

# American Trailblazing Society and Literature

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## Abstract

The Puritans were the core of the people who emigrated to America to seek refuge in the New World. Even after the disappearance of the power of religious domination, the Puritans' indomitable perseverance and reality-affirming spirit stayed on in the minds of early Americans and evolved into the spirit of pursuing freedom and equality, which resulted in bringing forth the literature of romantic humanism. For example, we can see in Ralph Waldo Emerson, who called on American scholars to create their own independent American literature, and Henry Thoreau, who lived simply with few needs or material possessions true to his beliefs, a sound mind that believes in the free will of man—the driving force that brought forth Walt Whitman's democratic literature.

Thereafter, the introduction of capitalism and scientific thought encouraged the development of the frontier spirit, which led to the birth of the literature that dealt with life in primeval forests and ocean voyages. The frontier spirit flows through the entire American literature, from *Moby Dick* and *the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which are some representative works of the literature of that era, to modern-day works, such as *Death of a Salesman* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

It is often indicated that the hybridity of races and their cultures is the major cause for contradictions and conflicts in the vast American society. The number of races present in American society amounts to 20. Nevertheless, with his/her self-consciousness of being a dignified human being in the New World and high ambition, each individual of each race freed himself/herself from slavish subordination, established a tone for living as a cosmopolitan individual, and contributed to the creation of the federal government under the Stars and Stripes. In the same way, every effort has been made to create the regional characteristics of each race in American literature as well. In this study, we will discuss 1) early pioneering and literature and 2) society during the period of the American War for Independence and literature.

## 1. Introduction

Regarded as a symbol of freedom and justice, the flag known as the Stars and Stripes is what Americans have from time to time spilled precious blood for on the battlefield under its unfurled presence and at other times waved while shedding tears of jubilant delight at victory. However, unless it is properly understood that the long history, extending from the first attempt

at colonization to the present day, is inscribed in the progression through which fifty stars came to appear on the current flag, I believe that it is not possible to know their true meaning. The truth of this statement is not limited to just the Stars and Stripes. It is even true of what is referred to as literature, which has transcended time and space, such that literature could be described as something that has been brought forth under a state of social inevitability within a framework that has been shaped by various events through long historical processes. Thus, if you wish to truly understand literature from its very foundations as a set of literary ideas, you cannot expect to obtain particularly fruitful results if you chose not to subject literature to such an examination. In this sense, it is my belief that it would certainly not be pointless to use reference materials at my disposal and other sources to sort out information on authors with any kind of link to those areas on the West coast that I have investigated and on the social and literary trends underlying their works.

## **2. Early trailblazing and literature**

As it is generally known, the Americas were discovered in 1492 by Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, who introduced the first land he came across to Europe as the Indies. However, this fact does not mean that there were no humans and no literature on the American continent. There were quite a few indigenous people, whom he referred to as Indios, living in this place when he arrived in the Bahamas.

In his book *Ancient Mexico*, archaeologist Frederick Peterson estimates that there were a total of between 1,300 and 500 people living in the whole of both North and South America in the fifteenth century. The existence in these lands of such civilizations as the “Mayans” and “Incas” can be surmised through numerous ruins of cities and other pieces of evidence. Nonetheless, there are no written records of these societies, such that the discovery of this land by Columbus is usually regarded as the pivotal act by which the New World came to be opened.

Nobody in Europe was aware until the beginning of the sixteenth century that a much larger ocean lay beyond this newly discovered continent than the one they had just crossed. This fact was properly revealed by Magellan when he circumnavigated the globe in 1521. Spain and Portugal led the way in making inroads into the New World. More than a century later, England (which would subsequently give rise to the United States) belatedly began to exercise its colonial muscles.

Economic, social, religious, and other elements formed the context for such efforts to make

inroads into the New World. On the economic front, there were those who wondered whether they could secure new markets for woolen products and other goods plagued with the problem of surplus production and whether they could produce lumber, olives, wine, and other commodities directly on such land. Socially, a vent to accommodate an increasing population was being urgently sought. As for the role that religion played at the time, it is to be noted that a push for attaining greater national prestige was building in England in the second half of the sixteenth century under Queen Elizabeth owing to a desire to keep undeveloped regions out of the hands of a rival nation in Catholic Spain.

We should not forget that all of this jostling among nations was most influenced by the reports given by many explorers who came after Columbus of there being a land of gold and a Garden of Eden at the western edge of the New World.

In response to such developments, Walter Raleigh (1554-1618) took over a charter issued by the queen to Humphrey Gilbert (1539-1583) and attempted to establish a colony known as “Virginia” in 1584 in what is now North Carolina. With the home country beset by an invasion perpetrated by the Spanish Armada as dispatched by Spain; however, there was no scope for lending a helping hand to Virginia in the New World. It was for this reason that the management of this settlement failed, thereby resulting in a withdrawal in just a few short years.

Having overcome the threat posed by the Spanish Armada by way of its defeat, England rekindled her dream of settling the new continent. Led by Captain John Smith (1580-1631), the settlement of Jamestown came to be built in Virginia in 1607 by upper-class English settlers bearing a charter issued by King James I.

However, actual living conditions differed completely from expectations formed based on reports. For settlers hoping to make a fortune in one fell swoop, such expectations far exceeded their imagination, beleaguered as they were by starvation, illness, and raids by indigenous people.

These settlers somehow eventually became able to nurture their dream five years later when the Virginia Company relaxed its exploitative endeavors and both recognized individual freedoms and succeeded in harvesting tobacco. The success of tobacco harvesting necessitated considerable manpower in the south and would ultimately lead to the laying of a foundation for large plantations based on a system of slavery.

At the same time, the Pilgrim Fathers who landed in Plymouth, Boston, and other northern locations in New England differed in essential ways. These settlers were a blend of religious dissenters who had broken away from the Church of England and who had sought a land where

they could live lives rooted in the Bible and workers employed by merchants who had made financial contributions to a migration plan. After boarding the Mayflower in 1620, this group of settlers landed in Cape Cod way to the north of their intended destination in Virginia.

For this reason, the charter issued to these settlers was rendered useless and a rebellion arose among them, with some complaining that their contract had been breached. Composed by William Brewster (1566-1644), the famous Mayflower Compact was signed at this time. On the basis of this compact, the passengers landed in order to ensure that Plymouth would be made an enduring commonwealth of God. Of course, such Puritan colonists were not limited to those residing in Plymouth. In 1630, a colony was developed in Boston under the guidance of John Winthrop (1588-1649). Over 20,000 people arrived here over the next decade. While the Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth were separatists who had repudiated the Church of England, the colonists in Boston comprised non-separatists and nonconformists. Although these colonists were highly critical of the church, they aspired to purify rather than to completely sever all ties to the Church of England, such that persecution did not constitute a direct motive as it did for the Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth.

Even in terms of structure, cultural and living standards were higher and the population was greater in Boston than it was in Plymouth. Thus, as is evident in the founding of Harvard University and the mandating of primary school education, functions concerning education and culture were proactively undertaken. With the eventual absorption of Plymouth, a society based on the powerful union of church and state rooted in faith in the doctrines of John Calvin was formed. Some people were nevertheless prompted by dissatisfaction with such a system to set up other settlements in Rhode Island and Connecticut according to their own ideals. In this way, the north was fertile with the soil of literature and education in contrast to settlements in the south where there were processes giving rise to a materially centered culture. Yet, living was mostly preoccupied with the task of developing the New World, such that there was neither any scope for listening to the poetry of indigenous people nor any time to transplant such poetry to new soil. The fact is that writings of a utilitarian bent in the manner of reports, letters, journals, and memoirs were typical, and writings that could be considered pure literature were exceedingly rare. Examples of the latter were produced by the likes of William Bradford (1590-1657), leader of the Plymouth Fathers; John Winthrop, a leading figure in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; Roger Williams (1603-1683), founder of the Rhode Island Colony; and Anne Bradstreet, a brilliant muse considered by many to be the first poet of the American colonies.

In addition, American society was being overwhelmed by rapid advances in civilization, in response to which various social phenomena arose. The three strains of ethics forged in America since its founding—Puritanism, the frontier spirit, and pragmatism (Yankeeism)—were deeply embedded in the hearts of Americans. Shaped by the passage of history through the era of migration to the New World (Puritan spirit), the era during which pioneers spread throughout the eastern and western sections of the continent (frontier spirit, pragmatism), and the era of the Civil War fought between the North against the South, a new form of morality came to be ingrained in people during the First World War. During the era of Puritanism that formed the basis of American literature, people searched for the divine will in everything. For example, settlers believed that even illnesses were caused by divine anger. Referring to himself as the “simple cobbler of Aggawam,” Nathaniel Ward was a minister who showed zeal in reforming England. Once he came to be gradually accepted, he began his assault on religious freedom.

Cotton Mather, a strict minister, delivered many sermons and wrote many books. *Path of Life*, a collection of sermons on the mission of Christians in which he summarized the ethical system of Puritanism for his audience, is a famous example of his writings. Other exceptional works include *Magnalia Christi Americana* and *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*.

Alongside these examples as given, such works as *The Sincere Convert*, a collection of sermons by Pastor Shepard, and *Church Government and Church Covenant Discussed*, which was written by Richard Mather, enjoy a fine reputation and are regarded as representative of the time in which they were produced.

Yet, it cannot be denied that Puritanism, irrespective of its merits and demerits, helped define the spiritual climate of America and that it influenced, to a great degree, daily living as well as literary output. There can also be no disputing that Puritanism should be regarded as the starting point of American literature.

### **3. Society and literature around the time of the American Revolution**

The time of the American Revolution as mentioned here refers to the period between the middle of the 1760s, when the Declaration of Independence was adopted, and around 1800, when a tentative peace descended upon the land.

Even if there was what is described as a factor that paved the way for the Declaration of Independence in the suppression of freedom by English colonial policies affecting rights that should have ensured the equality of colonists with the people of England, the financial pressure

arising from the need to reckon the huge costs of the Seven Years' War between mother country England and France and the demands made by American settlers for the freedom to acquire land in the west cannot be overlooked as factors that played a role behind the scenes.

In order to pass the financial burden of paying for the war onto the colonies, England imposed various taxes, including a customs tax under the Sugar Act of 1764 and a special tax under the Stamp Act of 1765 to meddle in and regulate commerce and industry. In the meantime, the Royal Proclamation Line drawn in connection with the conclusion of an agreement with local French settlers effectively ignored the intent of local colonists.

As such feelings of discontent and grievances toward England increased, incidents in which deaths and injuries resulted from confrontations between English garrison forces and residents and the Boston Tea Party as instigated by Samuel Adams and others occurred in Boston. What struck a decisive blow to such emotions was the Quebec Act of 1774. The enactment of this law effectively crushed their dreams of advancing westwards.

I believe that these various circumstances can be collectively seen as the force that drove the colonists to seek independence. It goes without saying that a conference between the mother country and the colonies was held to deal with these circumstances. As a conclusion to this conference was put off until the following year, however, clashes between English troops and colonial soldiers occurred in Lexington and Concord to the west of Boston to set the colonies on a path towards independence. At a Continental Congress in 1776, the decision was made to seek independence, whereupon the Declaration of Independence was adopted and proclaimed.

As the English forces arranged to have the colonists attacked in this conflict by taking advantage of the fact that the indigenous population was opposed to their westward advance, the colonies were dragged into an agonizing war. However, the colonies obtained the support of the French, who were traditionally sworn enemies of the English and who had just lost territory in Canada in the previous war. In addition, the discovery of natural resources allowed dramatic advances in commerce and industry and the achievement of growth at a rate surpassing that of the mother country.

Against this backdrop, the war situation gradually came to favor the colonies. A little while after a peace treaty was signed in 1783, George Washington became the first president of this new country.

This political independence and the industrial and economic growth that accompanied it convinced people of the veracity of the Calvinist stance by which it was claimed that heavenly wealth is not the only form of wealth and that real wealth can be found here on earth as well.

However, neither works that could be described as pure literature nor authors of any modern significance existed during this period of enmeshment in the hardships that were faced as a new country emerged from the battle for independence.

What was encountered during this seminal moment in history was the thought that unique genres and themes, including ideas imbued with revolutionary ripples and fervor and the inner yearning to surrender to a romantic spirit that would flourish before long, had become intermingled. On the other hand, this period can be regarded as a time when newspapers, magazines, and other such outlets that had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century evolved into vehicles that could provide a means of communications to authors who were set to make their mark on the world.

I would like to briefly classify the authors who are often described as the spiritual products of this era as follows:

Benjamin Franklin (1705-1790), a man who was committed to rationalism and who asserted Yankee utilitarianism, can be mentioned as someone who stands in contrast to Jonathan Edwards (1703-1753), a man who had vainly striven to restore the rule of God to the earthly realm prior to this time of transition. Others include Crèvecoeur, said to have lucidly ascertained the significance of living the frontier life in America despite residing in that country for only a brief period of time; Thomas Paine (1737-1809), author of *Common Sense*, a work that provided great inspiration to the revolution for independence; Patrick Henry (1736-1799), said to have taken up arms himself upon passionately embracing the cause of patriotism; and Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the Declaration of Independence.

There were some for whom literature may not have constituted a regular vocation but from whom significant contributions were obtained. For example, there was a group of literary persons known as the Connecticut Wits that consisted of the likes of John Trumbull (1756-1847), David Humphreys (1752-1818), and Joel Barlow. We must not forget others who, unlike this group of conservative thinkers, supported the revolution and the idea of independence. The likes of Philip Freneau (1752-1832), referred to as the poet of the American Revolution, and Royall Tyler (1757-1826), often called the Father of American Drama, fall into this latter category.

Other well-known figures of the time include international author Washington Irving, who did not forget to employ satire and humor and whose name is recognized even in Japan; novelist C.B. Brown (1771-1810), who managed to make a living producing literature after a fashion; J.F. Cooper (1789-1851), a man who was always devoted to America even while recognizing shortages of resources in America; and W.C. Bryant (1794-1878), called the father

of American Poetry.

Others whose contributions cannot be overlooked include William Ellery Channing(1780-1842), a preacher of Utilitarianism; and major figures in Transcendentalism A.B. Alcott, who poured his energies into childhood education, George Ripley (1802-1880), and Theodore Parker(1810-1860).

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