

Puritan Times period of American Literature - 1650-1750

Content:

- errand into the wilderness
- be a city upon a hill
- Christian utopia

Genre/Style:

- sermons, diaries
- personal narratives
- captivity narratives
- written in plain style

Effect:

- instructive
- reinforces authority of the Bible and church

Historical Context:

- a person's fate is determined by God
 - all people are corrupt and must be saved by Christ
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Rationalism / Age of Enlightenment period of American Literature - 1750-1800

Content:

- national mission and American character
- democratic utopia
- use of reason
- history is an act of individual and national self-assertion

Genre/Style:

- political pamphlets
- travel writing
- highly ornate writing style
- fiction employs generic plots and characters
- fiction often tells the story of how an innocent young woman is tested by a seductive male

Effect:

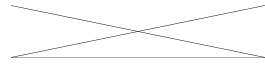
- patriotism grows
- instills pride
- creates common agreement about issues
- shows differences between Americans and Europeans

Historical Context:

- tells readers how to interpret what they are reading to encourage Revolutionary War support
- instructive in values

BEGINNINGS TO 1800

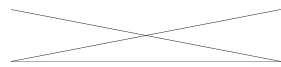
American literature was shaped in America from the first day that immigrants arrived to the unforgiving continent. The religious puritans who escaped prosecution in England started the American literary movement with their extremist views regarding society. As time progressed, different literary and philosophical groups came about and resulted in the American literature diverging into three distinctive philosophical branches: Puritanism, Deism and Rationalism



The Puritan society placed God at the center point of society, and their literary works, which were primary diaries and histories, expressed God as the central theme or as having a strong presence. The Puritan writing is very strict and simple and, although quite distinct, did not distinguish much from European writing.

Characteristics of Puritan writing

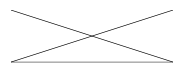
- God is the central aspect
- Bible provides a model for Puritan writing (direct Biblical events related with their own lives)
- Used writing to find God in their lives
- Plain and simple writing style



The Rationalists had a belief that was entirely opposite of the Puritan religious cult. They stressed that not religion but reasoning would lead humans to arrive to the truth of life. Furthermore, they believed that God gave humans the ability to think, and that this gift needed to be exploited by humans, resulting in Rationalism becoming a vantage point taken by numerous scientists.

Rationalist Beliefs

- God created universe, but does not interfere in its workings
- People are basically good
- Reasoning leads to the truth in life



The Deists, similar to the Rationalists believed in a more light-hearted world, which was generally orderly and good. They believed that the individual could be perfected through reasoning, and through doing good for others.

Much of this information was found at http://www.studyguide.org/am_lit_timeline.htm

Rationalism

Rationalism is the term used to describe writers and philosophers who privilege scientific reason and logical thought over and above everything else. The Rationalists in America were very much influenced by the Enlightenment that was happening in the 18th century in Europe. However, unlike the Enlightenment's great thinkers and philosophers, the Founding Fathers of America attempted to put the philosophy of the Enlightenment to actual use. This is most likely directly related to the fact that American Rationalists evolved out of the tradition of Puritanism, not the class structure and Feudalism of Europe.

Rationalism is based on the concepts of logic and scientific reasoning, but the Rationalists themselves were not scientists as we think of the term. Science in the 18th century was not a profession – it was a hobby. Wealthier Americans who had gone to the universities went back to their homes and began to categorize the flora and fauna of their home regions. Not because they were biologists, but because somebody had to do it, and it might as well be them.

Most American science was based on figuring out how to do things more efficiently (and profitably). Rationalists used the scientific method of identifying the problem, hypothesizing a solution, and testing the hypotheses until you reach a satisfactory conclusion. Benjamin Franklin became one of America's great scientists, but almost everything that he invented (bifocals, lightning rods, Franklin stoves, etc) were designed to solve specific problems. He was not just “puttering around” or doing experiments willy-nilly.

One side effect of rationalism was that it led to questioning – of everything. Instead of following tradition simply because it had always been done that way, rationalists questioned the traditions and made the necessary changes based on what they observed. Thus, because of the rationalist worldview, instead of automatically setting up a government like every other government in Europe, the Founding Fathers asked what sort of government made the most logical sense.

One other significant element of rationalism is their view of religion. As is often pointed out in church/state discussions today, the Founding Fathers made reference to God on a regular basis. However, their view of God and religion was NOT the same as the Puritans. The vast majority of the Founding Fathers and other leading Rationalists were Deists. They believed in God, but it was not a God who was involved in human affairs. The metaphor that was commonly used was the God was like a Clockmaker who had made the universe, wound it up, and was letting it wind down. By referencing God, they were referencing the very notion of a rational, planned universe. Man's role was to try to make proper use of what God had created, whether it be in political structures, daily life, or even scientific observation. Studying the world scientifically wasn't in defiance of religion, it was to better understand what God had created.

American Renaissance/Romanticism period of American Literature - 1800-1855

Content:

- writing that can be interpreted two ways, on the surface for common folk or in depth for philosophical readers
- sense of idealism
- focus on the individual's inner feelings
- emphasis on the imagination over reason and intuition over facts
- urbanization versus nostalgia for nature
- burden of the Puritan past

Genre/Style:

- literary tale
- character sketch
- slave narratives,
- political novels
- poetry
- transcendentalism

Effect:

- helps instill proper gender behavior for men and women
- fuels the abolitionist movement
- allow people to re-imagine the American past

Historical Context:

- expansion of magazines, newspapers, and book publishing
- slavery debates

Romanticism vs. Rationalism in American Literature

Summary: Romanticism versus Rationalism in order to find Truth in American Literature.

Romanticism and rationalism are by definition very different. The first, romanticism, developed in part as a reaction to rationalistic thoughts and ideas, the original method to find "truth" in life. Rationalistic feelings started out with a plain, factual and methodical way to approach a problem and to obtain a valid and logical solution. The romantic point of view was developed as a sort of rebellious cause against rationalism, for those who had a different approach to truth. Rationalism, however, is always a good first choice since it

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saves a person the pondering and time of romanticism. In general, however, it is better to have a good balance between the two ways of finding Truth.

Gothic period of American Literature - 1800-1850

Gothic is a sub-genre of Romanticism

Content:

- sublime and overt use of the supernatural
- individual characters see themselves at the mercy of forces out of their control which they do not understand
- motif of the "double": an individual with both evil and good characteristics
- often involve the persecution of a young woman who is forced apart from her true love

Style:

- short stories and novels
- hold readers' attention through dread of a series of terrible possibilities
- feature landscapes of dark forests, extreme vegetation, concealed ruins with horrific rooms, depressed characters

Effect:

- today in literature we still see portrayals of alluring antagonists whose evil characteristics appeal to one's sense of awe
- today in literature we still see stories of the persecuted young girl forced apart from her true love

Historical Context:

- industrial revolution brings ideas that the "old ways" of doing things are now irrelevant
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