



Native American and Colonial Literature

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Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

What types of writing were popular during the early days of the United States? In this lesson, we'll look at three major categories of 17th and 18th century American writing in more detail: Native American oral stories, Puritan writing, and early American political writing.

Early America

Imagine that you are faced with a vast wilderness. You, your family, and a few of your friends must live in the midst of this wilderness. You must find a way to get food from the land, set up shelter, and organize yourselves into a semblance of society.

Five hundred years ago, America was an open, wild land. Both European settlers and Native Americans were faced with many of the same issues: food, shelter, and politics. As might be expected, these issues influenced the literature of both groups. People struggled with the hardships of life in 17th century America, and in order to make sense of their world, they developed stories and applied religious beliefs to explain hardships and blessings alike.

There are three major categories of literature from 17th and 18th century America: Native American oral stories, Puritan writings, and early American political writings. Let's look at each one a little closer.

Native American Oral Tradition

An **oral tradition** is a series of stories passed down from generation to generation through storytelling, as opposed to writing them down. Oral storytelling was a key component of Native American cultures.

There were many different Native American tribes, and as a result, there were myriad of different tales passed down through oral tradition. But there were a few elements that many of the Native American stories have in common.

1. A hero's journey. Many of the stories deal with a hero who goes through a series of hardships and has to rise above them, using his skills and smarts. Sometimes, the hero has to make a sacrifice for the good of the larger community.

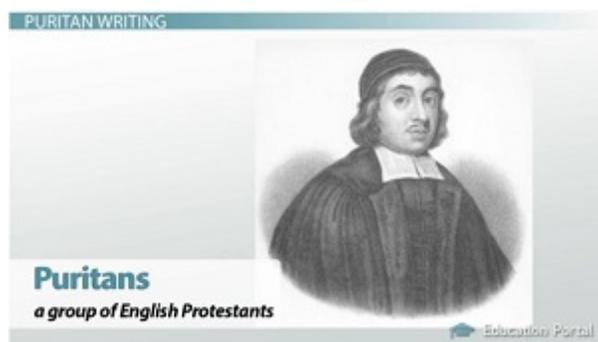
2. A trickster God interferes. The trickster is a staple in many Native American stories. He likes to mess with humans and cause havoc. Sometimes his tricks are harmless enough, but sometimes they represent real peril or roadblocks that the hero must face.
3. Nature changes. The actions of the hero and/or the gods in Native American stories often end up affecting or changing nature. In this way, nature becomes a symbol of what the hero is going through. Sometimes natural problems, such as a lack of rain or too much snow, are the beginning of the hero's journey, and sometimes they are something that pops up during the journey.
4. Worlds are created. Creation is a key element in many of the Native American stories. Sometimes, this creation has to do with the literal creation of the world. Other times, creation is seen in the changing of the seasons or the birth of a new generation. Even the living rhythm of language was seen as a kind of creation; after all, it is in storytelling and language that people create worlds and make sense of them.

Puritan Writing

There were many types of European settlements in America in the 1600s, and all of them had their own oral and written literature. However, a group of settlers known as the Puritans dominated the colonial literary scene in America.

The **Puritans** were a group of English Protestants who were discriminated against in England. As a result, many of them moved to America to seek freedom and found their own colony based on the religious and political beliefs of their members.

Why did Puritan writing have a stronger influence on colonial literature than other groups? Well, for one thing, the Puritans were mostly middle-class and well-educated. Compare that to some of the other colonies, which were founded by tradesmen who did not put as much emphasis on reading and writing.



The Puritans wrote more stories than any other settlers in the 1600s.

There were several things that distinguish Puritan writing:

1. Focus on God and the Bible. Because the Puritans were religious, their writing reflected that by using the Bible as a template for their writing. Everything related back to God, and everything was explained in terms of God's will. As part of their relationship with God, the Puritans believed in **predestination**, or the belief that God controls the world and the people in it. As a result, many of their writings dealt with predestination.

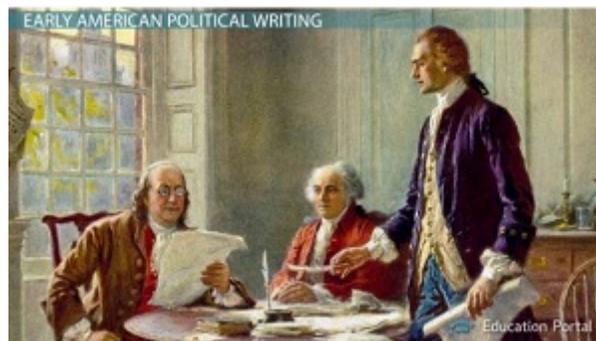
2. The hardships of life in the colonies. Puritan writing often dealt with difficulties that the writers faced every day.
3. Symbolism of everyday events. In addition to simply relating the day-to-day struggles of life, the Puritans saw them as symbols. A paper cut could mean that God wanted a person to stop writing so many letters to his non-religious sister. A woman who burned her husband's shirt could see that as a warning to prepare for his death. Everything was seen as a symbol from God.
4. Inward reflection. Much Puritan writing was in the form of diaries or personal narratives, because there was a heavy focus on inward reflection.
5. Simple and plain style. Life was difficult for the Puritans, and they did not have or seek luxuries. Their writing style reflected this; they used plain language that was not dressed up with fancy words.

Ask a Question

Early American Political Writing

In addition to the Puritans, another type of writing that has had a wide influence on America is that of early American political writing. As the colonies began to succeed as settlements, they began to look at politics and social issues. In the hundred years before the American Revolution, political writing became a major part of American literature.

Political writing took many forms, including essays, letters, speeches, pamphlets, and even poetry. But all of these fall into two main categories of political writing: religious and secular. Some people, including the Puritans, believed that religious law should be state law. That is, instead of having a separate set of laws to govern the settlements and colonies, the Ten Commandments and other Christian laws should simply be the way the land was governed. Religious political writing blended politics and religion, and includes sermons as well as other forms of writing.



Early American political writings were grouped into religious or secular categories.

In contrast, many of the early political and revolutionary leaders of 18th century America believed in the idea of the separation of church and state. That is, they believed that people should obey their religious laws as long as the religious laws did not interfere with the secular, or non-religious, laws of the land. Secular political writing looked at politics as a separate entity from religion.

Lesson Summary