

## INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to define the beginning of American Literature. You have to agree upon three important parameters:

1. place
2. time
3. people

Referring to “place”, you have to keep in mind that Columbus meant the “whole” America what we know today as Canada, the USA and Latin-America. Nowadays, talking, thinking, and writing about American Literature, we allude to the United States of America (USA).

If we think about the “time” and the “people”, there is not one certain point in time, neither one particular people:

1. We could refer to 34,000 B.C., when the first hunters came to America without knowing they entered another continent, for the American and the Asian continent were connected by a land bridge named Beringia, today known as the Bering Sea.
2. We could also allude to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the Viking Leif Ericson went to what is today known as Newfoundland.
3. Moreover, there is the famous 1492, the year in which Christopher Columbus landed on one of the Bahama Islands and, shortly after that, on Hispaniola (Haiti and Dominican Republic).
4. In 1497, the Italian Giovanni Caboto, sailing for the English Crown and hence named John Cabot, was the first going on to land in the American mainland.
5. In 1499, another Italian named Amerigo Vespucci sailed to and around the whole Northern and Eastern coast of South-America and it were in 1507, when the German cartographer Waldseemüller who named the South-American continent, as well as in 1538, when the Dutch Mercator (actually Kremer) named the whole double-continent after his first name – America.

Keeping in mind that this is not a complete list of time and people belonging to those who went ashore, it is furthermore important to say that the languages used were English, Spanish, as well as regional Indian languages. Since we are interested in literature written in English, we take a closer look at the development of the English-speaking America.

### **“E pluribus unum”**

This Latin quote describes precisely the development undergone by the American people from the plurality of many different people coming from many different countries to a new world toward the heterogeneity of ONE PEOPLE.

### **Tasks:**

1. Sum up in one or two sentences the beginning of American Literature.
2. Find an example from your own environment that epitomizes the Latin citation.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT UP TO THE END OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The striking feature of all phases of colonial development was the lack of controlling influence by the English government.

### *“Homo americanus”*

The *homo americanus* was the so-called “self-made man” who took over the responsibility of his/her own development.

To begin with, the following characteristics marked 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century of American history:

1. There was a competition between England, Spain, and France as the main colonizers.
2. There were conflicts between them and the Indian population.
3. Social conflicts in Europe influenced American history.
4. In contrast to the Spaniards, the English sent salesmen instead of soldiers. Their aim was not to conquer but to trade – primarily, at least.
5. In the first decades, the new continent was not of so much value, hence abandoned by the Crown.
6. Though not being military primarily, wherever Indians disturbed the trade (and therefore wealth), they were driven away, or, if they refused, killed. Indians were always marginal subjects in American society. It was only in 1924, when they received the full American citizenship.

### The 17<sup>th</sup> century

Keeping this in mind, it all began in 1607, when the first people settled permanently at the East coast of America. Most of the settlers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were English; nonetheless, there were also Dutch, Swedes, Germans, and French, slaves from Africa, Spaniards, Italian, and Portuguese.

There were a couple of important achievements in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were crucial for the development and, finally, the establishment of a genuine American Literature. The dissemination of Literature, hence culture, would have been unthinkable without having set up the first printing press in Harvard in 1639. In the second half of the century, every town inhabiting more than 50 families<sup>1</sup> had to provide a grammar school<sup>2</sup> preparing for college. Therefore, illiteracy among the people decreased and in the 1680s, the first booksellers arrived and started the first bookstores. Whereas the foundation of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1636 was accessible to only a very few, the College of William and Mary in Virginia in 1693 as well as Yale University in 1701 had to deal with a much larger number of “studiosi”. It was probably also the case because of the establishment of schools, which began to teach who began to teach writing, reading, and keeping accounts. As a result, education spread all over the country.

This is quite an accomplishment if you keep in mind that settlement was established gradually and at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were only 250,000 people (in comparison to 240,000,000 today), distributed over all the conquered lands.

<sup>1</sup> The size of a family of that time included father, mother and twelve to fourteen children; hence a family consisted of approximately fifteen members. Considering fifty families per town, around 750 people were necessary to establish a school (cf. James M. Volo, Dorothy Denneen Volo (2007): Family Life in 17th- and 18th-century America. Westport. Pp. 149.)

<sup>2</sup> A *grammar school* is what is today known as “Gymnasium” in Germany or a “High School” in America.

On the other hand, the spreading and increase of education was necessary if you want to motivate people to settle on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. However, although America was on its way to its own identity, European life-style still marked the American ways of life.

Another aspect of this century was one most Americans probably do not dare to think of: the conquest. Not only the great accomplishments mentioned above marked the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Expulsion and brutal extermination of Indian tribes connote the time. So-called “settlers” acted with brutality and unscrupulousness without equal; it often peaked in genocide, not to mention the witch-hunts and trials in Salem Village, Massachusetts in 1692. The belief in witchcraft was widely spread in America as well as in Europe.

Coming to the New World and attempting to create a better one by e.g. a sense of mutual responsibility, i.e. “you give – you get” and vice versa, i.e. “you do not give – you will not get (anything)”, it turned out to be a much longer way than expected.

The way settlers saw themselves was in most cases of puritan belief. John Winthrop, a contemporary, expressed it like this: “some must be poor, some rich”. Thus, there was a clear-cut vertical hierarchy in their minds – reminiscences of Europe.

### **The 18<sup>th</sup> century**

The above stated belief in witchcraft, unfortunately, survived the change of century and it would need more than another hundred years (up to 1830) until America overcame it.

Around 1730, the (first) “Great Awakening” (of four) took place, meaning that the people were afraid of the devil lurking around and among them. Thus, it was not only the faith in divinity but also in the underworld that was, from today’s enlightened point of view, hard to comprehend.

During the process of popularization, more than 10,000,000 African slaves were deported to America over the Atlantic Ocean. The first African slaves were brought by Spanish and Portuguese conquerors in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Socially, they had a slightly better position than Indians did, but, in the end, white people treated all of them badly. At least, the northern states (.....) abolished slavery in 1744, but they played a key role in agriculture. It was a “war” that lasted far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even today, racism, especially against African Americans, is on the political agenda.

On the other hand, great achievements marked 18<sup>th</sup> century America that developed from a mere colony that “co”-existed to make life better in Europe, to a superior first conglomerate of colonies (later: united states), gaining their independence from Europe on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1776. They got their first elected president in 1789 – Mr George Washington.

#### ***“French Revolution”***

(1789-1799) The French Revolution endeavoured to establish a democratic state, getting rid of aristocracy (in leading positions) while putting the bourgeoisie into power. The slogan was “Liberté – Égalité – Fraternité”.

Liberté (Eng. freedom) referred to the basic right that all men are created equal and as long as you do not harm anybody with what you do, you can do it.

Égalité (Eng. equality) applies to the realization of the fact that all men gave to obey the law equally, no matter which social class you are coming from.

Fraternité (Eng. fraternity, brotherliness) was a request to the third class to join the revolution.

On their way to freedom, they achieved e.g. the Stamp Act in 1765 (“No taxation without representation”). There was also the “Boston Tea Party” in 1773 in which Americans disguised as Indians threw more than 300 boxes with tea overboard, because the English merchant refused to pay taxes. The Empire was furious, but, finally, unable to force the people in America to obey *their* rules. In 1783, Great Britain recognized America’s independence and four years later, America established its first constitution, valid in all thirteen colonies. In December 1791, the states passed their Bill of Rights, containing the 10 amendments to the constitution, a document that guaranteed (and still does) e.g. free speech, freedom of press and religion along with freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, etc. The probably most well-known amendment is the second one that allows all Americans to have weapons<sup>3</sup>.

## GENRES AND AUTHORSHIP

In the beginning 17<sup>th</sup> century, you would not find the typical genres we know today, namely narrative, poetry, drama. The first “American” genres were journals, letters, occasional poetry, sermons, as well as historical and political speeches and translations of biblical texts, plus puritan poetry. Especially the last two were highly didactic and closely bound to further the aristocracy of the time who tried to maintain the co-government of religion and secularity.

The first genuine American genre was the “captivity narrative” which was the only public enterable genre. The author told about how s/he got caught and was treated by the Indians during their capture and, of course, how they were liberated by divine power.

It was not before the outgoing 18<sup>th</sup> century that autobiographies of “Americans” appeared for the first time. In addition, on the ground of the French Revolution (1789), Olaudah Equiano invented the “black slave narrative” having been the first independent Afro-American genre. Finally, travelogues mainly by Columbus, Cortez, Hudson, Drake, and Champlain expressed the scruples of the imperial extension.

Authors of the North (New England) were priests, magistrates, teachers in the service of the theocratic project. Sophisticated gentlemen wrote in the South. The settlement of compositors along with the foundation of magazines was promoted with the aim of a wide and secular public. Formally, they all transferred English writing tradition.

## TOPICS

This part refers to the content, meaning what was on the minds of the first settlers. It is not a mere list of themes.

**IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**, settlers felt ambiguous about what they found: on the one hand, they were immigrants discovering the beauty of untouched and paradise-like nature; on the other, to continue migrating they needed to prove economic value. Moreover, they brought a sophisticated culture to the Native Americans. This polarity was a difficult issue to overcome.

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<sup>3</sup> “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”

Another important point is that the settlers were aware of making history. Particularly religion played a key role. The creation of a new world meant the liberation from the old at the same time. They perceived themselves as a chosen people – chosen from God, of course. Puritans were the most influential group, though there were also Protestants. However, since there were many people differing about what is right and wrong. Conflicts and disagreement were predestined.

### “Calvinism”

Confession that goes back to John Calvin (actually: Jean Cauvin; 10 July 1509 – 27 May 1564). It demands a church order with four authorities: pastors for sermons, consistories for court, deacons for social concerns, and doctors for education. Due to its rigorousness, it led to many death sentences because of faith deviation. The bible is their only source and standard of faith. The difference to Lutheranism is theory of double predestination: salvation and damnation. This leads to the probation pursuit (Bewährungsstreben). Calvinists furthermore refuse the image of God.

### “Puritanism”

Since 1564, Calvinists are referred to as Puritans. It derives from Latin *purus*, which means “pure”, “clean” in a moral sense. It also alludes to the purification from the Roman-Catholic Church. Puritans are followers of the strict and prude conduct of life.

### “Protestantism”

Protestantism arose from the reformation movement, which was a movement of renewing the church between 1517 (Thesenanschlag) and 1648 (end of the Thirty Years’ War), leading to split the church into various confessions. John Calvin and Martin Luther (10 November 1483 – 18 February 1546) were two key figures. Protestantism protested against clerical abuse and indulgence. Main characteristics were the denial of the formation divine grace through human institutions (Papacy, Priesthood) along with doubts as to the validity of ecclesiastical tradition. The word of God (= Bible) was the only standard, even if scientific research lead to new interpretations repeatedly (demystification).

At first, of course, there was the *translation studii*, the transfer of cultural knowledge from East to West. Early texts dealt with practical questions concerning daily life. Settlers feared the error of the eschatological aim (death – resurrection – Last Judgment – eternal life). Diaries tell about discomfort, weaknesses, illnesses due to lack of knowledge and undersupply. People expressed their religious chosenness by means of social status. Mary Rowland, for example, asks in 1682 who has the actual right to have the land: the natives who are seen as unnatural and diabolic, or the chosen settlers.

Nevertheless there were also people who doubted the divine chosenness: Anne Hutchinson wrote in 1638 against an inner enemy referring to the puritans; Roger Williams questions the God-given right to annex the unknown lands and is driven into emigration; John Eliot waves in 1654 between egalitarian and discriminating points of view.

As we can see so far, there were many different opinions arguing for or against the settlement. The hunch of inauthenticity was omnipresent, for settlers were praying and pretending to do good deeds on the one hand, on the other, they tortured and slaved the Indian tribes, killed them brutally. They also had to deal with a high rate of child mortality, epidemics, an unsafe economy, and possible poverty.

**IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**, “American” authors had emancipated from England and they began to “write back”. They became more self-confident as you can read in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*

(1702), in which they described the colonies not as inferior but superior to England. They wrote ironic, sarcastic texts, as well as parodies to underpin their position.

Comte de Buffon claimed the American continent to be less life-promoting by nature referring to plants, animals and humans. Ebenezer Cooke had the same point of view when writing about bestial humans without any culture, order, or justice at all.

In the course of emancipation and political autonomy, women started to write discussing their right to participation; first networks arise.

They also accuse the, until then, *natural* slavery, alluding to Indians and Africans. It was Benjamin Franklin who felt “ambiguous”: On the one hand, he wrote against slavery, on the other hand, he kept slaves on his farm. In this context, John Wilkins questioned the legality of unlimited capitalism and utters first approaches of ecological thinking. He steps significantly back from slavery.

In the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the wish for democracy arises and culminates, finally, in the independence of 1776.

**Task:**

Draw a mind map in order to outline the most important facts about the beginning of (English speaking) American Literature.