

# CHAPTER 1

## EARLY AMERICAN AND COLONIAL PERIOD TO 1776

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American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America before the first Europeans arrived. As a result, Native American oral literature is quite diverse. Narratives from quasi-nomadic hunting cultures like the Navaho are different from stories of settled agricultural tribes such as the pueblo-dwelling Acoma; the stories of northern lakeside dwellers such as the Ojibwa often differ radically from stories of desert tribes like the Hopi.

Tribes maintained their own religions — worshipping gods, animals, plants, or sacred persons. Systems of government ranged from democracies to councils of elders to theocracies. These tribal variations enter into the oral literature as well.

Still, it is possible to make a few generalizations. Indian stories, for example, glow with reverence for nature as a spiritual as well as physical mother. Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual. The closest to the Indian sense of holiness in later American literature is Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental "Over-Soul," which pervades all of life.

The Mexican tribes revered the divine Quetzalcoatl, a god of the Toltecs and Aztecs, and some tales of a high god or culture were told

elsewhere. However, there are no long, standardized religious cycles about one supreme divinity. The closest equivalents to Old World spiritual narratives are often accounts of shamans' initiations and voyages. Apart from these, there are stories about culture heroes such as the Ojibwa tribe's Manabozho or the Navajo tribe's Coyote. These tricksters are treated with varying degrees of respect. In one tale they may act like heroes, while in another they may seem selfish or foolish. Although past authorities, such as the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, have deprecated trickster tales as expressing the inferior, amoral side of the psyche, contemporary scholars — some of them Native Americans — point out that Odysseus and Prometheus, the revered Greek heroes, are essentially tricksters as well.

Examples of almost every oral genre can be found in American Indian literature: lyrics, chants, myths, fairy tales, humorous anecdotes, incantations, riddles, proverbs, epics, and legendary histories. Accounts of migrations and ancestors abound, as do vision or healing songs and tricksters' tales. Certain creation stories are particularly popular. In one well-known creation story, told with variations among many tribes, a turtle holds up the world. In a Cheyenne version, the creator, Maheo, has four chances to fashion the world from a watery universe. He sends four water birds diving to try to bring up earth from the bottom. The snow goose, loon, and mallard soar high into the sky and sweep down in a dive, but cannot reach bottom; but the little coot, who cannot fly, succeeds in bringing up some mud in his bill. Only one creature, humble Grandmother Turtle, is the right shape to support the mud world Maheo shapes on her shell — hence the Indian name for America, "Turtle Island."

The songs or poetry, like the narratives, range from the sacred to the light and humorous: There are lullabies, war chants, love songs, and special songs for children's games,

gambling, various chores, magic, or dance ceremonies. Generally the songs are repetitive. Short poem-songs given in dreams sometimes have the clear imagery and subtle mood associated with Japanese haiku or Eastern-influenced imagistic poetry. A Chippewa song runs:

A loon I thought it was  
But it was  
My love's  
splashing oar.

Vision songs, often very short, are another distinctive form. Appearing in dreams or visions, sometimes with no warning, they may be healing, hunting, or love songs. Often they are personal, as in this Modoc song:

I  
the song  
I walk here.

Indian oral tradition and its relation to American literature as a whole is one of the richest and least explored topics in American studies. The Indian contribution to America is greater than is often believed. The hundreds of Indian words in everyday American English include "canoe," "tobacco," "potato," "moccasin," "moose," "persimmon," "raccoon," "tomahawk," and "totem." Contemporary Native American writing, discussed in chapter 8, also contains works of great beauty.

## THE LITERATURE OF EXPLORATION

Had history taken a different turn, the United States easily could have been a part of the great Spanish or French overseas empires. Its present inhabitants might speak Spanish and form one nation with Mexico, or speak French and be joined with Canadian Francophone Quebec and Montreal.

Yet the earliest explorers of America were not English, Spanish, or French. The first

European record of exploration in America is in a Scandinavian language. The Old Norse Vinland Saga recounts how the adventurous Leif Ericson and a band of wandering Norsemen settled briefly somewhere on the northeast coast of America — probably Nova Scotia, in Canada — in the first decade of the 11th century, almost 400 years before the next recorded European discovery of the New World.

The first known and sustained contact between the Americas and the rest of the world, however, began with the famous voyage of an Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, funded by the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus's journal in his "Epistola," printed in 1493, recounts the trip's drama — the terror of the men, who feared monsters and thought they might fall off the edge of the world; the near-mutiny; how Columbus faked the ships' logs so the men would not know how much farther they had travelled than anyone had gone before; and the first sighting of land as they neared America.

Bartolomé de las Casas is the richest source of information about the early contact between American Indians and Europeans. As a young priest he helped conquer Cuba. He transcribed Columbus's journal, and late in life wrote a long, vivid *History of the Indians* criticizing their enslavement by the Spanish.

Initial English attempts at colonization were disasters. The first colony was set up in 1585 at Roanoke, off the coast of North Carolina; all its colonists disappeared, and to this day legends are told about blue-eyed Croatan Indians of the area. The second colony was more permanent: Jamestown, established in 1607. It endured starvation, brutality, and misrule. However, the literature of the period paints America in glowing colors as the land of riches and opportunity. Accounts of the colonizations became world-renowned. The exploration of Roanoke was carefully recorded by Thomas Hariot in *A Brief and True Report of the New-Found Land*

of *Virginia* (1588). Hariot's book was quickly translated into Latin, French, and German; the text and pictures were made into engravings and widely republished for over 200 years.

The Jamestown colony's main record, the writings of Captain John Smith, one of its leaders, is the exact opposite of Hariot's accurate, scientific account. Smith was an incurable romantic, and he seems to have embroidered his adventures. To him we owe the famous story of the Indian maiden, Pocahontas. Whether fact or fiction, the tale is ingrained in the American historical imagination. The story recounts how Pocahontas, favorite daughter of Chief Powhatan, saved Captain Smith's life when he was a prisoner of the chief. Later, when the English persuaded Powhatan to give Pocahontas to them as a hostage, her gentleness, intelligence, and beauty impressed the English, and, in 1614, she married John Rolfe, an English gentleman. The marriage initiated an eight-year peace between the colonists and the Indians, ensuring the survival of the struggling new colony.

In the 17th century, pirates, adventurers, and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists, bringing their wives, children, farm implements, and craftsmen's tools. The early literature of exploration, made up of diaries, letters, travel journals, ships' logs, and reports to the explorers' financial backers — European rulers or, in mercantile England and Holland, joint stock companies — gradually was supplanted by records of the settled colonies. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best-known and most-anthologized colonial literature is English. As American minority literature continues to flower in the 20th century and American life becomes increasingly multicultural, scholars are rediscovering the importance of the continent's mixed ethnic heritage. Although the story of literature now turns to the English accounts, it is important to recognize its richly cosmopolitan beginnings.

## THE COLONIAL PERIOD IN NEW ENGLAND

It is likely that no other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans. Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern section of the United States, known as New England, as in the mother country — an astounding fact when one considers that most educated people of the time were aristocrats who were unwilling to risk their lives in wilderness conditions. The self-made and often self-educated Puritans were notable exceptions. They wanted education to understand and execute God's will as they established their colonies throughout New England.

The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced on Earth. Puritan style varied enormously — from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history. Whatever the style or genre, certain themes remained constant. Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss. This world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, a formidable enemy with many disguises. Many Puritans excitedly awaited the “millennium,” when Jesus would return to Earth, end human misery, and inaugurate 1,000 years of peace and prosperity.

Scholars have long pointed out the link between Puritanism and capitalism: Both rest on ambition, hard work, and an intense striving for success. Although individual Puritans could not know, in strict theological terms, whether they were “saved” and among the elect who would go to heaven, Puritans tended to feel that earthly success was a sign of election. Wealth and status were sought not only for themselves, but as welcome reassurances



“The First Thanksgiving,” a painting by J.L.G. Ferris, depicts America’s early settlers and Native Americans celebrating a bountiful harvest.

of spiritual health and promises of eternal life.

Moreover, the concept of stewardship encouraged success. The Puritans interpreted all things and events as symbols with deeper spiritual meanings, and felt that in advancing their own profit and their community’s well-being, they were also furthering God’s plans. They did not draw lines of distinction between the secular and religious spheres: All of life was an expression of the divine will — a belief that later resurfaces in Transcendentalism.

In recording ordinary events to reveal their spiritual meaning, Puritan authors commonly cited the Bible, chapter and verse. History was a symbolic religious panorama leading to the Puritan triumph over the New World and to God’s kingdom on Earth.

The first Puritan colonists who settled New England exemplified the seriousness of Reformation Christianity. Known as the “Pilgrims,” they were a small group of believers who had migrated from England to Holland — even then known for its religious tolerance — in 1608, during a time of persecutions.

Like most Puritans, they interpreted the Bible literally. They read and acted on the text of the Second Book of Corinthians — “Come out from among them and be ye separate,

saith the Lord.” Despairing of purifying the Church of England from within, “Separatists” formed underground “covenanted” churches that swore loyalty to the group instead of the king. Seen as traitors to the king as well as heretics damned to hell, they were often persecuted. Their separation took them ultimately to the New World.

### *William Bradford (1590-1657)*

William Bradford was elected governor of Plymouth in the Massachusetts Bay Colony shortly after the Separatists landed. He was a deeply pious, self-educated man who had learned several languages, including Hebrew, in order to “see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty.” His participation in the migration to Holland and the *Mayflower* voyage to Plymouth, and his duties as governor, made him ideally suited to be the first historian of his colony. His history, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1651), is a clear and compelling account of the colony’s beginning. His description of the first view of America is justly famous:

Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles...they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh

their weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succor...savage barbarians...were readier to fill their sides with arrows than otherwise. And for the reason it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country, know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms... all stand upon them with a weatherbeaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue.

**B**radford also recorded the first document of colonial self-governance in the English New World, the “Mayflower Compact,” drawn up while the Pilgrims were still on board ship. The compact was a harbinger of the Declaration of Independence to come a century and a half later.

Puritans disapproved of such secular amusements as dancing and card-playing, which were associated with ungodly aristocrats and immoral living. Reading or writing “light” books also fell into this category. Puritan minds poured their tremendous energies into non-fiction and pious genres: poetry, sermons, theological tracts, and histories. Their intimate diaries and meditations record the rich inner lives of this introspective and intense people.

### *Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672)*

The first published book of poems by an American was also the first American book to be published by a woman — Anne Bradstreet. It is not surprising that the book was published in England, given the lack of printing presses in the early years of the first American colonies. Born and educated in England, Anne Bradstreet was the daughter of an earl’s estate manager. She emigrated with her family when she was 18. Her husband eventually became governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which later grew into the great city of Boston. She preferred her long, religious poems on conventional subjects such as the seasons,

but contemporary readers most enjoy the witty poems on subjects from daily life and her warm and loving poems to her husband and children. She was inspired by English metaphysical poetry, and her book *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) shows the influence of Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and other English poets as well. She often uses elaborate conceits or extended metaphors. “To My Dear and Loving Husband” (1678) uses the oriental imagery, love theme, and idea of comparison popular in Europe at the time, but gives these a pious meaning at the poem’s conclusion:

If ever two were one, then surely we.  
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;  
If ever wife was happy in a man,  
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.  
I prize thy love more than whole mines of  
gold  
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.  
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,  
Nor ought but love from thee, give  
recompense.  
Thy love is such I can no way repay,  
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.  
Then while we live, in love let’s so  
persevere  
That when we live no more, we may live  
ever.

### *Edward Taylor (c. 1644-1729)*

Like Anne Bradstreet, and, in fact, all of New England’s first writers, the intense, brilliant poet and minister Edward Taylor was born in England. The son of a yeoman farmer — an independent farmer who owned his own land — Taylor was a teacher who sailed to New England in 1668 rather than take an oath of loyalty to the Church of England. He studied at Harvard College, and, like most Harvard-trained ministers, he knew Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. A selfless and pious man, Taylor acted as a missionary to the settlers when he accepted his

lifelong job as a minister in the frontier town of Westfield, Massachusetts, 160 kilometers into the thickly forested, wild interior. Taylor was the best-educated man in the area, and he put his knowledge to use, working as the town minister, doctor, and civic leader.

Modest, pious, and hard-working, Taylor never published his poetry, which was discovered only in the 1930s. He would, no doubt, have seen his work's discovery as divine providence; today's readers should be grateful to have his poems — the finest examples of 17th-century poetry in North America.

Taylor wrote a variety of verse: funeral elegies, lyrics, a medieval “debate,” and a 500-page *Metrical History of Christianity* (mainly a history of martyrs). His best works, according to modern critics, are the series of short preparatory meditations.

### *Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705)*

Michael Wigglesworth, like Taylor an English-born, Harvard-educated Puritan minister who practiced medicine, is the third New England colonial poet of note. He continues the Puritan themes in his best-known work, *The Day of Doom* (1662). A long narrative that often falls into doggerel, this terrifying popularization of Calvinistic doctrine was the most popular poem of the colonial period. This first American best-seller is an appalling portrait of damnation to hell in ballad meter.

It is terrible poetry — but everybody loved it. It fused the fascination of a horror story with the authority of John Calvin. For more than two centuries, people memorized this long, dreadful monument to religious terror; children proudly recited it, and elders quoted it in everyday speech. It is not such a leap from the terrible punishments of this poem to the ghastly self-inflicted wound of Nathaniel Hawthorne's guilty Puritan minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) or Herman Melville's crippled Captain Ahab,

a New England Faust whose quest for forbidden knowledge sinks the ship of American humanity in *Moby-Dick* (1851). (*Moby-Dick* was the favorite novel of 20th-century American novelist William Faulkner, whose profound and disturbing works suggest that the dark, metaphysical vision of Protestant America has not yet been exhausted.)

Like most colonial literature, the poems of early New England imitate the form and technique of the mother country, though the religious passion and frequent biblical references, as well as the new setting, give New England writing a special identity. Isolated New World writers also lived before the advent of rapid transportation and electronic communications. As a result, colonial writers were imitating writing that was already out of date in England. Thus, Edward Taylor, the best American poet of his day, wrote metaphysical poetry after it had become unfashionable in England. At times, as in Taylor's poetry, rich works of striking originality grew out of colonial isolation.

Colonial writers often seemed ignorant of such great English authors as Ben Jonson. Some colonial writers rejected English poets who belonged to a different sect as well, thereby cutting themselves off from the finest lyric and dramatic models the English language had produced. In addition, many colonials remained ignorant due to the lack of books.

The great model of writing, belief, and conduct was the Bible, in an authorized English translation that was already outdated when it came out. The age of the Bible, so much older than the Roman church, made it authoritative to Puritan eyes.

New England Puritans clung to the tales of the Jews in the Old Testament, believing that they, like the Jews, were persecuted for their faith, that they knew the one true God, and that they were the chosen elect who would establish the New Jerusalem — a heaven on Earth.