

### The Role of Poetry in American Literature

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#### ABSTRACT

*In every society, literature plays one of the most important roles. Besides, literature could not choose time and place. In this article I am going to discuss some types of literature and the role of poetry in especially American literature.*

Literature- the most adorable and readable part of the culture. With the help of literature, every person might have an opportunity to fly, cry or play mentally. Each person understands literature differently. For someone it is only boring activity for spending time and for some it is everything: their career, their mind and the way they live. There are various types of historical books about the literature of America, now I am going to share some facts about the history of American literature which are taken from the book called “Highlights of American literature” based upon a core manuscript by Dr.Carl Bode, University of Maryland.

“The first American literature was neither American nor really literature. It was not American because it was the work mainly of immigrants from England. It was not literature as we know it – in the form of poetry, essays, or fiction – but rather an interesting mixture of travel accounts and religious writings.

The earliest colonial travel accountants are records of the perils and frustrations that challenged the courage of America’s first settlers. William Bradford’s History of Plimmoth Plantation describes the cold greeting which the passengers of the ship Mayflower received when they landed on the coast of America in 1620:

Being thus arrived in a good harbor, and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element....

But here I cannot stand half amazed at this poor people’s present condition; and so, I think

will the reader, too, when he well considers the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean, .... They had no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies; nor houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succour.

If the American wilderness did not provide a hearty welcome for the colonists, it nevertheless offered a wealth of natural resources. "He is a bad fisher [who] cannot kill on one day with his hooke and line, one, two, or three hundred Cods" is a claim made by Captain John Smith in *A Description of new England* (1616). "A sup of New England's air is better than a whole draft of old England's is better than a whole draft of old England's ale" is a testimonial given by Francis Higginson in his *New-England's Plantation* (1630). Higginson adds:

Besides, I have one of my children that was formerly most lamentably handled with sore breaking out of both his hands and feet of the king's evil, but since he came hither, he is very well over [what he was], and there is hope of perfect recovery shortly, even by the very wholesomeness of the air.

Poor Higginson did not fare as well as his son: he died the same year the *New England's Plantation* was published."

As we can see, the origination of the literature was not easy. Someone gave something during centuries. As a result, it came to the stage of culture. Now it is time for facts about the pre-Columbian epoch.

Native American literature existed before colonization period and it dates from over 20000 years ago to 1500. Of course, stories didn't exist in written form; it was just an oral traditional folklore. Let's look at some examples of the folklore:

1. "I am a Native American who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. You all know little about what I did but you do know that I was a peacemaker and spiritual guide of the Mohawk Native Americans".

2. "I am a young woman who is a part of the Powhatan tribe, but I eventually moved to England I met John Smith at 12 years old and I lived from 1595 to 1627".

As we could understand the people in history wanted to show the literature, culture and nationality of the place they live. According to the book "American literature" by Diana L. Baisheva: The main genres of pre-colonial period were: poems, songs, stories, oratories, and drawings. Stories mostly existed in the form of myths.

#### The Diary of captain John Smith

One of the most famous stories from the early days of American colonization is the tale of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas. He was a leader in Jamestown, England's first successful settlement. She was an Indian princess, daughter of Powhatan, chief of the Algonquain Indians. They first met when Smith was taken captive by the Algonquain in 1607. The following is Smith's own account of the experience, taken from his book *The Settlement of Jamestown – 1606*. As you can see, the English he uses is closer to Shakespeare than to modern English, but with a little effort it can be understood. Note that Smith refers to himself in the third person here. He wrote this for publication, not as a diary.

Extract:

The text in the original:

When this news came to Jamestown [of John Smith's capture], much was their sorrow for his loss, few expecting what ensued.

Text in modern English:

When news came to Jamestown [of John Smith's capture] they were very sad about

loosing him. Few expected what happened then.

You see that even in old English period, people tried to leave some manuscript and different types of literature.

What is poetry itself? Poetry is one of the most adorable part of literature. With the help of poetry, the poet could explain his or her feelings directly. The feelings may be critical, may be hurting. So the people who do not understand poetry may seem like it is the waste of time, however as a philologist I also consider that poetry is necessary for every generation. Poetry might reflect the history or future and of course present. The problems related to the nation, native people.

As other nations, in American poetry also have some features which reflect the long and rich history of the America. First feature is Colonial poetry. This period of poetry consists of religious poems, because most of nomadic tribes were religious and they tend to deliver the information with the help of their poems to their family members and other people. In the United States, the Puritans were religious colonists who arrived in the mid-1600s to settle in what is now known as Massachusetts. Puritan poets wrote about religion and family life. Poet Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) wrote about both of these themes; her most famous poem “To My Dear and Loving Husband” (1678) explores the love she feels her husband.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, popular poetry began to reflect the political fervor of the American War of Independence. Poetry became a political as well as an artistic form of expression as poets recognized the extraordinary times they were living in and the power of their pens. During the American Revolution, poems of this time extolled the values of independence and freedom while valorizing American war heroes, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s (1807-1882) “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1860) that commemorated this event of the War of Independence. The American War of Independence or American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) was fought to free the American colonies from British rule. The Americans succeeded, and The Treaty of Paris (1783) formally ended the war and secured American Independence.

As we can see, every period of the American poetry has its own history and way of origin. The next period or the type of poetry is Transcendentalist Poetry (1820s-1850s). Transcendentalism in America took root thanks to poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Transcendentalism was the American response to English Romanticism in literature, which featured significant poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. However, transcendentalism represented the development of distinctly American approach to poetry.

Through transcendentalist poetry, this new, American voice reflected:

- Optimism about humanity
- Appreciation for the natural world
- A belief in the unity of humanity and the natural world
- A rejection of societal conveniences
- Support for humanitarian issues.

Every poetry period contributed some investigation for the literature of America, here the role of the poetry is so huge in literature, because with the help of poetry millions of people could be aware of issues which are happening around the society. The next period is Modernist poetry (1890s-1950s). Heading into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, poets established a truly American voice in poetry through Modernism. Modernism arose from the symbolism movement that swept the

literary and art worlds of Europe. Modernist writers sought to radically change the way poetry was written. This happened by rejecting the formal conventions and strictures of poetic structure as well as the notion of objectivity in poetry.

What is symbolism? Symbolism is a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century European movement that began with Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). The movement features poetry and art that focuses on symbols or images to express emotions, abstract concepts, or the poet's mental state at the time of writing.

Out of the modernist movement came Imagism, which challenged the conventional forms of Victorian and Romantic poetry. Imagists used free verse poetry to paint clear, concise pictures with words. The poems were meant to follow a rhythm that mimicked musical phrases rather than the rigid tempo of a metronome. Poets Ezra Pound (1895-1972) and T.S. Eliot (1898-1972) are two of quintessential modernist poets in America. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1920) is a defining work of modernist poetry. Modernism remained popular until the 1950s, however, post-World War 2, modernism waned in popularity due to the rise in Postmodernist poetry.

These stages of poetry were formed by people who have passion and some pain in their heart. Let's analyze one poem of Henry David Thoreau. He was an American poet. He lived and composed in the Transcendentalist Poetry period. He is best known with his book *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay *Civil Disobedience*, an argument for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to an unjust state.

My life has been the poem  
My life has been the poem  
I would have writ,  
But I could not both live  
and utter it.

As we could know, this poem is about himself. He spent all his life to write poems and understand the nation's pain, the political and economical issues. Because, every poet has something that motivates him to write something. This poem is literary condition of the poet, namely he has been lived for poems. By saying this, he meant that his all job was writing poem. It does not matter which topic or in how condition is he, he always tried to write. If it comes to the second line, "I would have writ" this means that he may have a masterpiece if he collected all his poems. He already has a collection of his poems however it would be a huge book. And, this book is all about his life, his feelings and the thing here, he could not complete all these tasks, because he should live. As other people around him, he is also an ordinary person. But no, he is not. There is something in his heart which motivates him to write. By writing, he could not manage all his tasks. He could not get his book, huge book. Because he lives in his poems. If he gave all these poems to someone, then how he would live?

The feelings, deep and shallow feelings. Every poet owns one of these two feelings. If they have former one, then he is happy enough to have a name of poet.

The people who could curb their feelings, is person who is suitable for the name of poet.

In conclusion, I would say that the role of the poetry in every nation's literature is big enough. Because, people could not live without feelings, without motivation. Everyone should take or give feelings. People who could express their feelings, are poets. And the role of poetry in American literature is really important. Without poetry, we could not imagine literature.

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