

Early American Literature

An Era of Change

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An Era of Change

Hardly anyone today wants to be called a Puritan. To many people the name *Puritan* suggests grim judgmentalism—a rigid, repressive prudery that once darkened American thought but is now thankfully outgrown. Although this Puritan stereotype has been discredited by historians, the myth lives on.

The truth is that Puritanism has been much more central in American life than is commonly supposed. The Puritans gave America not only a doctrinal system but also an idea of how life should be lived. Puritan theology lost its hold on American thought within two hundred years. However, the Puritan view of life—the work ethic, the goal-centeredness, the subservience of pleasure to duty—has survived, even among many who despise its religious foundation.

Two Puritan themes are strongly apparent in the literature of the early period. The first is this country's role as idealistic leader and practical innovator. The Puritans set high goals and devised means for reaching them; their efforts would command the attention of all peoples. In 1629 while sailing to Massachusetts, Governor John Winthrop urged the other Puritans aboard ship not to forget that their attempt to establish a religious state in the New World would be observed carefully by the rest of the world. "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people . . . upon us." These words were prophetic, for the rest of the world since Puritan times has carefully watched this country's political, religious, and social developments.

The second Puritan theme is the Christian's attitude toward the world. In his history of Plymouth Plantation, Governor William Bradford described how the Pilgrims, who were actually Separatists rather than Puritans, shared the Puritan view of the alluring, hostile world that had tried to destroy them and their testimony: "So they left that goodly and pleasant city [Leyden, Netherlands], which had been their resting place near twelve years; but they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country, and quieted their spirits." Few writers have better summarized the faith of Christians, who while *in* the world are not to be *of* the world. The theme of America as



an idealistic leader and practical innovator persisted in American literature well beyond the early period. Regrettably, however, the idea of Americans as Christian pilgrims in the world appears only rarely after 1750.

The division known as Early American Literature spans over 200 years. This period is important not only because of its considerable length but also because of its influence on the character of the developing nation. In order to appreciate the literature of our first writers, therefore, we must understand something of the key developments during their time.

During these centuries, American writers were affected by changes occurring in three major areas. First, the population of the country, while constantly expanding, changed from essentially immigrant to distinctively American. Second, the principles that governed decisions made by men in power shifted from religious to secular and materialistic. Third, the political system of the country underwent a radical modification from colonial dependence on and subservience to England to proud independence as the United States of America.

EUROPEAN TO AMERICAN: THE SOCIAL CHANGE

The Early Immigrants

Most of our early colonists were immigrants from England. In 1607 the first permanent English settlement began at Jamestown, Virginia. Here the small band of poorly organized Englishmen confidently expected to become wealthy merely by picking up the gold and pearls they thought awaited them. Had Captain John Smith not organized and directed them, the Jamestown planting would probably have failed like the ill-fated settlements of Roanoke Island.

In 1620, thirteen years after Jamestown's founding, the first permanent English settlers arrived in New England. The 102 colonists aboard the *Mayflower* were greeted by a barren, wintry wilderness and hostile savages. By the spring of 1621, more than half the original settlers were dead. What sustained these Pilgrims through the hardships of their first years in New England was their will to succeed and their confidence in God's providential care.

In the 1630s the struggling colony at Plymouth was surpassed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which had experienced an influx of relatively wealthy and influential Puritans. The first group of them, unlike the Pilgrims, embarked for the New World in a fleet of ships. From 1630 to 1640, during what is called the Great Migration, some twenty thousand people sailed to Massachusetts, hastened by political and religious events in England. During the period immediately before the English Civil War (1642-1646), many dissenters came to the New World because of especially severe repression by the Church of England.

Immigration slackened during the Commonwealth period in England when the Puritans seized political control and stopped the persecutions. However, it dramatically increased in 1660, when the monarchy was restored. This year marked the beginning of the second major Puritan migration. Reacting against the stern Puritan rule during the preceding decade, Parliament passed a series of harsh, repressive

acts against nonconformists. Until the Toleration Act of 1689 somewhat eased conditions for Puritans, these laws caused thousands more to flee to the New World.

Religious reasons for immigration The main motive behind these migrations to New England was religious. Many colonists came because of religious persecution. In chapter 2 of his history of Plymouth, Governor Bradford movingly describes the severe oppression endured by just one small band of English dissenters: those who settled Plymouth. Because they were Separatists (members of independent congregations that had left the Church of England for conscience' sake), their practice of worship was especially hated by leaders of the state church. These dissenters were betrayed and imprisoned, had their property confiscated, and finally were forced to flee illegally to the Netherlands. For many later dissenters, this persecution took another form. They were forbidden to preach from pulpits, to teach in schools or colleges, and to hold political office.

Other colonists sailed to the New World because they wanted to put their religious ideals into operation. The Massachusetts Puritans wanted to follow what they believed the Bible taught in doctrine and church government. Beyond that, they wished to establish a state governed by religious principles. They believed that their government should be theocratic (governed by God) rather than democratic (governed by the people). Since the Bible describes only one form of government specifically ordained by God, the theocratic government of Israel, the Puritans took it as their model.

Secular reasons for immigration Colonists also came to the New World because of nonreligious motives. Some came for adventure, some to help England challenge Spain's claims to the American continent, and some to gain personal independence and wealth. The last of these motives, self-realization and advancement, gave rise to the American Dream. Many immigrants believed that in the New World they could free themselves from the class restrictions of European societies and rise by their own abilities to positions of affluence and prestige. The dream was so strong that hundreds even sold themselves into bondage as indentured servants in order to repay the cost of their passage to the colonies.

What made these seventeenth-century immigrants so valuable to the emerging nation is that they brought with them the culture of their homeland. As they struggled to construct their "city upon a hill" in the wilderness, they built their new society upon the rich cultural values which they had brought from England.

The Transitional Colonists

With the coming of the eighteenth century, however, colonists became noticeably less European. Since many colonials were by this time second-, third-, or even fourth-generation residents, they felt few ties to England. Increasingly, these homebred citizens recognized they were no longer merely transplanted Europeans. In New England the transitional colonist took on a special identity, that of the "Yankee." This sturdy New England type was characterized by homespun wisdom, practical ingenuity, and a shrewd business sense.

Meanwhile, as more Europeans flocked to the New World, the colonial population lost its distinctively English identity. Large numbers of Dutch, French Huguenot, German, and Scottish immigrants helped shape the national spirit as they pushed westward into the wilderness. But since most of these new immigrants were Protestant and most sought the liberty which had been denied them in their homelands, they carried on the spirit of the first immigrants.

The Americans

The product of these developments was described in 1782 by a Frenchman who had himself immigrated to New York. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur gives a stirring answer to the question, "What then is the American, this new man?"

He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and [one] which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. . . . The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions.

Crèvecoeur strikes several major themes developed by later writers: the United States as a melting pot of nationalities, Americans as the "western pilgrims" who will accomplish great things for mankind, the American as the "new man" who is forward-looking and experimental.

PURITANISM TO DEISM: THE RELIGIOUS CHANGE

The Essence of Puritanism

Because most of the first New England colonists embraced Puritan ideals, Puritanism has formed the main current in the development of American values. The Puritan movement began in England during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). It