

EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Robert F Sayre, PhD

Early American Literature : Colonial Literature

Introduction

What is American literature? A generation ago the answer was, “the writing in English of people of European descent about their lives and experiences in North America.” It followed, you might say, from Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s answer to the question, “What is an American, this new man?” “He is either an European, or the descendant of an European....” (p. 433) Thus the earliest American literature was assumed to be by the explorers and settlers of Virginia like Captain John Smith and the Pilgrims and Puritans who settled Massachusetts, beginning in 1620. These writings, mainly diaries, sermons and histories, were followed by more obviously literary work like the poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor and various kinds of autobiographical writing: narratives of Indian captivity, travel narratives like Sarah Kemble Knight’s story of her month-long journey from Boston to New York, religious conversion narratives, and finally the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Such, in brief, was the canon of early American literature.

Today that definition is inadequate. American literature is considered to include much that was not written in English, such as the writings of French and Italian and Spanish explorers and settlers, as well as the later writings of immigrants from elsewhere in the world. The definition must also embrace the oral literature of American Indians – tales and histories that originally were not *written* at all. So the definition might now be: the stories and expressions of the people of what is now the United States, reflecting their lives and beliefs and cultures in all of their languages, even though most of it is today read more than it is heard and, for the purposes of general availability and popularity, read in English. As a result, the canon of American literature, early and later, is much larger and correspondingly harder to encompass. One must try to understand, for example, the customs and conventions of oral story telling. And one must appreciate the experiences of people of many more cultures, customs, and backgrounds.

The student who can make these adjustments, however, will gain both a more comprehensive knowledge of literature and a deeper understanding of the varieties of races and cultures in North America in general and the United States in particular. In the Indian tales, for example, we learn some of the many different accounts of the origin of the world that were held by different tribes, some resembling the account in Genesis, most not. But what they have in common is something Scott Momaday says of his people, the Kiowas. When they “entered upon the Great Plains,” it was “stories [that enabled] them to appropriate an unknown and intimidating landscape to their experience” (p. 58). The story of the Kiowas’ being born out a log was analogous to their coming onto the plains from out of the Rocky Mountains. The story of seven sisters raised to the sky by a tree and becoming the seven stars in the Big Dipper made the night sky more familiar and benign. The Seneca story of the “Origin of Folk Stories” also tells us that Gaqka, the boy who learned the stories, won a beautiful bride and became “a great man,” a testimony to the power of story-tellers. They entertained, they interpreted the world, and they united people around a common world view, forming communities.

So the early Euro-Americans confronted a landscape that was all the more “unknown and intimidating,” to use Momaday’s words, because they did not have such native stories. The nearest that seventeenth-century English writers came to stories like the Kiowas’ are John Smith’s story of Pocahontas taking his head in her arms to save him from death (p. 117) and William Bradford’s story of Massasoit and Squanto befriending the Pilgrims (p. 143), because both suggest that these English newcomers were welcomed. But it was later writers and myth-makers who embellished these incidents. Smith’s account is only one sentence long, and Bradford’s is also short. The newcomers’ stories – like their cultures and religions, their customs and habits, tastes and tools – were all European. So to them the landscape was a wilderness – strange and dangerous, as we see in Cabeza de Vaca’s Narrative, William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* and many other writings of that time (and much later).

What the Europeans did have, however, was the Bible, which was not only the text from which they drew their faith and moral codes but also the glass through which they looked at America and interpreted their experience. This is particularly so of the Pilgrims like Bradford and the later New England Puritans. John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” is, you could say, the veritable constitution for the Christian commonwealth that he and his followers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony wished to establish. Every principle of behavior – mercy, forgiveness, lending, love, marriage, and more – is drawn from the Bible, with Winthrop giving chapter and verse to support it. The same goes for much of Anne Bradstreet’s poetry, although she does not document her sources so precisely and also includes references to Greek and Roman writers.

The Old Testament stories with which early Euro-Americans particularly identified were the stories of the creation and fall and of the exodus. All Puritans believed in original sin, stemming from the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and although they interpreted the story differently, they (and later American writers) could see many precedents for their condition and experience in each and every part of it. In the Exodus story of the Jews fleeing from Egypt, wandering for years in the desert, and later coming upon the promised land they saw a foreshadowing of their leaving England and confronting the trials and privations of the wilderness in order to build what Winthrop called “a Citty upon a hill.” Leaders like Winthrop were their Moses. The Indians were the heathen tribes of non-believers whom missionaries tried to convert and also the foes whom God had provided to test them. The latter is vividly clear in Mary Rowlandson’s story of her capture by Indians in February, 1675, during King Phillip’s War, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God.” Every kind of suffering and hardship is eventually explained for her by the verse from the book of Hebrews, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth.”

People in other colonies also saw and shaped their experiences along biblical lines, but chose different precedents and teachings. Elizabeth Ashbridge was raised a member of the Church of England, the state church that the Puritans wanted to reform, or “purify.” But she says she was wild and liked to sing and dance. Eventually, having gone to Pennsylvania as an indentured servant, she became a Quaker, a sect the Puritans persecuted. Like Rowlandson, however, she believed that her afflictions were ultimately beneficial. The German Francis Daniel Pastorius, who emigrated to Pennsylvania after meeting William Penn, found biblical precedent for trying to convince his fellow German Quakers to oppose slavery, as did John Woolman with his neighbors and in his missionary activity in the South.

By the 1720's, however, much of the religious dedication of the previous century had begun to wane. The colonies were more prosperous and secure, and divine guidance and protection did not seem so necessary. The result, as has happened several times since, was a religious revival. Two of its leaders were Jonathan Edwards, the eloquent Congregational minister of Northampton, Massachusetts, and George Whitefield, the English associate of John Wesley. Whitefield had come from England to spread the gospel of Methodism throughout the American colonies, and together they had a enormous impact. Edwards was the more scholarly, as can be seen in his "Images and Shadows of Divine Things," a dissertation which is not as well known as his frightening sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," or his "Personal Narrative," but which is very important as a precursor of modern American symbolism.

Aside from the writings of Jonathan Edwards, the Great Awakening had little impact on later American literature. It was soon followed by the arrival of the writings of the European Enlightenment, which had a profound impact on Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other leaders of the American Revolution. Their interests were more secular and practical— in business, like Franklin; science and mechanics like Franklin and Jefferson; and in politics, geography, and theories of government (all three). The differences between the writers of the Seventeenth Century and the Eighteenth Century are remarkable, and others are due to more than changes in religion and philosophy. Washington Irving and his contemporaries wrote to entertain. They wrote the first American short stories (though called tales), novels, and plays, trying to imitate the English writers whom they admired and so prove that Americans, too, could be cultivated and tasteful.

But other voices are also heard in the Eighteenth Century. Samson Occom's *A Short Narrative of My Life* is the first Native American autobiography. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is the first African American one.

The early Nineteenth Century brought more efforts at writing that was self-consciously literary, by authors who wrote for money, like Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, and who tried at the same time to establish a new national literature, answering the call from literary patriots for a literature that celebrated what Emerson called "our incomparable materials.... Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations...the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing,..." It also brought new fiction by women, such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novels and stories. Even more surprising, to literary traditionalists, it produced Jane Johnson Schoolcraft's transcriptions of Chippewa tales and legends, like "Mishosha, of the Magician and His Daughters."

Below are the reading assignments for each week, followed by suggested paper topics. Be sure to read each assignment carefully and to make use of both the comments above and the assigned introductions to each period and author that are given in the anthology.

Readings

Introduction, pp. 2-33
“A Tale of the Foundation of the Great Island,...,” pp. 37-40
Cherokee story, pp. 40-43
Momaday, 54-59
“Explorations...,” Columbus, Cabeza de Vaca, pp. 61-85
Colonial Settlements, 93-106
John Smith, pp. 106-9, 116-7
William Bradford, “Of Plymouth Plantation,” 124-146
John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” pp. 153-166
Anne Bradstreet, “The Prologue,” 166-71, “The Author to Her Book,” p. 181
Mary Rowlandson, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” pp. 190-228
Francis Daniel Pastorius, pp. 244-51
Jonathan Edwards, pp. 276-8, “Images and Shadows...,” pp. 303-5

[182 pp.]

Introduction, pp. 311-33
Franklin, from *The Autobiography of...*, pp. 335-71
Elizabeth Ashbridge, “Some Account of the Fore Part...,” pp. 376-89
John Woolman, from *The Journal...*, pp. 390-401
Samson Occom, from *A Short Narrative*, pp. 401-09
Olaudah Equiano, from *The Interesting Narrative...*, pp. 414-26
Crèvecoeur, from *Letters from an American Farmer*, pp. 427-32
John and Abigail Adams, Letters, pp. 442-45
Thomas Jefferson, Draft of the Declaration... and from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, pp. 446-57
Washington Irving, pp. 520-42
Catharine Maria Sedgwick, pp. 543-55
Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, pp. 577-86

[166 pp.]

Introduction, pp. 587-616
Emerson, pp. 653-724

[101 pp.]

Questions

Contrasting world views: Indian and Colonists’

Contrasting moralities: Puritan, Quaker, and Enlightenment

Contrasting philosophies: Sentimental and Romantic / Irving and Emerson