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Colonial Period In American Literature

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Introduction: The Birth of a Literary Voice in a New World

The story of American literature begins long before the United States existed as a nation. The **Colonial Period in American Literature**spans roughly from the early 1600s to the mid-1700s, a transformative era when European settlers—primarily from England—brought their language, faith, and literary traditions to the eastern shores of North America. This period laid the foundation for what would eventually become a uniquely American literary identity. Understanding the Colonial Period in American Literature means exploring how early writers recorded their experiences, grappled with religious devotion, documented the challenges of survival, and began to imagine a society built on new principles. Their works, though often utilitarian and deeply spiritual, remain vital for grasping the cultural and intellectual roots of the United States.

Historical Context of the Colonial Period in American Literature

The Colonial Period in American literature cannot be separated from its historical setting. The first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, was followed by the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620 and the Puritans in Massachusetts Bay in 1630. These early colonists wrote primarily for practical or religious purposes: letters, diaries, travel narratives, and sermons dominated. Literacy was prized, especially among the Puritans, who believed that every person should read the Bible. Consequently, writing became a tool for spiritual reflection, community instruction, and record-keeping.

As colonies grew and diversified, literature also expanded to include political tracts, captivity narratives, scientific observations, and early forms of autobiography. By the mid-1700s, Enlightenment ideas of reason, individualism, and natural rights began to influence colonial writers, setting the stage for revolutionary thought. The Colonial Period in American literature thus captures both the harsh realities of frontier life and the lofty aspirations of a people forging a new society.

Major Genres of Colonial Literature

Religious and Devotional Writing

The most dominant genre during the Colonial Period in American literature was religious writing. The Puritans, in particular, produced a vast body of sermons, theological treatises, and spiritual autobiographies. Their work aimed to explain God's will, interpret Biblical scripture for daily life, and encourage moral behavior. Sermons were often structured as "plain style" prose—clear, direct, and free of ornamental language—so that all listeners could understand and apply the lesson. Notable examples include the fiery sermons of **Jonathan Edwards**, such as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which vividly depicted the terrors of hell to urge repentance. Edwards's rhetorical power remains a landmark in early American oratory.

Journals, Diaries, and Travel Narratives

Another essential genre is the personal narrative. Colonists kept diaries and journals to document their

William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* is a prime example that chronicles the Pilgrims' voyage on the Mayflower, their first harsh winter, and the establishment of a self-governing colony. Similarly, **John Smith's** writings about Jamestown, including his embellished account of being saved by Pocahontas, blend fact with legend. These narratives gave readers in Europe a dramatic picture of the New World and helped promote further colonization.

Captivity Narratives

Captivity narratives became a popular and distinctly American genre during the colonial era. These accounts, often written by women who had been captured by Native American tribes, combined thrilling adventure with religious reflection. **Mary Rowlandson's** *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682) recounts her eleven weeks of captivity during King Philip's War. Rowlandson's narrative portrays her suffering and eventual redemption, framing her experience as a test of faith. Captivity narratives served both as entertainment and as moral instruction, reinforcing the settlers' belief in Providence and the dangers of the wilderness.

Poetry in the Colonies

Though less abundant than prose, poetry found a place in the Colonial Period in American literature. Most colonial poets wrote in traditional English forms, often addressing religious or moral themes. **Anne Bradstreet**, the first published poet in British North America, composed intimate poems about family, love, and faith. Her collection *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) was praised for its intellectual depth despite being written by a woman in a patriarchal society. Bradstreet's later works, such as "Upon the Burning of Our House," reveal a personal struggle between earthly attachments and spiritual acceptance. Another significant poet, **Edward Taylor**, wrote metaphysical poetry for his own private devotion, exploring the relationship between the soul and God through vivid imagery and intricate metaphors. His *Preparatory Meditations* were not published until the 20th century but are now recognized as masterpieces of colonial verse.

Political and Philosophical Writings

As the colonial period progressed, political writing grew in importance. The Enlightenment encouraged thinkers to question authority and assert natural rights. **Benjamin Franklin** embodies this transition; his *Poor Richard's Almanack* offered practical wisdom, while his *Autobiography*—begun in the late 1700s—traces his rise from humble printer to statesman. Franklin's writings combine self-improvement, scientific curiosity, and a distinctly American pragmatism. The seeds of revolution can also be found in the writings of figures like **Thomas Paine** and **Thomas Jefferson**, though their major works (Common Sense, 1776; the Declaration of Independence, 1776) bridge the colonial and revolutionary periods.

Major Authors and Their Contributions

William Bradford (1590–1657)

As the longtime governor of Plymouth Colony, Bradford wrote *Of Plymouth Plantation* between 1630 and 1651. This detailed history recounts the Pilgrims' religious persecution in England, their journey to Holland, and the difficult establishment of the colony. Bradford's plain, earnest prose captures the Puritan reliance on God's guidance. His description of the first Thanksgiving and the Mayflower Compact illustrates the communal spirit that characterized early colonial life. The work is invaluable for understanding both the events and the mindset of the first settlers.

Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672)

Anne Bradstreet's poetry broke new ground as the first volume of original poetry by a colonist to be published in England. Her work often wrestles with the tension between worldly love and heavenly devotion. In poems like "To My Dear and Loving Husband," she celebrates marital affection, while "The Flesh and the Spirit" dramatizes the conflict between earthly desires and spiritual aspirations. Bradstreet's voice is both personal and universal,

making her a touchstone for early American literature and a forerunner to women writers.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

Edwards was a theologian and philosopher whose sermons and treatises shaped the Great Awakening, a religious revival movement in the 1730s and 1740s. His most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," uses vivid imagery to depict the precarious state of unrepentant souls. Yet Edwards was also a nuanced thinker; his work *Freedom of the Will* engaged with Enlightenment ideas about human choice and divine sovereignty. His blend of emotional intensity and intellectual rigor marks him as a major figure within the Colonial Period in American literature.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

Though often associated with the American Revolution, Franklin's early writings belong firmly to the colonial era. His *Autobiography* outlines a philosophy of self-improvement and practical virtue. Franklin also wrote essays, pamphlets, and almanacs that promoted thrift, industry, and scientific inquiry. His famous thirteen virtues and his experiments with electricity exemplify the Enlightenment spirit applied to daily life. Franklin's wit and clarity made him one of the most widely read colonial authors.

Key Themes in Colonial Literature

Religion and Providence

The central theme of the Colonial Period in American literature is the overwhelming presence of God in every aspect of life. Puritan writers saw their journey to America as a divine mission—a "errand into the wilderness" to build a New Jerusalem. Every event, from crop failures to victories over enemies, was interpreted as a sign of God's favor or displeasure. This providential worldview infused sermons, histories, and personal narratives with a sense of cosmic importance.

Survival and Hardship

Colonial literature also records the brutal realities of survival in an unfamiliar land. Harsh winters, disease, starvation, and conflict with Indigenous peoples are recurring subjects. Writers often portrayed these struggles as tests of faith, but they also provided practical advice for newcomers. The motif of the "howling wilderness" appears frequently, symbolizing both physical danger and spiritual temptation.

Individualism and Community

While the Puritans emphasized community and covenant, colonial literature also reflects a growing sense of individual agency. Anne Bradstreet's personal poems, Franklin's self-help maxims, and Edwards's call for personal conversion all indicate a shift toward individual experience. This tension between collective responsibility and personal ambition would later become a defining characteristic of American identity.

The Role of Women and Indigenous Peoples

Women writers like Bradstreet and Rowlandson offered perspectives rarely recorded in official documents. Their accounts highlight domestic life, motherhood, and the unique challenges facing women in the colonies. Meanwhile, the portrayal of Native Americans in colonial literature ranged from hostile "savages" to noble "others." Captivity narratives often demonized Indigenous cultures, yet they also preserved details of Native customs. Modern scholarship encourages readers to approach these texts critically, recognizing the biases of the authors.

Stylistic Characteristics of Colonial Writing

The Colonial Period in American literature is marked by a deliberate simplicity of style, especially among Puritan authors. The "plain style" avoided elaborate metaphors and classical allusions, aiming for clarity and

directness. This approach reflected the belief that ornate language could obscure the truth of God's word. However, some writers, like Edward Taylor and Jonathan Edwards, employed powerful imagery and rhetorical devices to heighten emotional impact. Overall, colonial prose and poetry tend to be didactic—teaching a moral or religious lesson—and often include direct references to Scripture.

The Legacy of the Colonial Period in American Literature

The literature of the colonial era may seem distant to modern readers, but its influence is profound. The themes of divine purpose, personal struggle, and the search for a new identity have echoed through later American literature—from the transcendentalists to the modernists. Moreover, the colonial period established the practice of using writing to document, interpret, and shape a nation's story. Without the diaries, sermons, and poems of early settlers, we would lack a crucial window into the origins of the American character.

Today, scholars continue to study the Colonial Period in American literature not only for its historical value but also for the richness of its voices. Anne Bradstreet's quiet domestic reflections, Mary Rowlandson's harrowing ordeal, and Benjamin Franklin's worldly wisdom all remind us that literature is both a mirror and a lamp—reflecting the world as it was and illuminating the path forward.

Conclusion

The **Colonial Period in American Literature**is a foundational chapter in the literary heritage of the United States. From the religious intensity of Puritan sermons to the practical advice of Benjamin Franklin, colonial writers grappled with questions of faith, survival, community, and individuality. Their works, though created in a distant era, continue to offer insight into the values, hopes, and fears that shaped a nascent America. For anyone seeking to understand the roots of American thought and expression, an exploration of this period is not just recommended—it is essential.

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