

American Literature in
the Age of Reason
(1750-1800)

The literary implications of the American Revolution

Military victory and political independence from Britain spanned nationalistic hopes for a great national literature. Yet except for political writing, few works of note appeared during or soon after the Revolution.

The search for a native literature became an obsession. The copyright law of 1790, which allowed pirating, was nationalistic in intent. Drafted by Noah Webster, the great lexicographer who later compiled an American dictionary, the law protected only the work of American authors; it was felt that English writers should look out for themselves.

- In an age of revolution, literature was of course influenced by political, non-fiction texts: e.g. Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" (1776)

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

- Emphasis on logic and rational thought; emphasis on the good of the community, not the individual
- Rise of literary magazines
- Rise of the autobiographical genre
- “Captive Narrative” as a unique form of literature found in the colonies
- The rise of newspapers across the country
- Almanacs were very popular

KEY WRITERS



- Ben Franklin:
Philosopher, painter
scientist, publisher,
legislator, and diplomat.
- “The first American”
- The Autobiography
(1791)



Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (1753-1813)

- “Farmer’s letters”: *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782)
 - a series of letters that celebrate the independence of the yeoman farmer from the hierarchy and corruption of the Old World
 - Crèvecoeur illustrates the idealized version of a free society, a virtuous, independent country made of free-holding honest farmers, and anticipated the idea of America as a “melting-pot”



Phillis Wheatley

On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
Their colour is a diabolic die.
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd and join th'angelic train.

'The first
African-American
to print a book
(of poetry)'

(1773)

Most of the literature written in America during the Age of Reason was, understandably, rooted in reality rather than in the imagination. The best minds of this period were concentrating on social, political, and scientific improvements. As an agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly, Franklin lived in London in the 1750's, representing the interests of Pennsylvania. A decade later he was back in London lobbying for the Colonies in their dispute with Britain, hoping to bring about a reconciliation that would prevent war. In 1800, Jefferson was elected America's third president. A determined opponent of federal power, Jefferson was nevertheless responsible for one of the most sweeping federal actions of his age—the Louisiana Purchase. 1750-1800. Romanticism, Dark Romanticism, Anti-Transcendentalism, American Gothic. 1800-1865. Transcendentalism. 1840-1860. The Beat Generation was a small group of authors whose literature explored and influenced American culture in the post-World War II era. The Beats were against the prudery of their parents' generation and promoted sex and sexuality as healthy topics of discussion. Beat hipsters defied modest America with their hedonistic bohemianism and celebration of nonconforming creativity. The Age of Reason Rationalism is the belief that human beings can arrive at truth by using reason, rather than by relying on the authority of the past, on religious faith, or on intuition. 8 The Age of Reason Smallpox Plague April 1721, a ship from the West Indies docked in Boston Harbor. It brought sugar, molasses, and smallpox. 9 The Age of Reason Smallpox Plague Puritan minister Cotton Mather stated, "Let us not look to sin as a cause of sickness." Mather had heard of a Turkish physician who had a seemingly illogical solution called inoculation. 10 The Age of Reason Smallpox Plague Cotton Mather inoculated 300 people; only six of his patients died.