. Through her understanding of the covenant of grace, she developed a spirituality based on individual intuition and the gift of prophecy, both of which she grounded on scriptural texts.

The Massachusetts Bay authorities knew that in the covenant of grace as propounded by Hutchinson they were faced with an alternative conception of the self and, by implication at least, a radically different order of society. The certain knowledge resulting from the influx of grace to the soul would authorize the individual to act without reference to external authority. The Antinomian Controversy thus had implications well beyond the realm of church structure to society at large. It articulated a tension in American culture between private and public realms.

Although Hutchinson's departure from the mainstream of New England Puritanism was forced upon her rather than sought by her, she was nonetheless a forerunner of more radical religious dissenters, the Quakers. Her link to them was through her friend Mary Dyer. In 1635, a bride of 18, Dyer accompanied her Separatist husband William from England to Boston, where she became a member of Cotton's First Church and a friend and supporter of Hutchinson, incurring the wrath of Governor Winthrop, who considered the Dyers as troublesome as Hutchinson herself. When Hutchinson was banished, the Dyers followed the Hutchinsons to Aquidneck, where they settled to raise a large family. Dyer returned with her family in 1652 to England for a visit with her aged mother. While there, she joined the Quakers, or Society of Friends, a group newly founded by George Fox in the north of England. They based themselves on the belief that there is that of God in every one, which is to say that every person is worthy of reverence and has within themselves a seed which can illuminate their conscience and aid their spiritual growth. Early Quakers, with women given an equal role as missionaries and ministers, went out in pairs, Dyer among them, to proselytize through England and beyond, meeting persecution wherever they went. Even before Quakers arrived in Massachusetts, Puritan authorities knew their reputation as religious radicals and disturbers of government. On July 11, 1656, when Quakers Mary Fisher and Ann Austin sailed into Boston Harbor from Barbados, they were sent to prison without trial, kept five weeks, then sent back to Barbados. Eight other Quakers arrived, prompting the General Court to pass a law fining shipmasters if they brought Quakers, who would be arrested, whipped, and jailed.

When Dyer returned to America in 1657, she traveled the Boston area as a missionary and visited imprisoned Quakers until she was briefly jailed under the new laws, then released on bond to her husband. Back in Rhode Island, she served as the nucleus of a new Quaker group that felt called to return to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Mary Clark went to Boston, where she was severely whipped and jailed 12 weeks. In October 1657, a stricter law was passed decreeing that banished Quakers who returned would have their ears cropped and tongues bored with a hot iron; three returning Quakers each lost an ear by August 1658.

Boston authorities passed a final decree that anyone convicted of being a Quaker should be banished on pain of death. Four Quakers were hanged, including Dyer, who returned to Boston in 1659 to minister to imprisoned Quakers, and then again in 1660. Twice arrested, she was condemned to death both times and, although reprieved in 1659, was hanged on Boston Common on June 1, 1660. When King Charles II and local public opinion forced authorities to abandon the death penalty, the Cart and Whip Act followed, under which any

banished Quaker who returned would be tied to a cart and whipped through town, a fate endured by four Quaker women.

Although Hutchinson and Dyer are linked by their belief in the direct infusion of grace or light into the individual soul, the two controversies differ profoundly. Hutchinson's dispute with the ministers was a family quarrel over interpretation of Scripture, but she did not question the basic structures of the church. The Quakers, however, although rooted in Christianity and Scripture, departed from the entire church structure, professing no fixed set of theological tenets. Yet the links between Hutchinson and Dyer remain in Boston today. At the Massachusetts State House on Beacon Hill, a statue of Mary Dyer stands on the lawn opposite Boston Commons. Nearby stands a bronze memorial to Anne Hutchinson, portrayed as a young woman, eyes raised heavenward, one hand holding a Bible, the other a little girl. Dyer's inscription hails her witness for religious freedom, while Hutchinson's plaque eulogizes her courageous advocacy of civil liberty and religious toleration.

Puritan Literature

Many 17th century Puritans were deeply unhappy with the state of England and emigrated to the New World. From the 1630s onwards, many settled in New England and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which grew rapidly.

Puritan views were adopted by the congregations not only in New England, but also in the Netherlands, Wales and Ireland. Puritans were calling for purity of worship and personal piety. They believed that Christ was the only head of the church and they denied the monarch's supremacy and divine right to rule.

Puritans excluded decorations such as candles and images from their churches and rituals, placing greater emphasis on scripture and preaching. They refused to celebrate traditional holidays, including Christmas, which they considered to be in conflict with their principles. Puritans were well-educated, founding a number of schools and colleges, and they insisted that their children should get quality education.

Their literature consisted of prose or poetry. Because of their Puritan values, they disapproved of plays and dramas, and under Cromwell many of London's theatres, including those founded by William Shakespeare, which had been so popular in the Elizabethan era, were ordered to be closed.

Two of the most famous Puritan writers were John Milton (1608 to 1674), who wrote the poem *Paradise Lost*, and the preacher John Bunyan (1628 to 1688), the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Puritan poetry concerned mainly topics related to the unworthiness of the humankind before God, the uselessness of possessions and the vulnerability of vanity. Ann Bradstreet and Michael Wigglesworth were prominent Puritan poets. Bradstreet's poems were dedicated to real life events. For instance, she described a fire that destroyed her home and wrote about the volatility of material possessions. She also expressed her inner

fight after the loss of some of her grandchildren. Wigglesworth, in turn, concentrated his poems on the Judgment Day.

Puritan prose was focused on theological issues. Well-known Puritan writers Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather wrote mainly histories and sermons. Edwards is most famous for his *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* sermon, while Mather became popular with the *Magnalia Christi Americana* and *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. He is considered one of the fathers of literary criticism in America.

John Cotton and John Winthrop were among the first American Puritans who emigrated from England to the New World. Puritan writers also included Thomas Adams, Richard Baxter, James Durham, Samuel Rutherford, Thomas Shepard and Thomas Goodwin. These writers sought to glorify God. They wrote about politics and religion idealistically, though they pretended to be painting life realistically. Their society trusted plain speech as shown by William Bradford, who stressed on "plain style, with singular regard to the simple truth in all things."

As with their homes and churches, Puritan writers viewed ornate writing style as full of unnecessary adornments, while "painted sermons," were viewed to be an abomination. They used to stick to the simple, plain and orderly style, but implemented many techniques from the Bible like parables and analogies, similes and metaphors. Edwards was considered one of the greatest American literary artists. He shared common philosophical values with contemporaries Isaac Newton and John Locke. Edwards combined his knowledge of science and philosophy into writing religious literature.

Another important representative of Anglo-American literature from the colonial period was Benjamin Franklin, who created a connection between the late colonial period and the early years of nationalism. Franklin wrote *Dogood Papers* in 1722, which acquainted a new generation with the ethical legacy of Puritanism.

Some scholars trace this Puritan legacy all the way through another 100-plus years to Abraham Lincoln. Many claim that Puritanism, as well as influencing American culture and politics, was the basis for American democracy.

Characteristics of Puritan Writing

Genres

Early literature written by Puritans in America often appeared as first person narratives in the form of journals and diaries. Early American colonists wrote their accounts of immigration, settling in America, and day-to-day life in journals to pass their stories down. Many Puritans also wrote letters to send back to Europe to family and friends they left behind. Very little fiction appeared during this period; Puritans valued realistic writing with an emphasis on religious themes.

Three important Puritan genres included:

- Sermons
- Historical narrative
- Poetry

Influence

Puritans held deep religious beliefs based on their own perspective of Christianity. The Bible played an

important role in the daily lives of the Puritans. Families attended church regularly and read the Bible in their homes. Due to this influence, most Puritan writing is based on the styles of the Bible. Puritans compared their own lives to biblical narratives and events and compared themselves to biblical characters to illustrate points.

Plain Style

Puritans lived a simple life based on the concepts of humility and simplicity. This influence comes from their religious beliefs and the Bible. Wearing elaborate clothing or having conceited thoughts offended Puritans. Puritan writing mimics these cultural values in its plain writing style. Puritans wrote directly to the point, and avoided much of the elaborate writing style that became popular in Europe. Simple sentences with common language allowed Puritans to communicate information without feeling like they were drawing attention to themselves.

Purpose

Puritans wrote with specific purposes in mind. Even the letters they wrote to friends and family in Europe performed more of a purpose than simply communicating about their lives and keeping in touch. Puritans' religious beliefs affected their lives on all levels, and their writing illustrated their religion's values, such as the importance of the church and the influence of God in their lives. Writing often became instructive, teaching Christian values. The Puritans did not believe that literature was for entertainment; therefore, they frowned upon "entertainment" genres such as drama (plays) and fiction novels