

American Literature

Lecture 1

THE LITERATURE

OF

EXPLORATION

The story of American
literature begins

in the early 1600,

long before there
appeared any American
people.

American literature starts
with orally disseminated
stories,
tales,
legends,
lyrical songs of various
Indian cultures.

Before the first Europeans
arrived

there was **no written
literature**

among more than **500** different
languages,

tribes

and cultures.

Native American oral literature

is rich and extremely diverse.

It contains every oral genre:
fairy tales,
lyrics,

proverbs,
legends,
stories,
humorous jokes,
poetry,
magic
and dance ceremonials.

There were also vision
songs,
healing songs,
hunting songs,
songs for children's games,
love songs.

The mood of the songs,
narratives and poetry
ranges from **sacred** and
serious to **light** and
humorous.

Indian oral tradition
is rich and diverse.

Its contribution to
American literature
is important and
significant.

The other group felt that American literature was too young to declare its own independence from the British literary tradition. The American literature of that time grew and flowered, the greatest writers found a way **to combine the best qualities of**

The earliest **writers** were Englishmen describing the English exploration and colonization of the New World. The writers were travellers who reflected their new experience in the new land.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

—

Epistola Journal

He described his trip, the adventures and dramatic events,

people's fears and
strange imaginative
monsters.

In 1528, several years after
Columbus, Spaniard named
ALVAR DE VACA, landed
with an expedition
on the west coast of the land
which is now **called Florida.**

He created a story about the
trip's hardships and about
the expedition's experiences
with
a tribal group in Florida.

BARTHOLOME DE LAS CASAS

is one of the most important sources of information about the early contacts between American Indians and Europeans.

He transcribed Columbus's
journal. *He also wrote
History of the Indians.*

The first narrations were **autobiographical.**

They contained a **strong autobiographical element.**

They also were adventure
stories.

Such writings left
by many adventurers were
interesting and valuable.

They usually described
**the hardships and
obstacles**

the adventurers came
across.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The first colony was established in 1585 but all the colonists disappeared.

The second colony was more permanent in Jamestown in 1607.

The colony endured
starvation,
misery,
brutality.

Initial English attempts at colonization were not successful.

The first colony was established in **1585 in North Carolina** but all the colonists disappeared. The **second colony** was more permanent in **Jamestown in 1607**.

The literature of this period describes America as **the land of riches and opportunity, as the American dream.**

The first stories were
**adventure stories and
autobiographical stories.**

They contained a strong
autobiographical element.

Such narratives often **mixed
facts with fantasy.**

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH (1580-1631).

He created *The Writings of Captain John Smith*.

They try to convince the reader to settle and to live in the New World.

His romantic spirit is revealed in the *Writings*.

Smith has often been accused
of boasting,

and some people have said
that
he was guilty of great
exaggeration.

But it is certain that he repeatedly
braved hardships, extreme
dangers,
and captivity among
the Indians
to provide food
for
the colony and to survey Virginia.

Thanks to him readers heard
the story of his capture by
the Indians, of his rescue from
torture and death, by
the beautiful Indian maiden,
Pocahontas.

Captain Smith also wrote
*Description of New
England* (1616).

The Puritans studied it
attentively and decided
to settle there in 1620.

He described how she was risking her life to save him for the second time from Indian treachery. She also brought corn and preserved the colony from famine.

He described her visit
to England in 1616,
a few weeks after the death
of Shakespeare,
and her royal reception
as a princess, the daughter of
an Indian king.

It is a romantic story.

PURITAN

is a broad term, referring to any number of Protestant groups that sought to “purify” the established Church of England.

Puritans wished to return to
the simple forms of worship
and church organization

as described in the New
Testament.

Because they refused to conform to the state church's beliefs and practices, they were also called "*Nonconformists*" or "*Dissenters*".

Puritans suffered persecution.

Some of them left England,
at first for Holland.

But fearing that they would
lose their identity as
English Christians, a small
advanced group of about a
hundred puritans **set sail**
for the New World in
1620.

During the period
from 1620 to 1640,
large numbers of English
people migrated to that part
of America now known

as New England.

The Puritans

who came to America identified themselves with **pilgrims**.

The word **Pilgrimage** took a different meaning –

it was

a journey to **salvation.**

THOMAS HARRIOT

He wrote *Brief and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia* (1588). It was translated into many languages: French, Latin, and German. It is an accurate and scientific account of the events.

WILLIAM BRADFORD

1590 - 1657

William Bradford was born in
1590 in the **Pilgrim district**
of England,

in the Yorkshire village of
Austerfield, two miles north
of Scrooby.

While a child, he attended
the religious meetings
of the Puritans.

At the age of eighteen he gave
up a good position in the post
service of England, and
crossed to Holland to escape
religious persecution.

W. Bradford wrote
Of Plymouth Plantation

the most interesting of
the Puritan histories.

His *History of Plymouth
Plantation* tells the story
of the Pilgrim Fathers
from the time of the
formation of their two
congregations in England,
until 1647

His *History* is not a record of the Puritans as a whole, but only of that branch known as the Pilgrims who left England for Holland in 1607 and 1608.

and who, after remaining
there for nearly twelve years,
had the initiative to be
the first of their band to come
to the New World,
and
to settle at Plymouth in 1620.

For more than thirty years
he was

**Governor of the
Plymouth colony.**

WILLIAM STRACHEY (1572-1621)

Captain Smith was not the only Englishman writing in the colonies in the early seventeenth century.

William Strachey,
a contemporary of
Shakespeare
and secretary of the
Virginian colony, wrote at
Jamestown.

He sent to London in 1610
the manuscript of

*A True Repertory of the Wrack
and Redemption of Sir Thomas
Gates, Kt., upon and from the
Islands of the Bermudas.*

This is a story of shipwreck
on **the Bermudas** and
of escape
in small boats.

The book is memorable for
the description of a storm at
sea,

and it is possible that it may
even have some connections
to Shakespeare

for *The Tempest*.

COLONEL WILLIAM BYRD (1674-1744)

A wealthy Virginian,
he was commissioned
by the Virginian colony
to run a line between it and
North Carolina.

He wrote a *History of the
Dividing Line run in the
Year 1728.*

This book is a record
of personal experiences, and
is as interesting as its title
is forbidding.

~~JOHN WINTHROP (1588-1649)~~
He created his book "in the plain style".

It was *The History of New England*, although it might more properly still be called his *Journal*.

His *Journal* is a record
of contemporaneous events
from 1630 to 1648.

He very seldom shows
his feelings,
even when he is supposed
to speak about happiness,
joy, sorrow or sufferings and
unhappiness.

His style is rather dry.

He believed that most events could be perceived as a sign from God.

ANNE BRADSTREET (1612-1672)

One of the most notable characteristics of American literature is

the distinction of **women writers**, especially in poetry.

**The first accomplished
poet**

**in the USA of either sex,
was Anne Bradstreet.**

She was the first real New England's poet, or "**The Tenth Muse,**" as she was called by her friends.

She was the daughter of the Puritan governor, Thomas Dudley.

She became the wife
of another Puritan governor,

Simon Bradstreet, with
whom she came
to New England in 1630.

Although she was born before
the death of Shakespeare,
she seems never to have
studied the works of that
great dramatist.

She wrote *10th Muse Lately
Sprung Up in America.*

Her first poems were
criticized

but her later poems,
written with charming
simplicity,

showed the evolution
of her creative work.

She refused to describe adventures, brave soldiers, warriors, kings or captains. Instead, her works present the first attempt to write about **simple feelings**.

SAMUEL SEWALL (1652-1730)

Samuel Sewall graduated from Harvard in 1671 and became chief justice of Massachusetts.

He is known for his *Diary* which describes events from 1673 to 1729, the year before his death. Good diaries are scarce in any literature.

His *Diary* is precious and influences the works of the next generations of writers. It is important to dramatists, novelists, poets, as well as to historians. The *Diary* may prove to a coming American writer with a genius like Hawthorne's.

In Sewall's *Diary* readers at once feel that they are very close to life.

Sewall's *Diary* is best known for its faithful chronicle of his courtship of Mrs. Catharine Winthrop.

His style is **open, sincere**, he is frank and straightforward.

Sewall was one of the **seven judges** who sentenced nineteen persons to be put to death for witchcraft at Salem. After this terrible delusion had passed, he had the manliness to rise in church before all the members, and after acknowledging "the blame and shame of his decision," call for "prayers that God who has an unlimited authority would pardon that sin."

MARY ROWLANDSON (1636-1678)

She was the earliest woman writer who created prose. She wrote about her personal story. She was captured by Indians during an Indian massacre in 1676.

Her tale is called

*The Sovereignty and Godness of
God, Together with
the Faithfulness of His Promises
Displayed: Being a Narrative of
the Captivity and Restoration
of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson.*

Her narrative presents a terrifying and moving tale of a frontier life.

It also provides insight into how Puritans viewed their lives.

It was one of the most widely
read prose works
of the 17th century.

It was especially popular in
England, where people were
eager to find tales
of the native inhabitants
of the New World.

The popularity of Rowlandson's story gave rise to a mass of **imitations** that were purely fictional.

These “captivity” stories might have been entertaining,

but they had a tragic side
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The
End