



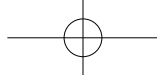
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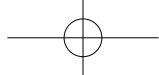
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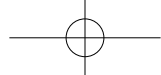
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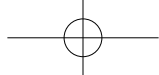
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# PART I

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## THE EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE (1620-1770)



# Chapter 1 | The Seventeenth Century Literature

## Puritanism in American Literature

American literature may be among the youngest national literatures in the world. Although the continent of North America was discovered about 500 years ago, its real history, if calculated roughly from the end of the Independence War (October 1781), is only about 230 years. Within such a short period, American literature swiftly developed and well matured, began to receive international recognition, and has exerted a marked effect upon world literature. In fact, American writers have brought out some of the world's best literature.

The first settlers in America were known as the ancestors of American Indians or Native Americans. The discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, however, led to the rush of European immigrants into this fascinating and strange continent and brought the rise of the New World. The English settlement in America emerged especially after the arrival of the ship *Mayflower* in 1620. The early settlers were called Separatists or Puritans, who managed to escape to the New World to avoid the religious persecution of the Church of England. They at first wished to reform or “purify” their religious beliefs and practices. To them religion should be a matter of personal faith rather than of ritual.

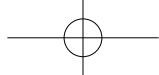
The 17th-century American Puritans included two parts: one were the creators of the Plymouth colony, called “Separatists.” They were so suppressed by the Church of England that they sought escape. Those Separatists first went into exile to Holland, then were aboard *Mayflower* in 1620 and settled down in Plymouth. America, therefore, as an infant was born. They considered that the Church of England had become hopeless and advocated to separate from it since general reform would be useless. The other part were the Englishmen in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.



Though they came later than those who settled in Plymouth colony, they were richer and better-educated. They devoted themselves to the reform of the Church of England and meant to clear away the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church in it. In reality, only this part were true Puritans. They accepted the doctrine of original sin, total depravity, predestination, and limited atonement through a special infusion of grace from God.

The main doctrine of Calvinism Puritans believed in was first shown in “total depravity.” They believed in the “original sin” in which Adam the first man God created sinned and which led to the conclusion that “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.” They considered that man was born sinful, was a sinner and could not redeem his original sinfulness. Moreover, they could not save themselves. Secondly, Puritans believed that man would be chosen by God unconditionally. They thought that God occupied a dominant position. He could save some people willfully, made them rise to the Heaven after death, and could also destroy some other people wantonly, made them fall into the Hell after death. Therefore, determinism took firm root in their minds. They believed in man’s destiny; everything of man was disposed in the hands of God, and only God knew who were the “chosen people”. Man himself was predestined and could not master his own destiny. They thought that God willfully granted people the favor that man could neither strive to gain, nor refuse to accept. The obtaining of God’s special kindness or God’s providence for him meant his “rebirth” or “being sainted.” In this sense, they strived to be saints while they were still alive. Man did not know whether they could be God’s chosen people, but should live a saint-like life in ordinary times according to God’s will. The Holy Bible was the guidebook to man’s behavior.

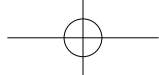
In New England where Puritanism was popular, one’s life was only the course of moral training and that of his struggle between God and devils. People had an austere and rigid way of life governed by the church. Therefore, clergymen were the dominant authorities. Puritans tended to suspect joy and laughter as symptoms of sin. They did not dance, did not go to theater, but sang chant in church and listened to the music. However, they allowed drinking, smoking and beautiful clothes. Puritanism encouraged people to struggle in their careers. If one’s business was booming, it proved that he was chosen by God.



In such a cultural background, the purpose of the literary creation could only be “pragmatic.” Over the years Puritans built a way of life that was in harmony with their somber religion, one that stressed hard work, thrift, piety, and sobriety. In people’s daily life, religious activities were a matter of first importance and all others should serve the religion. Their lives were disciplined and hard.

It was Puritanism that was most influential in the intellectual and economic life of the settlers. The early American literature started at the beginning of the 17th century, marked by that those headed by William Bradford on board of *Mayflower* reached the new continent and set up the colony of Plymouth. The first of American literature was not written by an American, but by John Smith, a British captain, who thus became the first American writer. *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Hath Happened in Virginia* was a long report recording what he saw and heard in the New World, which he sent back to England and was printed in 1608 without his knowledge.

Literature of this period, which is also called “Colonial Literature,” is first of all characterized by that most of the writers were born in Britain. Some were explorers, some immigrants, some colonialists. As their circumstances were hard and their life was difficult, the newcomers were very busy. Relying mainly on physical labor, they were not professional writers and did not mean to create a national literature. Only the life of the new world was inspiring and encouraged them to write. Secondly, the time when American literature was born was just the period when the Modern English took shape and developed. The early American literary works, therefore, were not so difficult to understand as the early English literary works. Certainly, it had some distinctions from present-day English, particularly in the spelling and pronunciation of some words, such as the article “ye” and the suffix “eth” in “maketh, holdth.” English of this period had long and loose sentences and a lot of conversions, such as verbs used as nouns, adjectives as adverbs, and in many cases “double negative” was used to emphasize negation. Thirdly, the principal ideological trend of this period was Puritanism besides the ideological influence of the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, etc. Moreover, in early Puritan writers’ works, English literary traditions



were faithfully imitated and transplanted. The American poets of the 17th century adopted the style of established European poets. In addition, regarding the genres of the literary works, there were “travel writing,” “diary,” and “poem,” etc., among which the poetry and prose gained most achievements in this period. The important literary figures were the first American writer John Smith, the first American woman poet Anne Bradstreet, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and Edward Taylor.

### **Reference Books**

Chang, Yaoxin. *A Survey of American Literature*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 1990.

Perkins, George, *et al.* eds. *The American Tradition in Literature*. New York: Random House, 1985.

Wu, Fuheng, *et al.* eds. *On American Writers*. Jinan: Shandong Education Press, 1999.

## **Exercises**

### **I. Make the proper choice or choices according to the context.**

1. Although the continent of North America was discovered about 500 years ago, the real history of American literature is only more than \_\_\_\_ years.  
A. 500  
B. 400  
C. 300  
D. 200
2. The Puritans believed in man's destiny, and in that everything of man was disposed in the hands of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. God  
B. Jesus  
C. himself  
D. mystic forces
3. The early settlers in America were so-called Separatists or Puritans to avoid the religious persecution of the \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. Roman Catholic Church  
B. Church of England

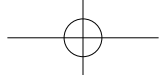




- C. Christianity  
D. Protestants
4. The first American writer is \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. Cotton Mather  
B. Jonathan Edwards  
C. John Smith  
D. Edward Taylor
5. The Puritans of the New World regarded joy and laughter as symbols of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. happiness  
B. craziness  
C. easiness  
D. sin
6. According to the Puritans, \_\_\_\_\_ was the guidebook to man's behaviors.  
A. *A True Sight of Sin*  
B. *A Model of Christian Charity*  
C. The Holy Bible  
D. *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America*

## II. Check the statements true (T) or false (F).

- T  F 1. To the Puritans of the New World, religion should be a matter of personal faith rather than of ritual.
- T  F 2. The 17th-century American Puritans included two parts: one part of them who were suppressed by the Church of England were aboard *Mayflower* and settled down in Plymouth; the other part who came later were the Englishmen in Massachusetts Bay Colony. They devoted themselves to the reform of the Church of England. In reality, only the former part of them were true Puritans.
- T  F 3. Nowadays colonial religious writing is of no great value.
- T  F 4. The first American woman poet is Anne Bradstreet.
- T  F 5. In the American colonial period, the Puritans believed they could save themselves and dispose everything in their own hands although they considered that man was born sinful due to the original sin.



- T F** 6. In early American literature of Puritanism, English literary traditions were faithfully imitated and transplanted. Moreover, some American professional writers adopted the style of established European writers and wrote about Europe.
- T F** 7. The first of American literature was not written by an American, but by a British captain. It was a long report recording what he saw and heard in the New World and was printed in England without his knowledge.

**III. Answer the following questions.**

1. What is the characteristics of the 17th-century American literature?
2. What types of literary works were popular in the 17th-century American literature?