PURITANISM

Their Puritan religion can be described as theism. Theism emphasizes a close, personal relationship with God; spirituality; and emotionalism. It contrasts sharply with Deism, which was the philosophy that was popular amongst the popular thinkers of the Enlightenment. Puritans believed in predestination and election. They viewed America as the Promised Land where the millennium would be established.

Although Puritanism had pretty much died out by the early to mid 1800s, this religion had a lasting effect on American culture. The American Dream, Manifest Destiny, and the American Mission were all influenced by the Puritan concept of grace.

Puritanism used the plain style to write works that teach a lesson. The plain style helped the Puritans to communicate the meaning of the divine commandments in an understandable way. Puritans considered the plain style suited to the rawness of the New World. The plain style is smooth, clear, short, and unadorned. The ideas that the plain style is used to communicate, however, are by no means simplistic.

William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, and Edward Taylor are three important Puritan writers. From Bradford’s Of Plymouth Plantation, we learn about the Puritan’s trip to America
and their initial months at Plymouth Plantation. When the Puritans arrived at Plymouth Rock, they were greeted by Indians who were hostile, but at the same time hesitant -- skulking about in the trees, stealing tools.

*Magnalia Christi Americana*, *The Bay Psalm Book*, and *The Day of Doom* are other examples of Puritan literature.

Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor were two of the first American poets, though their style and subject matter did not achieve a uniquely American flavor. This feat would be accomplished by poets of a later generation. Anne Bradstreet's best poetry concerns domestic affairs. Edward Taylor's poetry explores the mystic union between humans and God.

**THE SOUTHERN GENTLEMEN**

The Southern Gentlemen emphasized a gracious way of life and a sense of political duty. They were mostly the relatives of the courtly Cavaliers. A classic example of Southern Gentlemen literature is William Byrd's *Secret Diary*. From Byrd’s diary, we can conclude that religion and religious observances had less significance in colonial Virginia than in Puritan New England.

Another important work from this period is *The General History*. In it, Captain John Smith is portrayed as a strong, self-confident and adept leader -- the only true hero in the colony. A key reason for this favorable portrayal is that the author was also the story’s hero: John Smith.
THE GREAT AWAKENING

The Great Awakening was a time of religious revival in the American colonies between the years 1735 and 1742. It occurred in response to the fact that Puritanism was beginning to lose its strong grip over people's lives. The Great Awakening preached a return to basic Puritan beliefs.

The Great Awakening created a division between the Old Lights and the New Lights. The Great Awakening encouraged a very emotional involvement with God expressed by ecstatic experiences that were often counterfeited - - - a fact that concerned the leaders of the movement. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield are two notable figures from this movement.

Jonathan Edwards' “Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God” is probably not typical of his sermons. The majority of his sermons were actually pretty warm and heartfelt, but he is best known for this one because it typified the religious zeal of the times. “Sinners In The Hands of an Angry God” spoke of the fierce fires of hell just waiting to burn and torture the souls of sinners.

Personal Narrative is Jonathan Edwards' spiritual autobiography in which he puts his own experience with grace and salvation to the test.

THE AGE OF REASON

The Age of Reason stressed the inevitability of progress and natural law. It viewed nature as a self-contained machine such as a watch. According to the beliefs of the Age
of Reason, the faculty of reason could be used by humans to manage themselves and their societies without depending on authority and tradition. The Age of Reason also held that man could progress socially with the use of his reason.

Deism became popular during this time. Deism is more a philosophy than a religion. It rejects the idea of a personal, emotional relationship with God. Instead it emphasizes a somewhat distant, rational relationship with God (who is identified as just a spiritual being of a higher plane, and not necessarily a Christian God). Agnosticism and Unitarianism closely resemble Deism.

Political writing dominated the American Age of Reason. Benjamin Franklin, Joel Barlow, and John Trumbull are important figures from this period. Their ideas, and the Age of Reason in general, were greatly influenced by the writings of John Locke, Sir Isaac Newton, and Edmund Burke. Burke and Locke were political philosophers, and Newton was a scientist most famous for his theories about physics and gravity.

Reason thrived on freedom of speech, freedom from rulers, freedom to experiment and to question existing laws and institutions. So, it is no wonder that this philosophy made conditions ripe for revolution in the colonies. The Revolutionary War used the social contract theory as a reason for action. The social contract theory was developed by John Locke. This theory stresses the importance of leaders having the consent of the governed. The revolutionaries believed that their leader, the King of England, did not have their consent, so war was therefore an appropriate course of action. American leaders at the time of the Revolutionary War believed in government by social contract.
The Revolutionary War created and cemented a sense of nationalism. It gave rise to political independence and a sense of destiny. The Revolutionary War did not, however, result in complete artistic independence from England.

One of the important literary works to come out of this era was Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography. According to the author himself, Benjamin Franklin wrote his Autobiography as an example from which his descendants might reap the benefits. Practicality was one of the primary characteristics of Franklin's life.

Phillis Wheatley was another important writer. Her poetry was very famous during her own lifetime. However, Phillis Wheatley fell from success because she married a scoundrel who took the manuscript of her poems with him when he fled prison to North Carolina.

Joel Barlow was another poet from this era. The Hasty Pudding is a well-known work of his. He was very involved in politics and criticizing the English attitude towards the colonies. While in England, Joel Barlow became a radical and a deist.

Thomas Paine's pamphlet Common Sense was published during this time. The Declaration of Independence is another important political documents from this period. The Declaration of Independence was put into writing because the American people, respecting the opinions of all mankind, felt required to state their reasons for separation.
THE TRANSITION PERIOD

During the transition from the Age of Reason (Classicism) to Romanticism, the United States solidified as a nation. Philip Freneau is an important American poet because he broke out of the restrictions of neoclassical imitation and looked at life in a new, imaginative, and sensitive way.

ROMANTICISM

Romanticism is characterized by the intuitive experience expressed in literature. Imagination plays an important role in Romantic literature. It viewed nature as an organic process, undergoing constant development, and change. It encouraged the sense of nationalism begun earlier and helped to create a truly significant national literature.

The early Romantics supported the emphasis of reason over passion, the idea of man’s capacity to grow, and an organic conception of life. In contrast to their predecessors who wrote during the Age of Reason, the Romantics did not believe that the common good was more important than the individual.

The short stories of Washington Irving embody the important characteristics of early Romantic literature:

1. An emphasis on the irrational side of humans, mystery, and the supernatural world.
2. An effort to establish a common and uniquely American history and character.
3. A nationalistic tone.
4. A fascination with wilderness and the individual.

Washington Irving first established his career with the publication of *The Sketch Book.*