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# *American Literature Syllabus*

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## *Unit 1: The Colonial Period( Days 1-11)*

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### *Assigned Selections:*

“It Was the Wind that Gave Them Life” from the Navaho tradition

“The Council of the Great Peace” from the Iroquois tradition

Excerpt from *Of Plymouth Plantation* by William Bradford

Excerpt from *A Narrative of the Captivity* by Mary Rowlandson

Excerpt from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano

Excerpt from *Wonders of the Invisible World* by Cotton Mather

“Upon the Burning of Our House” and “To My Dear and Loving Husband” by Anne Bradstreet

“Upon a Wasp Chilled with Cold” and “Huswifery” by Edward Taylor

Excerpt from *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by Jonathan Edwards

### *Overview:*

Students will begin their study of American Literature by reading representative selections from the Colonial Period. After a brief introduction to the history of the period, they will read selections with a view toward understanding both how the history shaped the writers of the period and how the writers reflected the history of the period in their writing.

### *Objectives:*

Read a variety of writings from the Colonial Period

Establish a relationship between the history and the literature of this period

Review literary terms critical to these selections: style, plain style, allusion, chronological order, satire, tone, autobiography, inversion, metaphor, extended metaphor, conceit, metaphysical poetry

Discuss selections in class

Practice autobiographical and expository writing skills

### *Skills Attained:*

Understand the relationship between the history of a period and the literature that reflects that history

Learn about the contributions of different ethnic groups to the fabric of American literature

Understand something of the difficulties the earliest settlers/writers had in the New World

Trace the influence of Puritanism on the development of a uniquely American character

**Day 1:**

**Objective:** Students will be introduced to the idea that the history of a particular period influences the development of the literature of that period. They will also begin to develop ideas for a piece of autobiographical writing of their own.

**Topic:** Topics to be covered include the introduction to the literature of the Colonial Period in American history and the development of autobiographical writing.

**Procedures:** Methods will include journal writing, class discussion, and reaction to a variety of questions on a worksheet designed to get students thinking about a significant autobiographical event in their lives.

**Motivation:** To begin, ask students to write about a page detailing their knowledge of the history of the beginning of colonization in the Americas, as well as their knowledge of any writers from this era. This activity asks students to access their prior knowledge on the topic before actually reading and helps them to develop “hooks” on which to attach new knowledge. A “cold” reading is seldom a good idea because students need expectations about what they are reading if they are to read successfully. Allow about 10 minutes for this activity (or close it whenever a majority of the students have ceased writing). Invite discussion from their writing, noting important points on the board or an overhead transparency.

**Description:** Since many of the selections in this unit are autobiographical in nature, a good writing assignment to accompany this unit would be to ask students to do something of a biographical nature. I would hesitate to ask for the regular “I was born on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_” sort of assignment that leads to just a series of chronological accounts. This sort of assignment can be boring for students to write and certainly boring for you to read. Instead, help students to develop a specific incident that has a focus and that has shaped their lives in some way. To help with this assignment, **Worksheet 1:1** asks students to answer a number of questions designed to help them develop a good piece of autobiographical writing. A good way to use this handout might be to ask students to respond to a different question each day during the first five minutes or so of class—similar to a journal entry—and by the time they have answered all the questions, they should have a good idea of an incident about which they would like to write a fully developed essay. The paper will be due the day before the test (day 10).

**Application/Reflection:** Students should be able to select a significant event in their lives on which to write a reflective essay. They should further recognize that a good bit of the literature of the American Colonial Period is autobiographical in nature.

**Assessment:** Students should be able to adequately respond to a number of the questions on **Worksheet 1:1**.

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### **Day 2:**

**Objective:** Students will be exposed to ideas surrounding the development of American literature during the Colonial Period, particularly as that literature was shaped by the history of that period.

**Topic:** The topic will be the influence of American history on the development of the literature of the Colonial Period.

**Procedures:** Methods used will include a silent reading of the homework assignment, an informational worksheet (**Worksheet 1:2**), class notes, and class discussion.

**Motivation:** Go over the background sheet with students and make sure they can answer the questions. Use lecture notes to enhance and develop in more detail the points made in the background reading and worksheet.

**Description:** Make sure students understand that the only creative writing from this period is poetry. The rest of Colonial literature consists of more utilitarian types of writing such as diaries, journals, logs, histories, letters, sermons, and the like; colonists simply did not have the time to write for pleasure, the access to printing presses to be able to share their writing for pleasure or profit, or the support to write and publish for pleasure as we do today.

There are very basic differences in the writing that arose from the southeastern colonies and the writing that arose from the New England area. The southern colonies were founded primarily as business ventures by organizations such as the London Company. Most of these colonists hoped to become landowners and successful planters and tradesmen, a dream they often could not realize in Europe due to the scarcity of opportunities for the commoner. Therefore, most of their writing reflects this dream and encourages other aspiring landowners and tradesmen to follow them. Much of this writing is in the form of journals, diaries, letters, histories, and the like.

Students should also understand the tremendous influence Puritans had on shaping not only the course of American history but also American literature. For them, anything that did not glorify God or aid their fellow man was sinful and not to be undertaken; this included writing for pleasure. The little bit of poetry that arose out of this era usually contained references to God's grace and goodness in providing for His children. Therefore, poetry was acceptable. Other types of writing produced by the Puritans included journals, diaries, letters, and histories—all with a religious overtone—and sermons.

In order to understand the Puritan influence, students should become familiar with the concepts of "Theocracy," "Innate Depravity," "Doctrine of the Elect," and "Predestination." Because the Puritans felt God had directed them to establish a colony based on Biblical rule, their government was a "theocracy," or a government ruled by religious leaders. The Puritans saw humankind as basically evil from birth ("In Adam's fall, we sinned all"). This belief is known as Innate Depravity and colored the Puritan's view of the world, which they perceived as coming under constant attack by the forces of evil. They believed they had been chosen by God to be "saved" (Doctrine of the Elect) and that their colony was to be a "city on a hill," or an example to the rest of the world of how human beings should live. They further believed God had foreordained everything that would

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happen in this world (Predestination) and everything that happened to individuals occurred as a part of God's plan. Because of these beliefs, nearly all Puritan writing contains numerous references to both God's grace and God's judgment and a myriad of allusions to stories and scriptures from the Bible.

**Application/Reflection:** You may collect student work on a daily basis or you may require that they keep all their written work, with the exception of essays, until the end of the unit and turn in everything at that time for a major grade. The justification for collecting it as a unit is twofold: (1) to allow students to keep work that they may need to use to study for a test, and (2) to give hard-working students a chance at achieving high marks on a major grade, which can often offset lower test grades. Some very hard-working students are not always good test-takers. Thus, their unit work helps them keep a higher average than they might otherwise be able to achieve. However, there is certainly nothing wrong with taking up work on a daily basis.

**Assessment:** It is a good idea to **quiz** students on their knowledge of the background material at this point because an understanding of how the history relates to and influences the literature of the period is crucial to their understanding of the pieces they will read later.

Because this unit of material is often hard for students to grasp, you may not want to assign complete selections as homework, but instead begin it as class work and assign the remainder for homework. In addition, you may want to read aloud at least a portion of each selection to give your students an "ear" for the Colonial style to help them cope with the remainder of each selection on their own. Or you may choose to do certain selections completely in class, particularly if they appear to be difficult for your students.

### **Day 3:**

**Objective:** Students should know that some of our earliest and most fascinating literature begins with oral traditions passed from generation to generation by Native Americans and eventually recorded by European explorers and settlers.

**Topic:** The topic will be a creation myth and a governmental system from the Native American tradition.

**Procedures:** Methods will include a K-W-L chart, small group work, class discussion, following along with an oral reading, class notes, and completion of **Worksheet 1:4**.

**Motivation:** A good way to introduce this material is through the use of a K-W-L chart (**Worksheet 1:3**). In this activity, students are asked to fill out the first two columns of the chart "What I Know" and "What I Want to Know" prior to the reading assignment. Again, you are helping them to access their prior knowledge of the topic so they will be better prepared to read. This activity is great for small groups of 3-4 students per group. Allow about 10 minutes for the groups to discuss and record their responses on the chart. Invite discussion from their small groups and record responses on the board or an overhead transparency. After they have finished the reading selections, have students, alone or in their small groups, fill in the last column of the K-W-L chart, "What I Learned."

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**Description:** Since both Native American selections are short, you may want students to read them, either silently or orally, in class. As a follow-up to “It Was the Wind that Gave Them Life,” ask students to do a Venn diagram, noting the similarities and differences they may have noticed between this creation myth and the beliefs of their own culture or the cultures of others. Allow 5 to 7 minutes for this activity; then invite discussion and record responses on the board or an overhead transparency.

“The Council of the Great Peace,” from the Iroquois tradition, develops an extended metaphor comparing the strength of a tree to the strength the various Iroquois tribes hope will result from the federation they are forming as they unite to create one Iroquois nation. Students may find it interesting to note that the Founding Fathers were well aware of the “federal” system of government, so to speak, that this unification developed, and used it as a pattern for developing our own system of government. For example, in matters of welfare and safety of the Iroquois as a whole, representatives from each of the five—later six—tribes would meet together to decide what to do. The original five tribes, which united around 1390, were the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca. The Tuscarora did not join the nation until 1712. However, in matters that concerned only one tribe, local tribesmen retained the right to make decisions without interference from any of the other tribes—sort of a federal vs. states’ rights system like we have today.

**Application/Reflection:** Students should come away from this reading with an understanding of the extended metaphors surrounding the “Tree of the Great Peace,” the “Tree of the Great Long Leaves,” and the “Great White Roots of Peace.” The Tree of the Great Peace represents the united Iroquois nation, whose purpose it is to offer protection and safety to its individual tribes, first against other Indian tribes with whom they warred, and later in the face of encroachment by European settlers further and further into Iroquois territory. The Tree of the Great Long Leaves is believed to have been a white pine under which was spread the “feathery down of the globe thistle,” representing the laws governing the Iroquois nation. The Great White Roots of Peace were believed to spread in all four directions—north, south, east, and west—including all the Iroquois tribes and represented the strength that their unity provided.

The last paragraph of this selection lists characteristics of a good leader. Ask students to make a list of these characteristics (see **Worksheet 1:4**) and then to evaluate some of our own leaders in terms of these characteristics. Students usually enjoy this activity and can sometimes become quite vocal in expressing either their approval or disapproval of current leaders based on these qualities. List their responses on the board or an overhead transparency.

**Assessment:** Although some educators may dispute the need to quiz students regularly, reading quizzes can be most helpful in assessing their understanding of their reading and in determining whether you need to do further instruction before proceeding to the next selection. Therefore, you will find quizzes for each selection, which can be used at the discretion of the teacher.

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Day 4:

**Objective:** Students will read a representative piece from the early Puritan era and will discuss how beliefs shaped the literature of the Puritan society.

**Topic:** The topic will be an excerpt from *Of Plymouth Plantation* by William Bradford.

**Procedures:** Methods will include journal writing, class discussion, a double-entry journal (**Worksheet 1:5**), following along with an oral reading, and completion of **Worksheet 1:6**.

**Motivation:** To actively engage students in a selection which they may first identify as boring, hard to read, and irrelevant to their experiences, ask them to write down everything they know about the Pilgrims and to be ready to share their responses with the rest of the class. Allow about 10 minutes for this activity, then invite discussion and list responses on the board or an overhead transparency.

Next, assign students to read the excerpt in class using the double-entry journal, **Worksheet 1:5**, to record in the first column any anecdotes, information, allusions, interesting phrases or anything else that seems important or that catches their interest. Instruct them to record their personal reactions to those items from column one in the second column. You might also instruct students to list all religious allusions they find, as well. The double-entry journal ensures active reading and thinking by students, instead of the cursory skimming many of them often give material they perceive as “too hard” or “irrelevant.” Because the writing of the Puritans is so different from what modern students are used to, you may want to assign this piece to be read in class.

**Description:** William Bradford is a colorful character in the development of our nation’s history. A leader of the Pilgrims who arrived on the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts, he wrote the “Mayflower Compact,” which provided for a government derived from the “consent of the governed,” and required that all adult men sign it before they were allowed to leave the ship. This group of religious settlers felt God was leading them to a “Promised Land,” much as he had led the Israelites in the Old Testament of the Bible, and that their colony was to be a “City on a Hill,” or an example to the rest of the world on how to live and govern themselves according to religious principles. This belief is constantly reflected in their writing and provides the rationale for the theocratic form of government the New England colonies developed.

The Puritan writers prided themselves for their “plain style” of writing, a style marked by simplicity and clarity. At the same time, their writing is filled with Biblical allusions, references to individuals or situations that remind them of their own current experiences in the world. While most of this selection will be new to students, many of them may already be familiar with the section on the first Thanksgiving, in which Bradford recounts the assistance offered to the colonists by Squanto and Samoset, Native Americans without whose help the colony may not have survived.

**Application/Reflection:** After students have finished reading and journaling, invite responses and list them on the board or an overhead transparency. Their comments should lead very naturally into a discussion of the more important parts of the narrative.

**Assessment:** Finish with **Worksheet 1:6** and a quiz.

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### Day 5:

**Objective:** Students will read and discuss an excerpt dealing with the conflict between white settlers and Native Americans during King Philip's War.

**Topic:** The selection will be an excerpt from *A Narrative of the Captivity* by Mary Rowlandson.

**Procedures:** Methods will include a Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, class predictions, following along with an oral reading of a portion of the selection followed by a silent reading of the remainder, and completion of **Worksheet 1:7**, followed by a class discussion.

**Motivation:** A useful activity to help students engage actively with the material they are about to read is the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, an activity which involves students in thinking and making predictions about a selection before they read it. This activity is especially good for more difficult selections, such as those from the Early Colonial Period. To begin this activity, have students scan the title, *A Narrative of the Captivity*, and look at any illustrations, captions, and the like that the editors may have included to assist them with the selection. Allow 2-3 minutes for this activity. Then ask students to make predictions based on their observations. Ask students to write their predictions down in their notebooks because many students are often content to sit back and let two or three "eager beavers" do all the work. Next, ask for oral contributions from various students, presenting not only their predictions but also why they believe they will find their predictions to be accurate.

It is important at this point that the teacher not refute any incorrect predictions. The point is not to "guess it right" but to have some prior expectations before reading. These expectations will actively engage students in the reading process as they read to discover whether they were right. Instruct students to refine or even change their prediction as they read and find evidence that points them in a more specific direction. Because this selection is a little difficult at first, you might read aloud the first page or so for your students to get them into the flow of the narrative. After you have reached a pre-determined point, ask them if they have changed any of their predictions and allow time for responses. Ask students to keep their notebooks close by so they can refine their predictions as they discover new evidence. Students who follow this procedure are very actively involved in their reading, resulting in a more complete understanding of the piece and retention of details.

**Description:** Colonial literature is full of accounts of kidnappings of English settlers by various Indian tribes. *A Narrative of the Captivity* by Mary Rowlandson is a very moving and graphic account of Rowlandson's capture, along with her three children, by the Wampanoag Indians during what is now known as King Phillip's War. Instead of blaming the Indians, however, Rowlandson, characteristic of most of the Puritans, felt that God was punishing the settlers for the wrongs of their young people, who liked to dance. Throughout her account of her terrifying ordeal, Rowlandson constantly makes allusions to scriptures, comparing her situation with that of various Biblical characters and events in the Bible as she seeks to discover God's purpose for her plight. Typical of most Puritan writing,

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her writing reflects the Puritan belief that everything that happens has a spiritual significance.

**Application/Reflection:** Students should realize that there were two sides to the conflict between the settlers and the Native Americans, an issue which Rowlandson tries to reflect in her writing. Instead of dwelling just on her hardships, students should come away from this selection with a more positive view of the Native Americans based on their treatment of Rowlandson during her captivity.

**Assessment:** Finish with **Worksheet 1:7**, a class discussion of the worksheet, and a quiz.

### Day 6:

**Objective:** Students will read and discuss an account of the “middle passage” of the slave trade.

**Topic:** The topic will be an excerpt *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano.

**Procedure(s):** Methods will include a K-W-L chart, small group discussions, following along with an oral reading of the selection, completion of **Worksheet 1:9**, and class discussion.

**Motivation:** An effective way to approach this selection is through the use of the K-W-L chart, **Worksheet 1:8**, as most students will have some knowledge of the slave trade. However, their knowledge may not be so extensive as to be aware of the extent to which the slaves suffered, particularly during the middle passage. The K-W-L chart will help them access the knowledge they already have and will give them a chance to predict, and later correct and assimilate, the new understandings they will bring away from this selection. Again, it is good to use this strategy in small groups.

**Description:** One of the earliest and most moving accounts we have of what has been termed the “middle passage” in the slave trade is found in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano. Beginning with his capture from his family and ending with an account of the slave auction in Barbados, Equiano vividly describes the horrific experiences he must endure as a young boy. This eloquently written account never fails to move those who read it.

Students may not realize that the African tribes themselves engaged in slave trade by raiding the villages of enemy tribes and selling off the children and able-bodied adults they captured. In fact, Equiano’s father himself had slaves from enemy tribes. However, this fact does not diminish the horror of what this race of people had to endure in the name of progress for the plantations of the New World. By the time slave trade was outlawed in the nineteenth century, about 10 million Africans had been uprooted from their homeland and transported to America as slaves.

- **Application/Reflection:** Students should come away from this selection with a better understanding of the “middle passage” and with a good measure of empathy for Equiano’s situation.

**Assessment:** As a follow-up, ask students to answer the questions on **Worksheet 1:9**, after they’ve completed reading the selection, followed by a quiz.



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### Day 7:

**Objective:** Students will read and discuss an example of Puritan journalism.

**Topic:** The topic will be *Wonders of the Invisible World* by Cotton Mather.

**Procedure(s):** Methods will include journal writing, class discussion, following along with an oral reading of the selection, and completion of **Worksheet 1:10**.

**Motivation:** A good way to introduce this unit is to ask students to write about an incident in their lives when they may have been accused of doing something they had not actually done and had difficulty proving themselves innocent. Allow about 5 minutes for this. Ask for volunteers to share their experiences (about 10 minutes). An additional activity that will help students deal with this selection is to ask them to keep a list of statements by Mather that show he has already judged and condemned Martha Carrier before ever hearing the evidence against her.

**Description:** *Wonders of the Invisible World* by Cotton Mather is an account of the investigations into the charges of witchcraft that were brought against many of the Puritans in the late seventeenth century. Although Mather considered himself something of a journalist, his account is anything but the objective reporting of observable facts, which we have come to expect from journalists today. In fact, much of his reporting is subjective and inflammatory and probably helped to fan the fires of hysteria that raged during this period.

Students may find it interesting to examine some of the beliefs that led to this dark period in our history. Because the Puritans felt that God had ordained their colony, they believed that anyone who professed beliefs or practiced a lifestyle different from theirs was an agent of the Devil, sent to destroy the Puritan society. Therefore, they were quick to judge others and to eliminate those who were in some way “different,” even if it meant killing those whom they perceived as a threat. While the account of the trial of Martha Carrier in this selection is of a court proceeding, however prejudicial it might be, one of the preferred methods of trying a witch in Puritan New England was the “water method.” A person accused of witchcraft would be thrown into a pond of water. If she floated, she was deemed a witch because she had no solid character qualities, which would give her “weight.” If she sank, she was innocent because she had the weight of Christian qualities; however, she died anyway of drowning. Therefore, those who were accused of witchcraft were usually just as good as dead, no matter how they were judged. While this method may seem ridiculous to students today because they understand something of the buoyancy of the human body, it was nevertheless a trusted method of trying witches in the eyes of the Puritans.

**Application/Reflection:** Instruct your students to evaluate this selection in terms of its journalistic standards as they read. Most students will immediately recognize the biased reporting and hopefully will understand the importance of maintaining objectivity if one is to accurately report the facts.

**Assessment:** As a follow-up, ask students to answer the questions on **Worksheet 1:10**, after they’ve completed reading the selection. Follow up with a quiz.