**American Literature**

**The Puritans**

1

The 17th Century

American literature was a colonial literature, by author who were English men & who thought & wrote as such.

* All 17th century American writings were in the manner of the British writings of the period.
* John Smith wrote in the tradition of geographic literature whereas William Bradford echoed the cadences of the Bible.
* Anne Bradstreet’s poetic style derived from a long line of British poets, including Spenser & Sidney.
* The content and form of the literature of this first century was markedly English

2

Their Beliefs:

* Puritans believed in independent congregations with elected ministers.
* They also believed that God had already chosen those who would be saved from damnation.
* These people were the “elect.” The Puritans also believed in the covenant of grace: the idea that Christ would save all those who believed in him and that people might prepare their hearts for the experience of this grace. Their story was revealing God’s will in history.

3

The Puritans also believed that they were divinely selected to play a pivotal role in world history, serving as an example of an ideal society.

The Puritan worldview had a tendency to see parallels between the Puritan experience and such archetypes as the Israelites’ journey into the wilderness.

This tendency allowed the Puritans to invest their history with great symbolic significance and to find meaning in the most mundane occurrences. It also encouraged them to believe that their experiences had a divine purpose.

This tendency also prevented the Puritans from seeing the indigenous people of America as human beings— if the “unsettled” areas of the New World were a “howling wilderness” under Satan’s power, then the inhabitants of that wilderness must be Satan’s agents.

The Puritans thus considered the Native Americans to be “savages” and “animals,” and the land on which they lived to be unoccupied.

4

Their interpretation of scriptures was a harsh one. They emphasized a redemptive piety.

In principle, they emphasized conversion and not repression.

* Conversion was a rejection of the "worldliness" of society and a strict adherence to Biblical principles.
* While repression was not encouraged in principle, it was evident in their actions.

God could forgive anything, but man could forgive only by seeing a change in behavior.

Actions spoke louder than words, so actions had to be constantly controlled.

The Puritans believed that they must reject the attractions of the world and live only for the rewards of the heavenly kingdom which was to come, yet they also believed that people should work diligently in their earthly pursuits, whatever they might be, and that this diligent work would ultimately produce material success.

Thus the Puritans were torn between the need to reject the world’s attractions and the need to succeed on the world’s terms, and this contradiction created strife and disagreement almost from the beginning.

5

In short:

to the puritans, a person by nature was wholly sinful and could achieve good only by severe and unremitting discipline.

Hard work was considered a religious duty and emphasis was laid on constant self-examination and self-discipline.

They adhered to a severe code of behavior and punishment was often exaggerated.

6

Their Style:

- Autobiographies, conversion narratives, and biographies were important Puritan documents because Puritans believed that the life of the individual was a microcosm of the life of the group.

* Puritan literature was serious because life as a moral struggle was serious and stressful and literature attempted to represent life truly.
* It was realistic, sober and did not mix worldly pleasures with it principles.
* -It aimed to be rational and orderly because God’s creation was logical and harmonious
* -It was plain in style and use familiar expressions, drawn from daily life - incidents & situations of colonial life - such as fishing, farming, Indian warfare, & travel on land & sea.
* -It noted God’s justice & mercy to man, thus, it was full of examples of God’s dealings with justified people, & stressed both manifestations of divine purposes & judgments, and instances of human achievements and failures.

7

I. The Function of Puritan Writers:

* To make God more relevant to the universe.
* To glorify God.
* -To show understanding & acceptance of God’s purpose in life.

II. The Style of Puritan Writing:

* plain and direct
* reverence for the Bible.

Puritan writing reflected the character and scope of the reading public, which was literate and well-grounded in religion.

IV. Common Themes in Early Puritan Writing

* Idealism - both religious and political.
* Pragmatism - practicality and purposiveness.

8

Their Influence:

* They made a virtue of qualities that made for economic success such as self-reliance, frugality, industry, & energy which influenced modern social and economic life.
* Their concern for education was important in the development of the country.
* The idea of the congregational democratic church government was carried into the political life of the state as a source of modern democracy.