
M.A. English

Part II

Course III

AMERICAN POETRY AND DRAMA

BLOCK

I

INTRODUCTION



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AMERICAN POETRY AND DRAMA

BLOCK I

INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

This course attempts to focus on the important poets that you should read if you need to know about American Poetry. We have also included a few poems in the Appendix, which you can read before you start studying the Units written on them. This course also includes some of the American dramatists who have portrayed the growth of this genre in America. Do try and read all these plays too.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This first block in your course on American Literature, will take you through the formation of the country we now know as The United States of America, right up to the nineteenth century when American Literature came into its own. This block will deal with the literature produced by the colonies, and then the newly formed nation. Major works, if any, which do belong to this early period (from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century) will be dealt with genre wise in the respective blocks on Poetry and Drama.

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Unit 1

COLONIAL AMERICA

1.0 Objectives

This unit will give you an overview of the discovery of North America and take you through the formation of the colonies which went into the making of the nation - the USA.

1.1 Historical Background

1.1.1 The Discovery of North America

Actually it was in 1000 CE¹ that Leif Eriksson made three landfalls on the North American continent. But there is no other reference to the discovery of this continent until Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), an Italian explorer, sponsored by Spain, landed in North America in 1492. This new world came to the knowledge of Europe and was a land that had been inhabited for more than 20,000 years before it was discovered. Columbus's original attempt was to find a new route to India and China, known as "the Indies". When he landed in North America in the Bahamas, in 1492, he referred to the residents he encountered there as "Indians" in the mistaken belief that he had reached the Indian Ocean. Although Columbus's mistake was soon recognized, the name remained. For centuries the natives were collectively called "Indians". Do remember that "Indian" in these units refers to this Native American population.

Columbus was followed by other explorers like John Cabot (1450-1499) an Italian born English explorer, who, in 1497, reached the east coast of what is now Canada; Giovanni da Verrazzano, an Italian born French explorer, who, in 1524, explored the east coast from Florida to Newfoundland; and Jacques Cartier who, in 1534, on behalf of the French, reached the St Lawrence River. The explorers called the land they came to the "New World". They found the land to be rich in resources and natural beauty. Convinced by the report of the explorers there was a great influx of migrants to this New World. The exploration soon came to signify conquest. The drive for inhabiting this prosperous land was

¹ CE stands for what was called AD., and it means Common Era. Therefore BC becomes BCE – Before the Common Era Both BC/AD and BCE/CE are numerically equivalent.

primarily its economic potential and paradisiacal atmosphere. However there were other reasons too which we will be looking at shortly in the next section.

1.1.2 Colonization

During the sixteenth century the Spaniards established colonies on the coasts of South and Central America with a desire for acquiring precious metals. Likewise the French and English also explored the Americas, displaced Native American cultures, and established colonies in the Western Hemisphere. The Portuguese, made their first settlements in America on agricultural principles. This colonization resulted in a conglomeration of cultures, though Native American cultures often suffered the most in these early exchanges. During the sixteenth century the Spanish and Portuguese had established themselves in nearly every available region from the northern line of Mexico to the southern extremity of the continent. The seventeenth century however was destined to be the era of settlement of this important region, mainly by the English and French. In the French colonial regions, the focus of economy was the fur trade with the natives. At this point of time Captain John Smith (1580–1631), an English soldier, explorer and author, established the first permanent English settlement in North America at Jamestown in Virginia. He was the leader of the Virginia Colony who came in the hope of finding gold. He was sponsored by wealthy Englishmen to establish common stock companies. Smith wrote the first book in English in America in 1608, called *A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents of Note as hath happened in Virginia since the First Planting of that Colony*. Smith's books and maps may have been as important as his deeds, as they encouraged more Englishmen and women to follow the trail he had blazed and to colonize the New World. He gave the name New England to that region. This name came to be used when referring to the four early British colonies: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire (in the 1700s the states of Maine and Vermont were included).

In 1609, Henry Hudson, born in the 1560s, an English sea explorer, discovered the present site of New York, and the river bears his name. He was, at that time working for the Dutch East India Company, and therefore laid the foundations for the Dutch colonization of that area.

It was in 1619 that the ship *Mayflower* with 102 pilgrims – mainly English Puritans – landed in Massachusetts. It also brought to

America its first black slaves. It also brought William Bradford, who signed the Mayflower Compact, the first governing document of the Plymouth colony, which established the beginnings of democracy in Massachusetts. Bradford was elected Governor and re-elected thirty-three times. His book entitled *History of Plymouth Plantation* was published in 1646.

The Puritans settled north of the Plymouth Colony in Boston, thus forming Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Trade with the natives was an important part of English and French colonial policy, but they also heavily promoted settlement and development. Joint-stock companies were formed to gather funding for colonization through the sale of public stock. These companies were responsible for most English colonization throughout the seventeenth century. Samuel Sewall wrote a diary recording the history of Boston between 1675 and 1729. In 1700, he published *The Selling of Joseph*, a booklet against slavery.

Many groups on the other hand, came to the Americas searching for the right to practice their religion without persecution. Settlers to these colonies included Anglicans, Dutch Calvinists, English Puritans, English Catholics, German and Swedish Lutherans, and others of various nationalities. The lure of cheap land, religious freedom and the right to improve themselves with their own hand was very attractive to those who wished to escape from persecution and poverty.

On the other hand there was forced migration of another kind; firstly due to exploitation of slaves and secondly due to loss of indigenous population due to disease. Slavery existed in the Americas, prior to the presence of Europeans, as the Natives often captured and held other tribes' members as captives. As the native populations declined (significantly from forced exploitation and careless murder), they were often replaced by Africans imported through a large commercial slave trade. The cultural and political instability attending these losses appeared to have been of substantial aid in the efforts of various colonists to seize the great wealth in resources of the indigenous societies.

On the whole, colonization had a disastrous effect on the native population. War, slavery, and starvation claimed many lives. European settlements physically displaced numerous tribes, setting in motion the sad fate of Native Americans throughout American history.

1.1.3 Native American Oral Tradition

Activity A

Jot down a few lines about orally transmitted literature. What would have been the themes, length, language, content and form of such orally transmitted material? Many of us are familiar with the oral transmission of folktales and myths. Do you know or remember any of the Indian (Bharat) oral cultures? You may also ponder about the backgrounds of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Get to know the origin of *Spiderman*, for example!

Discussion

Most societies were oral societies as they were either non-literate or semi-literate ones. Their history was not written but orally kept in the form of poetry, songs, proverbs, stories, narratives, dances, various ritual lyrics, chants, myths, fairy tales, humorous anecdotes, incantations, riddles, epics, and legendary histories. Adivasis for example have a rich oral tradition. All their poetry and songs pass from one generation to the next orally. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are also said to be part of oral tradition before they were written down.

Many oral traditions are highly structured and are told faithfully without alteration. They can be as reliable as other non-oral ways of recording and passing on experiences. In this way, the force of oral tradition could continue through generations although small details in the telling changed. Because of this, oral traditions which relate past events and have been passed down through time cannot be dismissed simply as "myth". Ideas about truth, rationality, logic, causality, and ways of knowing the world are contextualized within all societies and are respected as such in their cultural contexts

Oral traditions can be categorized into legends, myths, folktales, and memorates. You may want to know what a memorate is. A memorate is an account of a personal experience or encounter with the supernatural, such as a ghost story or other expression of the spirit to a human being. Legends are stories that appear to happen within the realm of possibility. Myths as you know are the accounts which portray the earliest possible time, including creation stories, and the organization of the world and society. In contrast to other types of oral traditions, folktales are acknowledged as things which did not really happen, but are useful stories for providing moral or social lessons or for amusement. The Brothers Grimm also said that folktales which were historically

grounded were legends. “Once upon a time” stories which involve fictional characters are folktales. If you are familiar with Indian folklore, Panchatantra Tales and Jataka Tales are examples. *Spider Stories* also account to this category.

In the *Outline of American Literature* put out by the Embassy of the United States of America on the web in 2006, the chapter beginning “Early American and Colonial Period to 1776” says

American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America before the first Europeans arrived. As a result, Native American oral literature is quite diverse. Narratives from quasi-nomadic hunting cultures like the Navajo are different from stories of settled agricultural tribes such as the pueblo-dwelling Acoma; the stories of northern lakeside dwellers such as the Ojibwa often differ radically from stories of desert tribes like the Hopi.

The stories told as a prelude to the creation myth vary from tribe to tribe, such as Wenebojo and the Wolves (*Wisconsin Ojibwa*) and Creation of the World (*Wisconsin Ojibwa*). In one well-known creation story, told with variation among many tribes, a turtle holds up the world. Hence the Indian name for America “Turtle Island”. The Mexican tribe revered the divine Quetzalcoatl, a god of the Toltecs and Aztecs, and some tales of a high god or culture were told elsewhere.

These American Indian tribes had religious freedom and worshipped animals, plants, or sacred persons as their Gods. Similarly the way they chose to govern their own tribes ranged from democracies to councils of elders to theocracies. These tribal variations enter into the oral literature as well. American Indian stories chose to look upon nature with awe and reverence, giving equal importance to the role of Mother Earth. The main characters of these stories appeared from nature – animals, plants, mountains, and rivers.

Thus far we have looked at what Native American literature was like. Now we need to consider the amount of contribution the explorers have made to the so called American literature as it is seen now, as the authors were not Native Americans but migrants from almost all possible European nations.

1.1.4 Colonial Literature

Now let us look at the literature that had been produced in America both by the natives as well as by the colonizers who came to inhabit the land. Despite the reliance of some cultures on written records and accounts, oral traditions are important to every society. American literature is one such example. It begins with the orally transmitted tales of American Indian cultures. There was no written literature in North America before the first Europeans arrived.

Columbus and other early European explorers, in trying to accommodate strange sights and experiences to familiar signs and legends, were beginning a story of American literature - a story, that is, of encounters between cultures. Not of least importance here was Columbus's account of vegetation and native inhabitants of his earthly Paradise. Richard Grey in his book *A History of American Literature* available online says:

The American writer has to write in and of a world of permeable borders and change. Although he was hardly aware of it, Columbus was forging a narrative that was neither precisely Old World (because of the sights he had seen), nor exactly New World either (because of the signs he had used), but a mix or synthesis of both. Telling of meetings between strangers, oddly syncretic in its language and division, it was in its own way an American tale he was telling.

One such example is Columbus's journal *Epistola*, printed in 1493, which recounts the trip's result when the first sighting of land took place. During the colonial period, the Spanish and French had two of the strongest colonial literary traditions. Discussions of early American literature commonly include texts by Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca and Samuel de Champlain alongside English language texts by Thomas Harriot and John Smith. As we have already seen under the Colonization section, North America was largely a series of British colonies owing to the large immigration to Boston in the 1630s. Added to this, the high articulation of

Puritan cultural ideals and the early establishment of a college and a printing press in Cambridge, the New England colonies have often been regarded as the centre of early American literature. These events made English the lingua franca for the colonies at large. Therefore America's literary tradition begins linked to the broader tradition of English literature. However, unique American characteristics and the breadth of its production usually cause it to be considered a separate path and tradition.

The first century, and more, of American literature is overwhelmingly dominated by the works of the New Englanders. New England felt that it represented something specific and unique in the history of commonwealths, and its insistence on its spiritual identity was as firm as its insistence on its political charters. They had the responsibility not only of preserving their experiment but of furthering the revolution that might reproduce it universally. In this effort, writing played an important role. Their concept demanded a high degree of maturity and a sense of responsibility on the part of an informed people. .

Now we shall get to know some of the prominent writers and their works and the broad themes of their writings. Some of the American literature was pamphlets and writings extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonist audience. Captain John Smith could be considered the first American author with his works: Along with his first work in 1608, mentioned earlier in this unit, he also wrote *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624).

The religious disputes that prompted settlement in America were also topics of early writing. A journal written by John Winthrop, *The History of New England*, discussed the religious foundations of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the 1630s and 40s and was published only in 1790 by Noah Webster.

Of the second generation of New England settlers, Cotton Mather (1663-1728) son of Increase Mather, was one of the most versatile, influential and prolific writers of prose. He produced 500 books and pamphlets. He stands out as a theologian and historian, who wrote the history of the colonies with a view to God's activity in their midst and to connecting the Puritan leaders with the great heroes of the Christian faith. He was also a Puritan religious leader of this era, and is often remembered for his role in the Salem witch trials, which were trials of people accused of witchcraft. He published his book *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft* in 1689. His monumental work *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a

collection of seven books was published in 1702. It was an encyclopedic classic which recounted the chronological history of New England.

New England managed to hold on to the religious emphasis of its writing, even after the church had begun to lose its fullest authority. One of the greatest writers who appeared in the twilight of the old Puritanism was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). He (along with George Whitefield) represented the Great Awakening, a religious revival in the early 18th century that asserted strict Calvinism. In earlier approaches to American literary history, Jonathan Edwards had been cited chiefly as the author of a terrifying sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), which he delivered in the midst of the Great Awakening. It was Edwards' increasing emphasis on metaphysics that brought him recognition as the first great philosophic intelligence in American history. In the 20th century, with a revival of interest in theology and philosophy, Edwards' chief fame lies in such works as *The Freedom of the Will* (in full, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of the Will which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, 1754), where his defense of the doctrine of necessity led him to such brilliance of philosophical speculation that a modern critic like Perry Miller can say that "he was one of America's five or six major artists."

Alongside the writings of the New England colonies, southern literature is represented by the diary of William Byrd of Virginia, as well as by *The History of the Dividing Line*, published in 1728, which detailed the expedition to survey the swamp between Virginia and North Carolina but which also commented on the different lifestyles of the Native Americans and the white settlers in the area. In a similar book, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West*, published in 1791, William Bartram described in great detail the Southern landscape and the Native American peoples whom he encountered. Bartram's book was very popular in Europe, being translated into German, French and Dutch.

In 1682, William Penn established Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love" and the first school was set up in this place in 1683. In 1704, America's first newspaper, the *Boston Newsletter* was brought out from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Though New Englanders thought writing was a necessary activity within their holy commonwealth, there was much that militated

against the composition of poetry. Their conception of the poet's office emphasized content and not form; edification, not beauty. They were mainly metaphysical poets. Their reputation suffered when the use of conceits went out of fashion. The first Book of verse, *The Whole Book of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English Metre* (1640) better known as *The Bay Psalm Book*, was written by Thomas Weld, John Eliot and Richard Mather. The book is comparable to similar attempts of Donne and Milton. However, the translators' intention was not to create great literature but to create hymns that could be used in worship.

Among lyric poets, the most important figure was, Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) who wrote personal poems about her family and home life. She was one of the most important figures in the history of American Literature as she is considered the first American poet. You will read more about her in the block on poetry.

Most gifted of the Puritan poets Edward Taylor (1645-1729) left poems of remarkable intensity, striking and often sustained imagery, and a certain American homeliness. His writings were belatedly found in the School of Hebert, Crashaw and Quarles. Some of his poems are: *Huswifery*, *The Ebb and Flow*, *The Glory of and the Grace in the Church Set Out*, *Meditation Eight and Meditation Three*. Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705) a parson wrote the most terrifying poem of the colonial period – and by far the most popular: *The Day of Doom* (1662). It was written in galloping fourteeners with internal rhyme, a measure suited to popular appeal and easy memorization, but not to the subject. In this poem he breaks with rigid Calvinism. Despite its crude form, this poem has flashes of vitality and imagination. His other works are *Gods Controversy with New England* and *Meat out of the Eater*.

As the colonies moved towards their break with England, (which we will be looking at in a more detailed fashion in Unit 2) perhaps one of the most important discussions of American culture and identity came from the French immigrant St. Jean de Crevecoeur. His *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782, addressed the question: "What is an American?" by moving between praise for the opportunities and peace offered in the new society and recognition that the solid life of the farmer must rest uneasily between the oppressive aspects of urban life (with its luxuries built on slavery) and the lawless aspects of the frontier, where the lack of social structures leads to the loss of civilized living. You will read more about St Jean de Crevecoeur in the next unit.

Activity B

At this point, let us pause and think – what is the language these early Americans used? What is American English? Who is an American? How did America get its name?

Discussion

From what you have read in this unit, you must have observed that to start with, there were only the Native Americans with their oral traditions. People came from all over Europe to this land which promised hope and a better life than they had been exposed to. They came from England, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Germany, and Ireland. They also brought with them Africans who provided them with cheap labour.

The point to note is that most of the colonists were English and so the language that took hold in the USA was English, but with additions and modifications, creating a language and literature that came to be known as American English. The colonists started borrowing words from the indigenous population to describe the local flora, fauna or landscapes, or articles that they used as English had no equivalents. Examples of such words are ‘raccoon’, ‘moccasin’ and ‘wigwam’. They also borrowed from each other’s languages to make for easier communication. Some examples of these borrowings are ‘cookie’ and ‘stoop’ from Dutch; ‘kindergarten’ and ‘hamburger’ from German; ‘portage’ and ‘prairie’ from French; and ‘barbeque’ and ‘canyon’ from Spanish. The accents changed as did the vocabulary. There are books available on the differences between American English and British English which you might like to read.

As you have read so far, the only indigenous Americans were the Native Americans, the “Indians” whom Christopher Columbus wrote about. Most Americans had as their ancestors, immigrants from Europe and Africa, those who came and colonized bits of the land, starting in the fifteenth century. The next unit will tell you how they all merged to become what we know now as American, which term refers to citizenship and not to its ethnicity.

As for the name America, it came from an Italian explorer and cartographer, who was the first to disabuse Columbus’s notion – Columbus thought he had landed in Asia. He had actually landed on a new continent. And the name of this explorer who proved that Columbus had landed on a new continent was Amerigo Vespucci and the continent was called America, the Latinized version of Amerigo.

1.2 Summing Up

In this unit, we looked at the discovery of America which was a result of many explorations and expeditions, resulting in colonization of this continent. We also read about the Native Americans and their oral traditions and the writings of the explorers who wrote about their different experiences and their religious convictions, which form both the New England Literature as well as the Southern Literature, inclusive of their poetry and their prose writings.

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