

Essential Questions of the Literary Period

Early America (Beginnings to 1800)



What is the relationship
between place and *literature*?

What was the New World's natural environment?

About one century before the colonists arrived in North America, many people thought that crossing the Atlantic Ocean meant sailing off the edge of the earth. Instead, the first European colonists found a continent more magnificent, strange, and dangerous than any of them had ever imagined.

Place of Wonder The colonists discovered long shores and sandy beaches backed by vast forests. They found ranges of mountains and fertile valleys, and an astounding variety of plants, fish, birds, and animals. Nature in America was built on an immense scale. The wilderness looked endless. Nevertheless, for all its intimidating size and wild variety, this new place had one overwhelmingly satisfying quality: It was not Europe.

At One with the Place From the beginning, then, America was a place apart—but it was not so in the eyes of the Native Americans. In fact, for most Native American cultures, the people belonged to the land. The deep forests and wide plains were simply to be used and cared for by the human beings who lived in them temporarily. The lands and waters were life-giving environments, and the animals were part of the community. The facts of nature could be harsh, but they were also to be celebrated in myths, rituals, and songs. Nature was not to be feared as an enemy or overcome as an obstacle, but honored as the source of life.



TIMELINE

1555

1558: England
Elizabeth I inherits throne.

1565: St. Augustine, Florida First permanent settlement in U.S., founded by Pedro Menendez.

1570: Iroquois Confederacy established to stop warfare among the Five Nations.

▲ **1587:** English colony at Roanoke Island disappears; known as the Lost Colony.



What were the colonists' attitudes toward the New World environment?

For the colonists, the people did not belong to the land. Quite the opposite: Land belonged to people, and this land was to be claimed by Britain, France, and Spain. It was measured, divided, bought, sold, and governed as the property of European kings and trading companies. The Puritans, filled with religious zeal, may have wanted to build a "city upon a hill," but the hill would still belong to the King of England.

Dream vs. Reality During the seventeenth century, the colonists' attitude toward the American environment was a blend of dream and reality. The dream was to create a theocracy, an earthly community governed by religious principles. The reality was to avoid starving to death or falling prey to cold, disease, or animals. The colonists saw the continent's raw beauty, rich resources, and awe-inspiring possibilities. They also felt every day the hard facts of staying alive.

Independent Place and People By the eighteenth century, Europeans had gained a more secure foothold in America. Tree by tree, they had tamed a portion of the wilderness and built towns, roads, schools, and churches. They began to worry less about survival and more about self-government. They began to ask, "We live in an independent place, so why aren't we an independent people?" The effects of the Enlightenment began to set in, and people realized that they could belong to themselves rather than to a monarch. The spirit of self-reliance that had faced down the wilderness was the same spirit that would face down European kings. The place itself had taught Americans how to be Americans.

The American EXPERIENCE

A LIVING TRADITION

Anne Bradstreet and John Berryman

In the 1950s, American poet John Berryman responded powerfully to the life and work of Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, who had lived 300 years earlier. In his long poem of praise called "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet," he reveals his understanding of her struggle to survive and to be a writer in 17th century America. He imagines her winter ordeals and asserts that he is more sympathetic to her poetry than was her busy husband, Simon.



from "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet"

*Outside the New World winters in grand dark
white air lashing high thro' the virgin stands*

*foxes down foxholes sigh,
surely the English heart quails, stunned.
I doubt if Simon than this blast, that sea,
spares from his rigor for your poetry
more. We are on each other's hands
who care. Both of our worlds unhand us.
Lie stark,*

*thy eyes look to me mild. Out of maize & air
your body's made, and moves. I summon, see,
from the centuries it. . .*

1588: Spain The Spanish Armada is defeated by English fleet. ▼

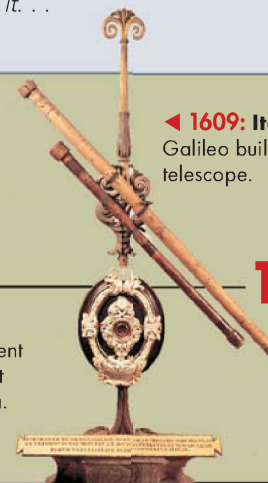
1595: England Shakespeare completes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

1605: Spain Cervantes publishes Part I of *Don Quixote*.

1607: First permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia.

◀ **1609: Italy** Galileo builds first telescope.

1620



How did attitudes toward nature show up in literature?

The close relationship between Native Americans and nature showed up in myths and legends. In these stories people communicate with mountains and rivers. People and animals talk with each other and sometimes even change into each other. Human beings and nature live in harmony.

When the earliest explorers searched the continent, their responses to the land appeared in their journals and the reports and letters they sent back home. Cabeza de Vaca recorded the natural wonders of the New World. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the finest written work of the first European Americans, is filled with detailed descriptions of creating a colony in a place so delightful and so dangerous.

"Errand into the Wilderness" America's first literary family—Richard, Increase, and Cotton Mather—saw the environment from a religious point of view. Their writings describe a mission to combat evil in an "uncivilized" place. In time, this idea of the wilderness as a dark place of evil profoundly affected other writers. Forests and wild places play a large role, physically and symbolically, in the writings of American writers who would come later, including Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mark Twain.

Place and Nation As the colonies developed, the power of reason began to make the continent a more hospitable place. Technology improved and agriculture flourished. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Jean de Crèvecoeur even used the imagery of growing plants to emphasize the important idea that living in this particular place turned Europeans into Americans: "In Europe they were as so many useless plants ... they withered and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war; but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished!" The very name of the new nation reveals the influence of place: The "United States of America" is made of separate distinct places (states) united into one—a federal republic.

TIMELINE

1620

1620: Pilgrims land at Plymouth, Massachusetts. ▼



1632: India Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan begins building the Taj Mahal as tomb for his wife Mumtaz. ►



1639: First printing press in English-speaking North America arrives in Massachusetts.

"For we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."
—John Winthrop, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1639-1648

1640: Bay Psalm Book published; first book printed in the colonies.



What makes American literature *American?*

American literature, naturally, shares the basic characteristics of all literature—characters, plots, settings, images, and themes. However, American literature is much more than literary works written by Americans. It also embodies certain ideas, evokes certain places, and tells stories of certain kinds of characters. There are qualities that distinguish American literature and make it a unique cultural expression.

What is a theme, and how does it find expression in literature?

A theme is the central idea, message, or insight that a literary work reveals. A theme is not the subject of a work, but rather the insight that the work reveals about the subject. A work reveals its themes through characters' words and actions, through details of setting and plot, through imagery, and even through language and style.

What were early American themes?

Three themes dominate Early American writing:

Wilderness Writers revealed insights into the nature and meaning of the wilderness by the details they used to describe it and by the stories they told of their physical, political, and spiritual struggles with it.

The American EXPERIENCE

DEVELOPING AMERICAN ENGLISH

Our Native American Heritage by Richard Lederer

If you had been a settler in North America, you would have found many things in your new environment unknown to you. The handiest way of filling voids in your vocabulary would have been to ask local Native Americans what words they used. Colonists began borrowing words from Native Americans almost from the moment of their first contact, and many of those shared words have remained in our everyday language. They are part of what makes American literature American.

Anglicizing Pronouncing many of the Native American words was difficult for the colonists, so they often shortened or simplified the words. For example, *askútasquash* became "squash," *otchock* became "woodchuck," *rahaugcum* turned to "raccoon," and the smelly *segankw* transformed into a "skunk." The North American menagerie brought more new words into the English language, including caribou (Micmac), chipmunk (Ojibwa), moose (Algonquian), and muskrat (Abenaki).

The Poetry of Place Names Some of our loveliest place names—*Susquehanna*, *Shenandoah*, *Rappahannock*—began life as Native American words. Such names are the stuff of poetry. Colonists freely used words of Indian origin to name states (half of all of them), cities, towns, mountains, lakes, rivers, and ponds.

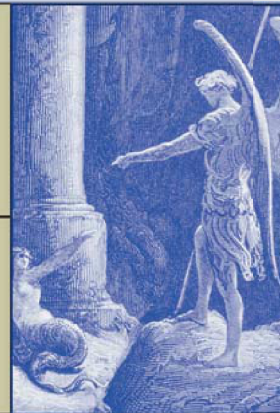


1642: England
Civil War begins.

1644: China
Ming Dynasty ends. ▼

**1652: South
Africa** First Dutch
settlers arrive.

1647: Massachusetts
establishes free public
schools.



◀ **1667: England**
Milton publishes
Paradise Lost.

1685

Community In public writing such as pamphlets and newspapers, colonists and patriots conveyed the central message that America was a unique combination of community and independence.

Individualism In history and memoir, and in everything from laws to lyric poems, writers made clear that self-reliance and individualism are fundamental American values.

What is uniquely American about those themes?

The Place Americans recognized that they were in a unique place, a New World, only a small part of which they had even seen. Nothing in their European experience had prepared them for the splendors and the terrors of the American wilderness. Sometimes, America seemed to be the Garden of Eden, a newly created place of natural wealth. Sometimes it seemed to be an enemy, a punishment, or a source of fear and death. These themes entered into the American literary imagination.

The Past When Americans wrote, they were aware of the many traditional European subjects and themes that were now of no importance to them. After all, there had been no Middle Ages or Renaissance in America. Europeans had medieval romances that told tales of knights and chivalry; Americans did not. Europeans had Shakespeare's tragedies of kings and princes; Americans did not. Europeans had a heritage of elegant and witty writing; Americans had a plain, straightforward way of writing. Americans did have histories and journals, prayers and sermons, speeches and essays. They even had some poems, but all of these imitated European styles. With the turn of the nineteenth century, American writers would begin to forge unique ways of expressing their unique experience.

The Vision The themes of independence and self-reliance are at the heart of Americans' vision of themselves as a new and unique people. They knew they were creating not only a new nation but a new kind of nation. That sense of newness marked Americans as a people of youth, innocence, optimism, risk-taking, and boundless originality.

TIMELINE

1690: India Calcutta founded by the British.

1685

1692: Salem witchcraft trials result in the execution of twenty people. ▼



▲ **1721: Germany**
Bach composes *The Brandenburg Concertos*.

1726: England Jonathan Swift publishes *Gulliver's Travels*. ▼





How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

What social and political forces affected early American literature?

Puritanism From the first, Puritanism influenced just about every aspect of colonial life. The impulse to escape to a New World and build a reformed and uncorrupted society shaped Puritan lawmaking, social relations, and daily life. Belief in predestination—John Calvin’s doctrine that God has already decided who will be saved—made Puritans search every thought, action, and word for signs of grace. In hymns, sermons, histories, journals, and autobiographies, they aimed only for self-examination and spiritual insight.

The Enlightenment By the eighteenth century, the power of reason asserted itself in America. In speeches, pamphlets, essays, and newspaper articles, the spirit of the times called for debate, clear thinking, and reorganization of the political situation. The Declaration of Independence, for example, is not an outcry or an anarchic demand. It is a reasoned document, a controlled statement of the rational argument for independence.

Native Americans and African Americans Relations with Native Americans and the continued enslavement of African Americans left deep marks in American literature. In histories and captivity narratives, we have some record of relationships between colonists and Native

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CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

African Americans and Women in the Revolution

In 1776, more than a half million African Americans lived in the colonies. At first, the Continental Congress did not permit enslaved or free African Americans to join the American army. However, when the British offered to free any male slave who fought for the king, George Washington changed American policy and allowed free African Americans to enlist. About 5,000 African Americans fought against the British. As this eyewitness account demonstrates, they fought with great courage:

Three times in succession, [African American soldiers] were attacked . . . by well-disciplined and veteran British troops, and three times did they successfully repel the assault, and thus preserve our army from capture.

Women also helped in the struggle for independence from Great Britain. When men went off to war, the women took on added work. They planted and harvested crops, and they made shoes and blankets and uniforms. Many followed their husbands and brothers to the front, where they washed, cooked, and cared for the wounded. Some even took part in battle, including a brave woman named Mary Hays who carried water on the battle lines and became known as Molly Pitcher.



1727: Brazil
First coffee plants cultivated. ▼

1735: John Peter Zenger acquitted of libel, furthering freedom of the press.

1748: France Montesquieu publishes *The Spirit of the Laws*, which later influences the U.S. Constitution.

1750

1741: Great Awakening, a series of religious revivals, begins to sweep the colonies.

▲ **1741:** Jonathan Edwards first delivers his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”



The American EXPERIENCE

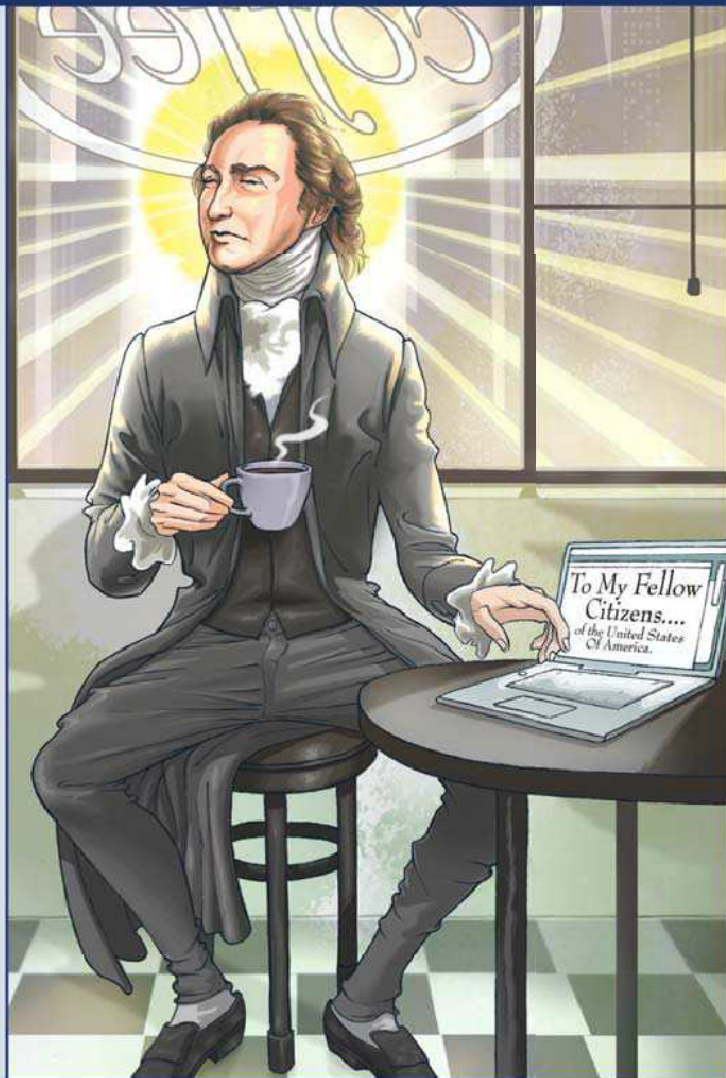
CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

Thomas Paine: Essayist, Hero of the Revolution ... Father of the Internet?

Thomas Paine believed that knowledge is power and that it belongs to all people, not just the wealthy or privileged. He believed that through knowledge, ordinary people could guarantee their own freedoms. Even at a time when the printed word was slow to publish and distribute, Paine's fiery words brought change, fueling both the American and the French revolutions.

While this pamphleteer and passionate advocate of communication is often seen as a pioneer of investigative journalism, perhaps his true legacy is the Internet. Writing in *Wired News* (issue 3.05–May 1995), journalist Jon Katz observed that on the Internet Paine's "ideas about communications, media ethics, the universal connections between people, and the free flow of honest opinion are all relevant again, visible every time one modem shakes hands with another."

Paine once said, "Such is the irresistible nature of truth that all it asks, and all it wants, is the liberty of appearing." When the Internet is used in its best and highest forms, truth becomes available to anyone with a computer. Thomas Paine, advocate of "all mankind," might recognize the Web as the true product of his own ideals.



TIMELINE

1750

1754: French and Indian War begins.



◀ 1755: England Samuel Johnson publishes *Dictionary of the English Language*.

1773: Parliament's Tea Act prompts Boston Tea Party. ▼



▲ 1775: American Revolution begins.

Americans, relationships that ranged from trust to distrust, from friendship to hatred. In narratives left by both slaves and slaveholders, we find heartrending stories of individuals, families, and communities scarred by slavery.

What were the major roles of early American writers?

Writers not only reflect the social and political forces of their society, they also influence those forces. They are not only the mirrors of their cultures and their communities. They can also be the fires that make those communities burn with hope, anger, love, idealism, and creativity.

Writer as Oral Poet and Historian Native American oral poets held places of vital importance for their tribes. They told each community's story, related its history, and honored its heroes. Those European Americans who wrote journals and histories fulfilled a similar role—recording the social and political events that gave meaning to their community's experience. The narratives of de Cárdenas and Cabeza de Vaca, and William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* give us perspective on our own heritage.

Writer as Preacher and Lawmaker The writers of hymns and sermons believed that their role was to articulate the will of God. Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards explained for their communities the working of divine Providence in the wilderness, and they did their utmost to instill the fear of God into every member of their trembling audiences. The writers of America's laws and political documents had a different role—to articulate the will of the people. Thomas Paine's pamphlets, Patrick Henry's speeches, and Thomas Jefferson's multifaceted writing survive today not only as a part of history but also as literature.

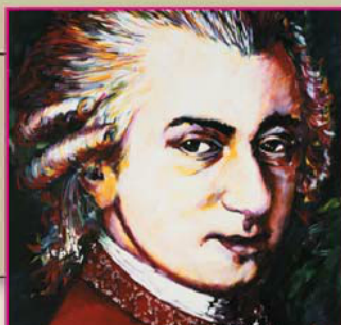
Writer as Autobiographer The autobiographer's role goes beyond answering the basic question, "What did I do and why did I do it?" The autobiographer also asks, "Why should you be interested in my life? What did I learn from it? What can you learn from it?" The slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano helped Americans face their own history and ultimately do something about it. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* combined a fascinating life story with explorations of essential American values.

1776: Second Continental Congress adopts Declaration of Independence.

"Any people that would give up liberty for a little temporary safety deserves neither liberty nor safety."
—Benjamin Franklin

1787: Constitutional Convention meets in Philadelphia to draft the Constitution.

1786: Austria Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart creates the comic opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. ▶



▲ **1789:** George Washington elected first President of the United States.

1800