

AMERICAN LITERATURE

1. The Colonial Period (1492–1700)

Native Americans, the first inhabitants of the continent, did not develop anything we can call “literature” – their stories and poems were spread orally, which means the American literary history begins with the age of **colonialism**.

The character of early American literature is strongly influenced by several factors:

- It was the era of **colonising the continent**. Since not only the **English** explored and claimed the territories, the beginnings of American literature are more or less connected also with **French, Spanish or Dutch** literatures as well.
- The first writers brought mainly **English ideas and ways of writing**, which means early American literature is based on the literature of England. As years passed and literary theory developed, the writers who adopted the English style are now sometimes called **pale faces** (Franklin, Longfellow, James, Pound). Their poetry is sometimes referred to as “cooked poetry”. On the other hand, there were authors who explored new topics and helped shape¹ America’s own literary tradition. Those are called **redskins** (Whitman, Emerson, the Beat Generation). Their poetry is referred to as “raw poetry”.
- **Religion** played an important part in the writers’ lives. Many writings of the period were sermons² and theological books. The fact that the **Pilgrims** landed in the Massachusetts Bay in **1620** had an immense³ influence on the culture of the newly developing colonial system.
- The topics common in the early periods were connected with the issues of living in a **new land** (agriculture, explorations, and relations with the native people) and travelling (travel logs⁴, journals).

JOHN SMITH (1580–1631) is considered to be the first American writer. He was an explorer and colonist; he helped found Jamestown in 1607.⁵ His *A True Relation of Virginia* is said to be the first American book written in English. It describes the problems of colonising the area.

WILLIAM BRADFORD (1590–1657) was a Puritan writer who described life in the early English settlements. His book *Of Plymouth Plantation* is full of religious topics and depictions⁶ of a difficult life in the colony.

¹ shape – utvořit

² sermon – kázání

³ immense – nesmírný

⁴ travel log – cestovní deník

⁵ John Smith is connected with the character of Pocahontas, an Indian woman who saved his life after he had been captured.

⁶ depiction – popis

ANNE BRADSTREET (1612–1672) wrote lyrical, religious and personal poetry. She is the author of *To My Dear and Loving Husband*. **MARY ROWLANDSON** (1637–1711) gives us the image of a woman’s life in the colonial period. Her *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* tells her story of being kidnapped by Native Americans. The book became a bestseller.

American Colonial Period Study Guide

JL Elias



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