

National Beginnings of the American Literature

American literature is the youngest literature, but one of the richest influential literatures in the world. 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.

Early American Literature was under the influence of the English literature for a long time and cannot be called American proper. The English described the colonization of the New World and first settlement in New England. The first books were presented by diaries, travel guides, dealing with the experience of new comers.

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. **Thomas Hariot's "Brief and True Report of the New – Found land of Virginia" (1588)** was only the first of many such works. Back in England, people planning to move to Virginia or New England would read the books as travel guides.

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. Puritan society was a "theocracy": the laws of society and the laws of religion were the same. Those who broke the laws were punished severely.

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.

The most interesting works of New England Puritan literature were histories. To the Puritans, history developed according to “God’s plan”. In all of their early New England histories, they saw New England as the “Promised Land” of the Bible. The central drama of history was the struggle between Christ and Satan.

“Of Plymouth Plantation” by William Bradford (1590-1657) is the most interesting of the Puritan histories. It describes the Puritans’ difficult relations with the Indians. It also describes difficulties during the 1st winter, when half of their colony died. The examples they used were drawn either from the Bible or from the everyday life of farmers and fishermen. At the same time, Bradford’s history is deeply influenced by the belief that God directs everything that happens.

Even in the early days, some writers were struggling hard against the Puritan democracy and **Anne Hutchinson** (1590-1643) and **Roger Williams** (1603-1683) both desired a freer religious freedom. Rogers, who went off to establish his own colony in Rhode Island, was especially important. To him, freedom was not only “good in itself”, it was a necessary condition for the “growth and development of the soul”.

Answer the questions

1. How can the Early American Literature be characterized?
2. What was the Early American Literature presented by?
3. What purpose was behind the first writings?
4. What kind of people were the first settlers?
5. What ideas did the Puritans follow?
6. How were those ideas reflected in the early writings?
7. What were the main works in the Puritan Literature?
8. What did William Bradford describe in his history?
9. What were the first writers seeking for?