

Lesson 1

National Beginnings of the American Literature

The first American literature was neither American nor literature at all. It was written by the immigrants and it was an interesting mixture of travel account and religious writings.

The first writers described the cold greetings with which the immigrants were met and the first books contained the description of the wealth of natural resources of the new land. Those writers had the purpose to attract dissatisfied inhabitants of the Old World across the ocean to the New World.

The earliest settlers included the Dutch, the Swedes, the Germans, the French, the Spaniards, the Italians, and the Portuguese. However the majority of the immigrants who came to America in the 17th century were the English. Among them there were a lot of people who wanted to reform the Church of England or those who wanted to have an entirely new church. They came to be known as “the Puritans”. They followed the ideas of the Swiss reformer John Calvin. Through the Calvinist influence the Puritans emphasized their common belief that human beings were basically evil and could do nothing about it and that many of them (though not all) would surely be condemned to hell.

During the last half of the 17th century the colonies (mostly English) were established. Among the Colonists one could find poets and essayists but no novelists because the Puritan members of the colonies believed that fiction ought not to be read because it was by definition not true.

Questions:

1. Who wrote the first American literature?

- A. The Puritans
- B. The English
- C. The Colonists
- D. The immigrants

2. What was the purpose of the first American literature?

- A. To describe the natural resources of the new land.
- B. To attract dissatisfied inhabitants of the Old World to the New World.
- C. To criticize the Church of England.
- D. To promote the idea that human beings were basically evil.

3. Who were the Puritans?

- A. A group of English immigrants who wanted to reform the Church of England.
- B. A group of French immigrants who established colonies in America.
- C. A group of Spanish immigrants who wrote the first American literature.
- D. A group of German immigrants who believed in Calvinist ideas.

4. What did the Puritans believe about human beings?

- A. They were basically good and could improve themselves.
- B. They were basically evil and could do nothing about it.
- C. They were all going to heaven.
- D. They were all going to hell.

5. Why were there no novelists among the Colonists?

- A. Because they were not interested in literature.
- B. Because they were all Puritans who believed that fiction was not true.
- C. Because they were too busy establishing colonies.
- D. Because they were not skilled enough to write novels.

6. What did the first American literature consist of?

- A. Novels and short stories.
- B. Travel accounts and religious writings.
- C. Political essays and speeches.
- D. Scientific treatises and philosophical works.

7. Which group of immigrants came to America in the 17th century in the largest numbers?

- A. The Dutch
- B. The Swedes
- C. The Germans
- D. The English

Statements:

1. The first American literature was written by the immigrants.
2. The first American literature was a mixture of travel account and religious writings.
3. The first books contained the description of the wealth of natural resources of the new land.
4. The earliest settlers included only the Dutch, the Swedes, and the Germans.
5. The majority of the immigrants who came to America in the 17th century were the French.
6. The Puritans followed the ideas of the English reformer John Calvin.
7. The Puritans believed that human beings were basically good.
8. The colonies established in the last half of the 17th century were mostly Spanish.
9. Among the Colonists, there were no novelists because the Puritans believed that fiction ought not to be read.
10. The Puritans believed that many people would surely be condemned to heaven.

Anne Bradstreet **1612-1672**

Anne Bradstreet was born in Northampton, England, in the year 1612.

Anne and her family immigrated to America in 1630 on the Arabella, one of the first ships to bring Puritans to New England in hopes of setting up plantation colonies. The journey was difficult; many perished during the three month journey, unable to cope with the harsh climate and poor living conditions.

The colonists' fight for survival had become daily routine, and the climate, lack of food, and primitive living arrangements made it very difficult for Anne to adapt.

Anne Bradstreet was especially fond of poetry, which she had begun to write herself; her works were kept private. She wrote for herself, her family, and close circle of educated friends, and did not intend on publication. However, Anne's work would not remain unnoticed. Her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, had secretly copied Anne's work, and would later bring it to England to have it published in 1650 under the title of "Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America, By a Gentlewoman of Those Parts". The book did fairly well in England, and was to be the last of her poetry to be published during her lifetime. All her other poems were published posthumously.

She passed away on September 16, 1672, in Andover, Massachusetts, at the age 60.

Michael Wigglesworth **[1631-1705]**

Michael Wigglesworth was born in England and came to America at the age of seven. He lived in New Haven until he went to Harvard; he was graduated in 1651 and remained as a tutor for three years.. A small man, he was extremely frail and weak until 1686 when, apparently, he

attained an Indian summer of health. Because of his physical condition he went to Bermuda for seven months in 1663; there he began to study medicine, which had always interested him. Eventually he became a physician of the body as well as of the soul. Although his household occupied some of his leisure (he was married three times and had eight children), he took to writing in order to spread the doctrine that his frailty frequently kept him from preaching in the pulpit. The most famous result of his efforts was *The Day of Doom*.

The Day of Doom must be considered in a purely historical light, for it reveals the Puritan notions of poetry much better than do the poems of Anne Bradstreet. Published in 1662, *The Day of Doom* became America's first best seller. The poem went through ten editions in the next fourteen decades, four in the seventeenth century and six in the eighteenth. In spite of its literary shortcomings, it is still the best "official" statement of the Puritan's attempt to use poetry for a plain exposition of the beliefs by which he tried to live.

The main theme of the poem can be understood as following: you might have fun in this life, but after you die justice will be meted out! The good will be rewarded, the unrighteous punished unmercifully.

The purpose of the poem is to scare the reader in reforming his ways and live according to the Puritan ideals

Questions:

1. Where was Anne Bradstreet born?

- A. Northampton, England
- B. New England
- C. Andover, Massachusetts
- D. Bermuda

2. What was the title of Anne Bradstreet's first published book of poetry?

- A. *Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America, By a Gentlewoman of Those Parts*
- B. *The Day of Doom*
- C. *Poems of Anne Bradstreet*
- D. None of the above

3. What was Michael Wigglesworth's profession?

- A. Physician
- B. Preacher

C. Tutor

D. Poet

4. What is *The Day of Doom* about?

A. The Puritan notion of poetry

B. The life of Michael Wigglesworth

C. The punishment of the unrighteous after death

D. The history of America

5. What was the purpose of *The Day of Doom*?

A. To entertain readers with poetry

B. To educate readers about Puritan ideals

C. To criticize the Puritan lifestyle

D. To promote Michael Wigglesworth's writing career

6. What was the main reason for Michael Wigglesworth's writing?

A. To spread Puritan doctrine

B. To become a famous poet

C. To make money

D. To entertain himself

7. What is the significance of *The Day of Doom* in American literature?

A. It is the first book of poetry published in America.

B. It is the best example of Puritan poetry.

C. It is the first bestseller in America.

D. It is the only book of poetry published by Michael Wigglesworth.