

What Was American Literature Like In The Very Beginning? Put It In C.E.R

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American literature's origins stretch back to a time when the continent was still largely explored and inhabited by indigenous peoples, and European settlers were beginning to carve out new lives. To understand what American literature was like in its earliest days, it's essential to examine the context, the themes that emerged, and the ways these writings reflect the experiences of early Americans. This article will explore these aspects using the C.E.R method—Claim, Evidence, Reasoning—to provide a clear and comprehensive overview of American literature's infancy.

Claim: Early American Literature Was Marked by Its Focus on Exploration, Survival, and Religious Faith

In its earliest stages, American literature was primarily shaped by the pioneering spirit of exploration, the struggles for survival in a new land, and the deep religious convictions of its settlers. These elements combined to produce a body of work that was deeply reflective of the challenges and aspirations of the early inhabitants of North America.

Evidence: Indigenous Oral Traditions and European Settler Writings

Before European contact, Native American tribes had a rich oral tradition that included stories, myths, songs, and rituals passed down through generations. These oral traditions served as a means of preserving history, explaining natural phenomena, and instilling moral values. For example, many tribes had creation myths explaining the origins of the world and humans, which functioned as foundational texts of their cultural identity.

With the arrival of European settlers in the 16th and 17th centuries, written works began to emerge that documented their experiences. Notable early texts include:

- *Of Plymouth Plantation* (written by William Bradford, 1620s): A detailed account of the Pilgrims' journey and settlement at Plymouth, emphasizing divine Providence and their hardships.

- John Winthrop's sermons and logs, which highlighted the importance of religious purpose and divine guidance in establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- Personal diaries, such as those of Anne Bradstreet, the first published American poet, whose poetry often reflected her Puritan faith and domestic life.

Reasoning: These writings reveal that early American literature was deeply rooted in the settlers' quest for religious freedom, their efforts to survive in a new environment, and their desire to record their experiences for posterity. The oral traditions of Native Americans, though largely unrecorded in written form, also played a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape that early settlers encountered, influencing themes of nature and spirituality in American literature.

Claim: Early American Literature Was Characterized by a Puritanical and Moral Focus

The dominant cultural influence in early American literature was Puritanism, which emphasized morality, divine providence, and the importance of a personal relationship with God. Literature from this period often reflected these values, serving both as spiritual guidance and as a means of social control.

Evidence: Puritan Writings and Sermons

The works of Puritan authors such as Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather exemplify the moral and religious focus of early American literature:

- *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Edwards, 1741): A fiery sermon urging repentance and warning of divine wrath, emphasizing the importance of salvation and moral righteousness.
- Cotton Mather's sermons and writings, which combined religious doctrine

with reflections on the importance of community and moral discipline.

- Puritan diaries and histories that recorded daily life, emphasizing piety, obedience, and the importance of establishing a “city upon a hill” as a model of Christian virtue.

Reasoning: These texts reveal that early American literature was often didactic, aiming to instruct and reinforce moral behavior aligned with religious principles. The Puritan worldview shaped not only personal morality but also the collective identity of the colonies, influencing the themes and purpose of early literary works.

Claim: The Literature of the Early Period Also Showed a Fascination with Nature and the New World

As explorers and settlers encountered vast and unfamiliar landscapes, their writings began to reflect a sense of wonder and reverence for the natural world. This fascination laid the groundwork for American transcendentalism and nature writing that would flourish later.

Evidence: Explorers’ Journals and Early Descriptions of America

Early explorers like John Smith, in his *The General History of Virginia* (1624), provided vivid descriptions of the landscapes, flora, fauna, and indigenous peoples they encountered. These writings often mixed admiration with a sense of conquest, but also laid the groundwork for later appreciation of American nature.

Additionally, Anne Bradstreet’s poetry often contained reflections on the natural environment, blending her Puritan faith with a sense of awe towards creation:

- Her poem “The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America” highlights her observations of the natural world and her spiritual reflections.

- Descriptions of the New World's beauty and bounty demonstrate a growing appreciation for the land itself.

Reasoning: These early texts show that, even amid struggles, writers were captivated by the landscape of America. This dual perspective of both awe and conquest influenced future American writers' approach to nature as a vital theme in literature.

Claim: Early American Literature Was Also Formative in Developing a Unique Cultural Identity

The writings from America's earliest days helped forge a distinctive cultural identity that distinguished itself from European traditions. This identity was rooted in themes of independence, self-reliance, and a collective destiny.

Evidence: The Concept of the "City upon a Hill" and Colonial Narratives

John Winthrop's famous sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630) articulated the idea of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a "city upon a hill," symbolizing a moral example for the world. This concept became a foundational idea for American exceptionalism and self-perception.

Similarly, colonial narratives often emphasized:

- The importance of hard work and self-reliance in establishing a new society.
- The pursuit of religious and personal freedom.
- A collective sense of mission and destiny to create a new nation.

Reasoning: These ideas helped shape a collective American identity rooted in values of independence, community, and divine purpose. Literature from this period served as both reflection and reinforcement of these ideals, establishing a foundation for future national literature.

Conclusion

In summary, American literature in its very beginning was a tapestry woven from the threads of exploration, religious faith, moral reflection, admiration of nature, and the forging of a new cultural identity. From indigenous oral traditions to the writings of Puritans, explorers, and early settlers, these foundational texts reveal a society in the process of defining itself amid challenges and opportunities. Through their focus on divine providence, morality, and the natural world, early American writers laid the groundwork for the diverse and dynamic literary landscape that would continue to evolve in the centuries to come. Understanding this early period is crucial to appreciating the roots of American literary identity and the enduring themes that continue to influence writers today.

Frequently Asked Questions

What characterized the earliest American literature during the colonial period?

Early American literature was primarily composed of religious writings, diaries, and sermons that reflected Puritan values and the settlers' experiences in establishing colonies.

How did Native American stories influence early American literature?

Native American oral traditions and stories contributed themes of nature, spirituality, and morality, serving as foundational cultural narratives that influenced later written works.

Who were some of the first notable American writers, and what did they write about?

Early writers like Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor focused on religious

devotion, personal reflection, and Puritan ideals, often expressing their faith and experiences through poetry.

What role did religion play in the earliest American literary works?

Religion was central, with much of the literature serving to reinforce Puritan beliefs, moral lessons, and spiritual reflection, often used to guide community life and personal conduct.

How did the Puritans' values influence the themes of early American literature?

Puritan values emphasized obedience, hard work, and divine providence, which were reflected in the literature's focus on morality, destiny, and the importance of faith.

In what ways did early American literature differ from European literature of the same period?

Early American literature was more focused on survival, religious expression, and the frontier experience, often written in a straightforward style, contrasting with the more ornate European literary traditions.

What is the significance of the 'C.E.R' format in understanding early American literature?

The C.E.R (Claim, Evidence, Reasoning) format helps analyze early American texts by encouraging critical thinking about the claims made in the literature, supporting them with evidence, and explaining their significance within the historical context.

Additional Resources

What Was American Literature Like In The Very Beginning? Put It In C.E.R

American literature's origins are a fascinating tapestry woven from the diverse cultures, histories, and voices that shaped the early colonies. When exploring what was American literature like in the very beginning, it's essential to analyze its characteristics through the lens of Claim, Evidence, and Reasoning (C.E.R). This approach helps us understand the context, themes, and influences that defined the nascent stages of American literary history. In this guide, we'll delve into the earliest forms of American literature, examining the claims about its nature, the evidence supporting these claims, and the reasoning that connects them to the broader cultural landscape.

Understanding the Foundations of Early American Literature

Before diving into the specifics, it's important to recognize that early American literature was heavily influenced by European traditions, indigenous storytelling, and the unique challenges faced by the settlers. The period roughly spans from the 17th century to the early 19th century, encompassing colonial writings, Native American oral traditions, and the beginnings of American literary identity.

Claim: Early American Literature Was Primarily Religious and Didactic

One of the most prominent features of early American literature was its focus on religion and moral instruction. The settlers brought their religious beliefs with them, which profoundly shaped their writings.

Evidence Supporting This Claim:

- Puritan Writings: The Puritans, who settled in New England, authored sermons, diaries, and histories emphasizing divine providence and moral righteousness. For example, John Winthrop's journal reflects a worldview centered on God's guidance.
- Sermons and Religious Texts: Figures like Jonathan Edwards delivered fiery sermons, such as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which aimed to inspire moral reflection and repentance.
- Pilgrim and Colonial Writings: Writings like William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" offer a narrative of divine intervention and manifest destiny.

Reasoning:

The dominance of religious themes in early American literature can be attributed to the settlers' desire to establish a moral society rooted in their faith. Literature served as a tool for moral guidance, ensuring the survival of their religious community and reinforcing their worldview.

Claim: Early American Literature Was Also Characterized by Exploration and Survival Narratives

Another key aspect was the emphasis on exploration, survival, and the relationship between humans and the wilderness.

Evidence Supporting This Claim:

- Exploration Accounts: Journals by explorers like Henry Hudson and Captain John Smith recount their voyages, encounters with indigenous peoples, and the challenges of establishing colonies.
- Pocahontas and Native Narratives: While often romanticized, stories like Pocahontas's interactions with settlers highlight early cross-cultural encounters.
- Settlement Diaries: William Bradford's writings document the hardships

faced by Pilgrims, including starvation, disease, and conflicts with Native Americans.

Reasoning:

These narratives served both as practical guides for future settlers and as myth-making tools that fostered a sense of adventure and resilience. They also reflect the early Americans' complex and often conflicted relationship with the land and indigenous peoples.

Claim: Native American Oral Traditions Were a Fundamental Part of Early Literary Culture

While much of the written record from early America is European in origin, Native American oral storytelling traditions played a crucial role.

Evidence Supporting This Claim:

- Oral Stories and Myths: Tribes shared creation stories, legends, and moral lessons orally, preserving their histories and spiritual beliefs.
- The Role of Oral Tradition: These stories were passed down through generations without written texts, emphasizing community, spirituality, and the natural world.
- Later Transcriptions: Some oral stories were eventually transcribed by early settlers or anthropologists, providing insights into indigenous perspectives.

Reasoning:

Native American oral traditions represent a form of literature that predates European colonization. Recognizing their significance expands the understanding of early American literary culture as diverse and multifaceted.

Claim: Early American Literature Was Limited in Formal Structure but Rich in Content and Purpose

Compared to later literary developments, early American writings often lacked sophisticated literary devices or formal structures but compensated with powerful content and purpose-driven narratives.

Evidence Supporting This Claim:

- Puritan Plain Style: Writers like Cotton Mather favored straightforward, unadorned language aimed at moral clarity rather than aesthetic beauty.
- Personal Diaries and Autobiographies: These often follow a simple chronological format, focusing on personal piety and divine favor.
- Public Documents and Treaties: These legal and political texts prioritized clarity and function over literary flourish.

Reasoning:

The pragmatic and religious priorities of early settlers influenced their writing style, emphasizing clarity and moral lessons over stylistic complexity. Their primary goal was instructive and preservative, rather than artistic.

Summarizing the Landscape of Early American Literature

In conclusion, what was American literature like in the very beginning can be summarized as follows:

- Religious and didactic: Literature was used to promote moral values and divine purpose.
- Exploration and survival-focused: Narratives chronicled the challenges of colonization and the wilderness.
- Diverse oral traditions: Native stories formed a foundational cultural narrative, often overlooked in written histories.
- Pragmatic and straightforward: Early writings prioritized clarity and purpose over stylistic complexity.

Final Thoughts: The Evolution from Beginnings to a Distinct Identity

While early American literature was deeply rooted in religious and survival themes, it laid the groundwork for a unique national voice. Over time, as the colonies grew and encountered new ideas, American writers began to explore individualism, democracy, and innovation—shaping a distinctly American literary identity.

Understanding the early period through the lens of Claim, Evidence, and Reasoning helps us appreciate the complexity and richness of the origins of American literature. It was a landscape marked by faith, resilience, cultural diversity, and the pursuit of a new identity—a narrative still unfolding today.

Whether you're a student, a reader, or a scholar, exploring these foundational elements offers a vital perspective on how American literature has evolved and what it continues to represent: a reflection of the nation's diverse roots and enduring spirit.

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