

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)