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18\textsuperscript{TH} CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE: BACKGROUND OF THE PERIOD

Annotation: In this article highlights of 18\textsuperscript{th} century American literature: background of the period.

Key words: literature, American literature, group.

Like other national literatures, American literature was shaped by the history of the country that produced it. For almost a century and a half, America was merely a group of colonies scattered along the eastern seaboard of the North American continent - colonies from which a few hardy souls tentatively ventured westward. After a successful rebellion against the motherland, America became the United States, a nation. By the end of the 19th century this nation extended southward to the Gulf of Mexico, northward to the 49th parallel, and westward to the Pacific. By the end of the 19th century, too, it had taken its place among the powers of the world - its fortunes so interrelated with those of other nations that inevitably it became involved in two world wars and, following these conflicts, with the problems of Europe and East Asia. Meanwhile, the rise of science and industry, as well as changes in ways of thinking and feeling, wrought many modifications in people’s lives. All these factors in the development of the United States molded the literature of the country.

In America in the early years of the 18th century, some writers, such as Cotton Mather, carried on the older traditions. His huge history and biography of Puritan New England, Magnalia Christi Americana, in 1702, and his vigorous Manuductio ad Ministerium, or introduction to the ministry, in
1726, were defenses of ancient Puritan convictions. Jonathan Edwards, initiator of the Great Awakening, a religious revival that stirred the eastern seacoast for many years, eloquently defended his burning belief in Calvinistic doctrine - of the concept that man, born totally depraved, could attain virtue and salvation only through God’s grace - in his powerful sermons and most notably in the philosophical treatise Freedom of Will. He supported his claims by relating them to a complex metaphysical system and by reasoning brilliantly in clear and often beautiful prose.

Owing to the large immigration to Boston in the 1630s, the high articulation of Puritan cultural ideals, and early establishment of a college and a printing press in Cambridge, the New England colonies have often regarded as the center of early American literature. However, the first European settlements in North America had been founded elsewhere many years earlier. Towns older than Boston include the Spanish settlements at Saint Augustine and Santa Fe, the Dutch settlements at Albany and New Amsterdam, as well as the English colony of Jamestown in present-day Virginia. During the colonial period, the printing press was active in many areas, from Cambridge and Boston to New York, Philadelphia, and Annapolis[1].

The dominance of the English language was hardly inevitable[2]. The first item printed in Pennsylvania was in German the largest book printed in any of the colonies before the American Revolution. Spanish and French had two of the strongest colonial literary traditions in the areas that now comprise the United States, and discussions of early American literature commonly include texts by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Samuel de Champlain alongside English language texts by Thomas Harriot and John Smith. Moreover, we are now aware of the wealth of oral literary traditions already existing on the continent among the numerous different Native American groups. Political events, however, would eventually make English the lingua franca for the colonies at large as well
as the literary language of choice. For instance, when the English conquered New Amsterdam in 1664, they renamed it New York and changed the administrative language from Dutch to English.

From 1696 to 1700, only about 250 separate items were issued from the major printing presses in the American colonies. This is a small number compared to the output of the printers in London at the time. London printers published materials written by New England authors, so the body of American literature was larger than what was published in North America. However, printing was established in the American colonies before it was allowed in most of England. In England, restrictive laws had long confined printing to four locations, where the government could monitor what was published: London, York, Oxford, and Cambridge. Because of this, the colonies ventured into the modern world earlier than their provincial English counterparts[3].

Back then, some of the American literature were pamphlets and writings extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonist audience. Captain John Smith could be considered the first American author with his works: A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Happened in Virginia and The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles[4]. Other writers of this manner included Daniel Denton, Thomas Ash, William Penn, George Percy, William Strachey, Daniel Coxe, Gabriel Thomas, and John Lawson.

The religious disputes that prompted settlement in America were also topics of early writing.[5] A journal written by John Winthrop, The History of New England, discussed the religious foundations of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Edward Winslow also recorded a diary of the first years after the Mayflower's arrival. "A modell of Christian Charity" by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, was a Sermon preached on the Arbella (the flagship of the Winthrop Fleet) in 1630. This work outlined the ideal society he and his
followers of separatists were about to build in an attempt to realize the "Puritan utopia"[6].

The used literature


