

UNIT 1: The Literature of Colonial America

Semester 4 - Week 1

Section 2: American Literature

Unit 1: The Literature of Colonial America

Time allotted: 1 to 2 sessions

Weekly Workload : 1 hour 30 mn

Description:

This unit seeks to study the body of works written in America from the period of its discovery to its independence. The study covers accounts of exploration, religious Diaries, and pamphlets written by soldiers, religious figures, and political men.

Objectives:

1. To describe the situation in America during the period of the settlements
2. Analysis of different forms of writing (other than novels)
3. Literary analysis of non-fiction and historical texts
4. Study of the basic principles of life in America which later became the centre of the American Dream

Pre-requisites: A good knowledge of the history of America, merely the period of its discovery, the settlements, the puritan experience, the war, and the independence

Lesson Plan

- Study of a few excerpts from the accounts of exploration with focus on the language and its implications
- analysis of the soldiers discourse and comparison with historical facts
- emphasis on the idea of propaganda
- Study of the discourse of the religious diary
- Study of the pamphlet and implicit meanings in "Common Sense"

Lecture 1: Overview of the Colonial Literature in America

Colonial Literature as a term refers to the body of works written in America during the colonial period. These were not works of fiction but **reports of exploration and settlement** written by soldiers and explorers to describe the situation in America to the monarchs who sponsored their expeditions and to attract more immigrants to move from Europe to the New Land. Such texts had a European belonging rather than

American because their authors were colonists who were still British in origin. The only thing American about such reports was the location.

In the year 1606 the first expedition towards America started from Britain under the name of King Jame I, the expedition included adventurers and explorers whose mission was to discover the country and to build settlements. They landed in Virginia and established the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown.

The colony faced a number of hardships and was then led by Captain John Smith (1580 – 1631) who became a figure in what is known as **Captivity narratives**. He was named president of the colony in 1608. His reports of exploration are the first American literary texts to be written in English.

Smith's first work was a letter sent from Virginia titled "A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents in Virginia". He also wrote *A Description of New England* and *The General History of Virginia*, where he depicted an attractive image of America to attract more settlers. He described it as the land of plenty and wealth, and a paradise which attracted thousands of settlers, including the Puritans who travelled to the continent in search for religious freedom. His reports might have been one of the first texts to build the idea of the American Dream.

The **Settlers' reports** were written:

- To justify the expeditions and settlements
- These reports were propagandas to attract future immigrants to the continent
- To officially claim the newly discovered territories on behalf of the monarchs who supported their journeys
- To outline the geographical and economic circumstances for future settlers and serve them as guides

Other forms of literature included the **Captivity Narratives**, such as Mary Rowlandson's "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson". These accounts described the experiences of colonists by Native Americans during conflicts.

Analysis of an excerpt from The General History of Virginia by Captain John Smith

From The General History of Virginia by Captain John Smith

The Third Book

Chapter I

It might well be thought a country so fair (as Virginia is) and a people so tractable (as the Indians are) would long ere this have been quietly possessed, to the satisfaction of the adventurers and the eternizing of the memory of those that effected it. But because the world does see a default, this following treatise shall give satisfaction to all indifferent readers how the business has been carried whereby no doubt they will easily understand an answer to their question...

Captain Bartolomeo Gosnold, one of the first movers of this plantation, having many years solicited many of his friends but found small assistance, at last prevailed with some gentlemen, as Captain John Smith, Master Edward Maria Wingfield, Master Robert Hunt, and divers others, who depended a year upon his projects; but nothing could be effected till by their great charge and industry it came to be apprehended by certain of the nobility, gentry and merchants, so that his Majesty by his letter patent gave commission for establishing councils to direct here, and to govern and to execute there.

On the 19th of December, 1606 we set sail from Blackwall ...

We watered at the Canaries; we traded with the savages at Dominica; three weeks we spent in refreshing ourselves among these West India isles; in Guadaloupe we found a bath so hot as in it we boiled pork as well as over the fire. And at a little isle called Monito, we took from the bushes with our hands nearly two hogsheads full of birds in three or four hours. In Nevis, Mona and the Virgin isles, we spent some time, where, with a loathsome beast like a crocodile, called an iguana, tortoises, pelicans, parrots and fishes, we daily feasted.

Gone from thence in search of Virginia ... the first land they made they called Cape Henry, where thirty of them recreating themselves on shore were assaulted by five savages who hurt two of the English very dangerously.

Newport, Smith and twenty others were sent to discover the head of the river. By divers small habitations they passed; in six days they arrived at a town called Powhatan, consisting of some twelve houses pleasantly seated on a hill, before it three fertile isles, about it many of their cornfields; the place is very pleasant and strong by nature; of this place the prince is called Powhatan and his people Powhatans. To this place the river is navigable, but higher within a mile, by reason of the rocks and isles, there is not passage for a small boat; this they call the Falls. The people in all parts kindly entreated them, till being returned within twenty miles of Jamestown.

Chapter II

The new president and Martin, being little beloved, of weak judgement in dangers, and less industry in peace, committed the managing of all things abroad to Captain Smith, who, by his own example, good words, and fair promises, set some to mow, others to

bind thatch, some to build houses, others to thatch them, himself always bearing the greatest task for his own share, so that in short time he provided most of them lodgings, neglecting any for himself.

The Spaniards never more greedily desired gold than he (Smith) victual, nor his soldiers more to abandon the country than he to keep it. But (he found) plenty of corn in the river of Chickahominy, where hundreds of savages in divers places stood with baskets expecting his coming. And now the winter approaching, the rivers became so covered with swans, geese, ducks, and cranes that we daily feasted with good bread , Virginia peas, pumpkins, and persimmons, fish, fowl, and divers sorts of wild beasts as fat as we could eat them, so that none of our tuftaffaty humorists desired to go for England.