

colonial american literary criticism

The study of colonial American literary criticism is a fascinating journey into the intellectual and cultural foundations of a nascent nation. We'll delve into how early American writers and thinkers grappled with literary forms, themes, and the very purpose of writing in a new world, exploring the nascent development of critical thought that shaped both literary production and societal values. This comprehensive exploration will uncover the key figures, prevalent ideologies, and evolving methodologies that characterized colonial American literary criticism, offering a detailed look at how early Americans understood and evaluated their own burgeoning literature. We will examine the influences of European traditions, the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the colonial experience, and the eventual emergence of distinct American voices and critical perspectives, all while highlighting the significance of these early dialogues for understanding subsequent American literary history.

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Early Influences and European Roots

Colonial American literary criticism did not emerge in a vacuum. It was deeply intertwined with the literary and intellectual traditions of Europe, particularly England. Early colonial writers and thinkers were educated within these existing frameworks, and their critical perspectives often reflected the dominant modes of literary analysis prevalent in the metropole. This meant that notions of classical rhetoric, neo-classical aesthetics, and prevailing religious and philosophical doctrines significantly shaped how texts were produced, interpreted, and judged. Think of it like transplanting a sapling; it carries the DNA of its parent tree, but it also begins to adapt to its new soil and climate. This early critical landscape was characterized by a strong emphasis on moral instruction, didacticism, and the imitation of established literary models.

The very definition of what constituted "literature" in the colonial period was heavily influenced by these European antecedents. Works were often assessed based on their adherence to established genres like sermons, captivity narratives, histories, and poetry, and their success was measured by their ability to convey moral truths or engage in learned discourse. The critical impulse was often less about subjective interpretation and more about discerning the underlying moral or theological significance of a text, a practice that would evolve significantly over time.

The Puritan Influence on Literary Thought

The Puritan settlements, particularly in New England, exerted a profound and lasting influence on the early development of American literary sensibilities and, by extension, its critical discourse. For the Puritans, literature was not merely an aesthetic pursuit; it was a vital tool for spiritual edification and the reinforcement of their theological worldview. This meant that literary criticism within these communities was often inseparable from theological interpretation. Texts, whether sermons, personal diaries, or devotional poetry, were scrutinized for their alignment with Calvinist doctrine, their ability to foster piety, and their contribution to the "City upon a Hill" ideal.

The Puritan emphasis on predestination, divine providence, and the importance of self-examination created a specific lens through which literature was viewed. Critiques often focused on whether a work demonstrated humility, a recognition of human sinfulness, and a clear articulation of God's will. Works that were perceived as frivolous, overly ornate, or that celebrated secular vanities were likely to face censure. This created a critical environment that was both deeply moralistic and, in its own way, highly analytical, albeit within a very defined theological framework.

The Didactic Imperative

Central to Puritan literary criticism was the unwavering belief in the didactic imperative of writing. Literature was expected to teach, to guide, and to redeem. This meant that any text aspiring to be considered valuable had to serve a clear moral or spiritual purpose. The success of a poem or a narrative was not measured by its emotional impact or its stylistic innovation, but by its effectiveness in reinforcing Christian virtues and warning against sin. This perspective fundamentally shaped what kinds of texts were produced and, consequently, what criteria were applied in their evaluation.

Biblical Allusion and Interpretation

Puritan literary criticism often involved a rigorous engagement with biblical texts and their allegorical meanings. Writers were expected to draw heavily upon scripture, and critics would often analyze the skillful or unskillful use of biblical allusion. The ability to interpret scripture and apply its lessons to contemporary life was highly valued, and this skill was extended to the analysis of other literary works. A text that could be read through a theological lens, revealing deeper spiritual truths, was considered superior.

Secularization and the Rise of Enlightenment Ideals

As the colonial period progressed, particularly in the 18th century, a gradual secularization began to influence literary thought and criticism. The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason, empirical observation, and humanism, offered an alternative to the strictly theological frameworks that had previously dominated. This shift allowed for a broader range of literary concerns to emerge, moving

beyond purely religious didacticism towards an appreciation for secular themes, individual experience, and intellectual inquiry.

This transition didn't happen overnight, nor did it erase the influence of Puritanism entirely. Instead, it created a more complex and multifaceted critical landscape. Enlightenment ideals encouraged a more analytical and less solely moralistic approach to literature. Reason became a key evaluative tool, and writers began to explore subjects of political philosophy, natural rights, and social improvement, all of which found their way into critical discussions. The emphasis shifted towards clarity, logic, and persuasive argumentation, reflecting the intellectual currents of the time.

The Influence of Reason and Empiricism

Enlightenment philosophy championed the power of human reason and the importance of empirical evidence. In literary criticism, this translated into a greater focus on the logical structure of arguments within texts, the clarity of expression, and the verisimilitude of narratives. Writers like Benjamin Franklin, who embodied the practical application of Enlightenment ideals, produced works that were often implicitly or explicitly subject to this kind of rational scrutiny. Critical evaluation began to consider how well a text appealed to the intellect and provided useful knowledge or persuasive arguments.

Emergence of Secular Genres

The rise of Enlightenment thought coincided with the growth of secular genres and their critical engagement. Almanacs, newspapers, political pamphlets, and essays on social and scientific matters became increasingly important. Critiques of these works would focus on their accuracy, their argumentative strength, their clarity of presentation, and their potential to contribute to public discourse and social progress. This marked a significant departure from the exclusively religious focus of earlier criticism.

Key Figures in Colonial American Literary Criticism

While formal literary criticism as we understand it today was not a highly developed field in colonial America, several key figures contributed significantly to the critical discourse through their writings and intellectual engagement. These individuals, whether consciously acting as critics or implicitly shaping critical approaches through their own literary production and pronouncements, laid the groundwork for future generations.

Think of these figures as early cultivators of the critical garden. They didn't necessarily have elaborate treatises on literary theory, but their pronouncements on authorship, style, purpose, and audience had a tangible impact on how literature was perceived and evaluated. Their contributions often came in the form of prefaces, letters, essays, or even the very structure and content of their own works, which implicitly invited certain modes of interpretation.

Cotton Mather

Cotton Mather, a towering figure of Puritan intellectualism, was a prolific writer whose works often contained implicit critical judgments. His vast output, including sermons, histories, and scientific treatises, reveals a keen awareness of the persuasive power of language and the importance of conveying religious truth effectively. While not a systematic literary critic, Mather's engagement with texts, his emphasis on rhetorical effectiveness in sermons, and his own elaborate prose style offer insights into the critical values of his era. His work *The Present State of New-England* could be seen as a form of historical and literary appraisal of colonial endeavors.

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin represents a pivotal figure in the transition towards Enlightenment-influenced thought and criticism. His writings, from his autobiography to his numerous essays and political tracts, demonstrate a deep understanding of rhetoric, clarity, and the persuasive power of prose. Franklin's own literary practice, which often prioritized utility, wit, and common sense, implicitly championed a certain style and purpose for writing. His essays, like those in *Poor Richard's Almanack*, were not only read for their content but also for their skillful and accessible presentation, making him an unwitting arbiter of good writing for a broad audience.

Samuel Sewall

Samuel Sewall, the judge known for his later recantation of his role in the Salem Witch Trials, kept a detailed diary that offers valuable insights into the cultural and intellectual life of colonial Boston. While primarily a personal record, Sewall's diary implicitly engages with literary works by commenting on books he read, sermons he heard, and the general discourse of his time. His observations, though not formal criticism, reveal the prevailing attitudes towards literature, piety, and social commentary. His own writing style, often direct and earnest, reflects the values he held.

Forms and Genres Under Critical Scrutiny

In colonial America, the evaluation of literary works was intrinsically linked to the specific forms and genres they occupied. Different genres carried distinct expectations regarding content, style, and purpose, and critical approaches were tailored accordingly. Understanding these genre-specific critical lenses is crucial to appreciating the literary landscape of the period.

Imagine a toolkit where each tool is designed for a specific job. Similarly, colonial critics had a set of expectations for a sermon that differed dramatically from those for a ballad or a historical account. This categorization and expectation management were fundamental to how texts were understood and judged. The very act of identifying a work as a sermon, a captivity narrative, or a poem immediately placed it within a framework of anticipated critical considerations.

Sermons as Literary Texts

Sermons were arguably the most prominent and influential literary form in colonial America, particularly during the Puritan era. Consequently, critical evaluation of sermons focused on their theological soundness, their rhetorical power to persuade and edify the congregation, and their adherence to biblical exegesis. A powerful sermon was one that could move the soul, illuminate scripture, and reinforce the community's shared religious values. The skill of the preacher in structuring his argument, employing vivid imagery, and employing appropriate rhetorical devices was paramount and subject to implicit critical appraisal by listeners.

Captivity Narratives and Their Reception

Captivity narratives, recounting the experiences of colonists captured by Native Americans, were another popular genre that generated distinct critical responses. Critics and readers alike were interested in the authenticity of the account, the spiritual fortitude of the captive, and the narrative's ability to both horrify and instruct. The genre often served as a means to explore themes of fear, survival, providence, and the perceived savagery of the "other." Critical readings often focused on how well the narrative reinforced colonial anxieties and provided moral lessons about perseverance and faith.

Poetry and Verse

Colonial poetry often faced a more complex critical reception. While some poetry aimed for devotional purposes or followed classical models, it could also be viewed with suspicion if it appeared too frivolous or overly concerned with earthly matters. Anne Bradstreet, for instance, navigated this critical landscape, with her work often defended by her brother-in-law's preface as being morally sound and serving a didactic purpose, even as it showcased considerable artistic skill. Critical evaluation would consider the meter, rhyme, subject matter, and adherence to established poetic conventions, often filtered through a moralistic lens.

The Function and Purpose of Literature in the Colonies

The very understanding of why literature existed and what it was supposed to achieve differed significantly in the colonial period compared to modern sensibilities. Literature was deeply embedded within the social, religious, and political fabric of colonial life, serving a range of crucial functions that shaped how it was created and, by extension, how it was critically assessed.

Think of literature as the early American community's Swiss Army knife. It wasn't just for entertainment; it had to perform multiple essential tasks. Whether it was solidifying religious beliefs, documenting history, or persuading people to political action, literature was expected to do something tangible. This practical and purposeful orientation inevitably informed any critical evaluation of its effectiveness.

Religious and Moral Instruction

For much of the colonial period, especially in Puritan New England, the primary function of literature was religious and moral instruction. Sermons, devotional works, catechisms, and even historical accounts were designed to guide individuals toward salvation and to reinforce the collective moral and religious framework of the community. Literary criticism, therefore, often focused on how effectively a text achieved these didactic aims, prioritizing clarity of message and spiritual efficacy over aesthetic innovation. A well-formed argument that led a reader closer to God was considered superior to one that merely pleased the senses.

Historical Documentation and Identity Formation

Literature also played a vital role in documenting the colonial experience and fostering a sense of shared identity. Histories, journals, and letters served to record significant events, delineate boundaries, and articulate the aspirations of the colonies. Critically, these works were assessed for their accuracy, their comprehensiveness, and their ability to present a coherent narrative of colonial progress and purpose. They helped to solidify a nascent American identity, distinct from that of Britain, by chronicling their unique struggles and achievements.

Political Persuasion and Social Cohesion

As the colonies matured and political tensions with Great Britain grew, literature became an increasingly important tool for political persuasion and the maintenance of social cohesion. Pamphlets, essays, and broadsides were used to debate political issues, rally support for particular causes, and articulate grievances. Critical assessment of such works would focus on their logical force, their rhetorical effectiveness in moving public opinion, and their contribution to the broader political discourse. The ability of a piece to persuade readers towards a particular action or viewpoint was a key measure of its value.

Reception and Readership in the Colonial Era

Understanding colonial American literary criticism necessitates an examination of its reception and readership. The audience for literature in the colonies was diverse and evolving, and the ways in which readers engaged with texts profoundly influenced the critical discourse. The accessibility of print, literacy rates, and the social standing of readers all played a role in shaping how literary works were understood and evaluated.

Think of it as a marketplace of ideas. What was being produced? Who was buying it? And what were they saying about it? The answers to these questions provide a crucial context for understanding the critical judgments being made. The limited availability of books and the often-specific social circles of readers meant that critical opinions, while not always formally articulated, were certainly shared and influential within those circles.

Literacy and Access to Print

Literacy rates in colonial America varied by region, social class, and gender, but the gradual increase in print availability meant that literature, in its various forms, reached a widening audience. While elite circles might engage with more learned texts, almanacs, chapbooks, and newspapers were accessible to a broader segment of the population. The critical reception of these more popular forms often focused on their practical utility and moral straightforwardness.

The Role of Public Discourse

Much of the critical engagement with literature in colonial America occurred within the sphere of public discourse, rather than through formal academic reviews. Discussions in churches, taverns, and homes, as well as public readings and debates, served as informal venues for critical assessment. Letters to the editor, prefaces to published works, and even casual conversations contributed to a circulating body of opinion that shaped the perception and evaluation of literary texts.

Social Stratification and Taste

Social stratification inevitably influenced literary taste and critical reception. The educated elite might have been more attuned to classical allusions and complex rhetorical structures, while those with less formal education might have prioritized clear moral lessons and engaging narratives. This meant that critical judgments could be influenced by social class, with works that appealed to specific social groups receiving more favorable evaluations within those circles.

Challenges and Debates in Colonial Criticism

The landscape of colonial American literary criticism was not without its challenges and internal debates. As the colonies navigated their identity and their relationship with Europe, so too did their literary and critical sensibilities undergo periods of tension and re-evaluation. These debates often reflected broader societal anxieties and aspirations.

Imagine a society on the cusp of change, where old ideas are being challenged and new ones are struggling to take root. This is the environment in which colonial critics operated. They were wrestling with questions about authenticity, originality, and the very purpose of art in a new world, leading to ongoing discussions and disagreements.

Originality vs. Imitation

A significant debate revolved around the concept of originality. While colonial writers often looked to

European models, there was also a growing desire to establish a distinctly American literary voice. Critically, this led to discussions about whether imitation was a necessary step in developing native talent or a hindrance to true originality. The tension between adhering to established forms and forging new ones was a constant undercurrent.

The Role of Sentiment vs. Reason

As Enlightenment ideals gained traction, debates emerged regarding the proper balance between reason and sentiment in literature. While reason was valued for its clarity and logic, the growing appreciation for human emotion and individual experience led to discussions about the place of sentiment in literary works. Critically, this involved assessing whether a text appealed primarily to the intellect or to the heart, and what the ideal balance between the two might be.

Censorship and Propriety

Concerns about religious and moral propriety also led to debates around censorship. What constituted acceptable subject matter for literature? When did a text cross the line into licentiousness or sedition? These questions were often debated implicitly through the praise or condemnation of certain works, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of social norms and the boundaries of acceptable expression in the colonies.

The Legacy of Colonial American Literary Criticism

The critical dialogues and debates of the colonial era, though perhaps less formalized than modern literary criticism, laid crucial groundwork for the development of American literary studies. The emphasis on didacticism, the engagement with religious and moral themes, and the nascent discussions about national identity all left an indelible mark on subsequent literary traditions.

Think of the colonial period as the foundation upon which a grand literary edifice was built. The critical ideas and practices of this era, while seemingly rudimentary by today's standards, provided the essential structural elements and conceptual blueprints that would guide the construction of American literature for centuries to come. The very questions they asked and the values they championed continue to resonate.

The early focus on the moral purpose of literature, while evolving, informed later movements like American Romanticism, which explored individual conscience and moral development. The struggle for literary originality and a distinct American voice became a central theme in American literary history, from Emerson's call for self-reliance to the experimentalism of the 20th century. Furthermore, the critical examination of historical narratives and the construction of national identity, which began in the colonial period, remains a vital area of inquiry in contemporary literary scholarship. The colonial critics, in their own way, initiated a conversation that continues to shape our understanding of American literature and its place in the world.

FAQ

Q: What was the primary purpose of literature in colonial America, and how did this influence criticism?

A: The primary purpose of literature in colonial America was largely religious and moral instruction, especially during the Puritan era. This meant that critical evaluations heavily focused on a text's ability to convey religious truths, foster piety, and guide readers toward virtuous behavior. Works were judged less on their aesthetic qualities and more on their effectiveness in achieving these didactic aims.

Q: How did European literary traditions influence colonial American literary criticism?

A: Colonial American literary criticism was deeply rooted in European traditions, particularly those from England. Early critics and writers were educated with classical rhetoric, neo-classical aesthetics, and prevailing philosophical and religious doctrines, which shaped their understanding of literary forms, styles, and the very purpose of writing. This meant that established European models often served as the benchmark for evaluation.

Q: Who were some of the most influential figures in shaping colonial American literary thought and criticism, even if they didn't write formal treatises?

A: Key figures like Cotton Mather, with his deep engagement with theological and rhetorical matters, and Benjamin Franklin, who embodied Enlightenment ideals of clarity and utility in writing, significantly influenced colonial literary thought. Samuel Sewall's diary also offers insights into prevailing critical attitudes. While they may not have authored formal critical works, their writings and pronouncements shaped how literature was perceived and evaluated.

Q: What role did genres like sermons and captivity narratives play in colonial critical discourse?

A: Sermons were central and were critically assessed for their theological soundness, rhetorical power, and didactic effectiveness. Captivity narratives were popular and critically examined for their authenticity, the spiritual resilience of the captive, and their moral lessons regarding survival and faith. The specific expectations for each genre shaped how they were read and judged.

Q: How did the gradual secularization and the rise of Enlightenment ideals in the 18th century affect colonial

literary criticism?

A: The Enlightenment brought a shift towards reason, empirical observation, and humanism, influencing colonial literary criticism. This led to a broader appreciation for secular themes, individual experience, and intellectual inquiry. Critiques began to emphasize logical structure, clarity of expression, and persuasive argumentation, moving beyond purely religious didacticism and opening up new avenues for literary exploration and evaluation.

Q: What were some of the main debates or tensions within colonial American literary criticism?

A: Significant debates revolved around the tension between originality and imitation, with a growing desire for a distinctly American literary voice. There were also discussions about the balance between reason and sentiment in literature, and ongoing concerns about censorship and moral propriety, which influenced what subjects were considered acceptable for literary treatment.

Q: In what ways does colonial American literary criticism continue to influence modern literary studies?

A: Colonial American literary criticism's legacy lies in its foundational emphasis on the moral purpose of literature, its early engagement with national identity formation, and its initiation of discussions about literary originality. These themes have profoundly shaped subsequent American literary movements and continue to be vital areas of inquiry in contemporary literary scholarship, informing our understanding of American literary history and its cultural significance.

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