**AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE MID- TO LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

As was with Britain loomed ever closer, many American prose writers began abandoning early Puritanical concerns with religion and took to politics. In an age of increasing scientific rationalism, new ideas about equality and liberty circulated in Europe. A new and more educated American middle class, conscious of its national identity and less enslaved to the rigours of Puritanism, emerged during the mid 1700s. This was the age of the orator and pamphlet writer whose ‘literary’ efforts were to prove decisive in galvanizing public opinion behind the inevitable drive towards independence. Indeed, following Stamp Act (1765) dozens of revolutionary pamphlets were published. Undoubtedly the two most prominent ‘literary’ figures of the times were **Benjamin Franklin** (1706 – 1790) and **Thomas Paine** (1737 – 1809). Statesman, inventor, publisher and printer, Franklin rapidly became a spokesman for American interests and declared his open hostility towards Britain in a number of clear and concisely written pamphlets and political satires. Full of the practically-minded common sense attitudes of the American middle classes, *Poor Richard’s Almanack* was written and edited annually by Franklin between 1733 and 1758. Its pithy proverbs and prudent observations appealed greatly to the public of the time. Franklin will, however, be chiefly remembered for his unfinished *Autobiography* (1771), a highly influential rags to riches account of the ‘self made man’. The ‘Declaration of Independence’ (1776), perhaps the greatest expression of political liberty in prose, was drafted with the help of Franklin, although Thomas Jefferson must take most of the credit for its composition. Thomas Paine’s clear and forceful prose works, *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Crisis* (1776 – 1783), were highly influential in encouraging and sustaining American morale during the War of Independence. His The Rights of Man (1791) defended the cause of the revolutionaries in France, although the principles it extols are of universal concern.

An interest in the identity and character of America and its people grew as the country began to establish itself. The epistolary essays of an Americanized Frenchman, **Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecœur** (1735 – 1813), did much to satisfy the public curiosity in this respect: his Letters from an American Farmer (1782) and his most famous essay, *What is an American*? were to prove influential on later American writers.

Poetry offers little of interest during this turbulent period, much American verse harking back to the models of eighteenth-century neo-classical poetry in Britain. Most verse of the time was written in New England. **Philip Freneau** (1752 – 1832) was a New Yorker given to writing patriotic poems and political satires, although he is chiefly remembered for his simple nature lyrics, which were often thought to herald the arrival of early romantic poetry. A group of poets called the ‘Connecticut Wits’ (John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, David Humphreys and Joel Barlow) exhibited a desire for a new ‘national’ literature liberated from the trappings of European verse models, although much of their verse continued the tradition of English satire. From their time on, however, Americans were to show greater interest in the formation of specifically ‘American’ as opposed to pseudo-English literature.

**THE NEW CONSTITUTION (1783 – 1820)**

The thirteen colonies of pre-revolutionary America were called ‘states’ after the Treaty of Paris in 1783: together they formed the ‘United States of America’. Each of the states was originally responsible for its own laws and constitution, although under the Articles of Confederation, drawn up in 1781, a federal government had been set up in an effort to unify the states with regard to foreign policy. This was shown to be insufficient, however, since the federal government was powerless to impose and collect taxes, raise money for national defense or regulate the new nation’s trade. Delegates from twelve of the states got together in Philadelphia in 1787 to discuss the problems and, under the presidency of George Washington, agreed to abandon the Articles of Confederation in favor of a new constitution.

This new constitution provided for both federal and state powers, and was divided up into three branches: the executive, responsible for the implementation of laws; the legislature, divided up into the House of Representatives (where the number of seats for each state depended on population size) and the Senate (regardless of size, all states were to be represented equally), responsible for the making of laws; and finally the Judiciary, or federal court system. A balanced and flexible constitution, it succeeded in welding the states together into one solid political unit. Washington became the first President of the United States in 1789. Two years later the Bill of Rights, a series of ten amendments to the Constitution, provided further guarantees with regard to individual rights, including the right to trial by jury and freedom of speech, religion and the press.

**Thomas Jefferson**

The new nation faced considerable financial difficulties following the exhaustive war with Britain, but the skill of its leaders and the response of American people ensured that these difficulties were eventually overcome. Guided by Alexander Hamilton, federal law was imposed in order to collect taxes, which helped ease the burden of national debt. Despite opposition on the part of the gifted southern politician, Thomas Jefferson, a national bank was chartered for twenty years in 1791.

The 1790s saw the development of two political parties: Hamilton and his followers – mainly from the north – formed the Federalist Party which favored strong federal government and support for Britain in international disputes. In the south, Jefferson and his followers established the Democratic Republican Party: they advocated a less centralized form of government and were more inclined to support France in their foreign policy. Jefferson became President of the United States in 1800 and was re-elected in 1804. His vision of democracy, later known as ‘Jeffersonian democracy’, consisted of a firm belief in America as a nation of small farmers whose lives should be as little encumbered by central government as possible.

In 1803 Jefferson carried out the Louisiana Purchase whereby the United States paid $ 15 million to France for the area of land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. This purchase effectively doubled the area of US controlled territory: thirteen new states were later created from this vast area of rich agricultural land.

**THOMAS PAINE (1737–1809)**

"**Common Sense**“ (1776) - a 50-page pamphlet considered to be his most famous work. After the battles of Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775), which were the first military engagements of the American Revolutionary War, Paine argued that America should not simply revolt against taxation, but demand independence from Great Britain entirely. He expanded this idea in the pamphlet.

**‘CRISIS’ PAPERS**

During the war, Paine served as volunteer personal assistant to General Nathanael Greene, traveling with the Continental Army. While not a natural soldier, Paine contributed to the patriot cause by inspiring the troops with his 16 "Crisis" papers, which appeared between 1776 and 1783. **"The American Crisis. Number I**" was published on December 19, 1776, and began: "These are the times that try men's souls." Washington's troops were being decimated, and he ordered that the pamphlet be read to all of his troops at Valley Forge, in hopes of inflaming them to victory. Plain language used by common people.

THE AMERICAN CRISIS. NUMBER I. BY THE AUTHOR OF COMMON SENSE.

*THESE are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly:— It is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to set a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared, that she has a right (not only to TAX) but*

*to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,*

*and if being bound in that manner is not slavery, then there is not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious, for so unlimited a power can belong only to GOD.*

Paine was “a great simplifier who did not bother with qualifications and alternatives.” He believed that man is naturally the friend of man and that human nature is benign.

Paine argues that man is a rational animal who will naturally pursue his own self-interest.

He claimed: “Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness,” and “Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil.” Paine finds the “origin and rise of government” in “the inability of moral virtue to govern the world.”

***The Age of Reason***

In place of revelation, myth, the Bible, and the miraculous, Paine substitutes nature to substantiate his religious beliefs. He acknowledges “that there is a power superior to all… and that power is God.” Yet he denies the traditional arguments of Christian theology.

Aspects that make Paine’s style effective:

* Apt use of anecdote
* Humor
* Oversimplification
* Effective metaphor and imagery
* Rhetorical devices such as: alliteration, repetition, summary.

**WAR WITH BRITAIN**

Only through adroit political management did America succeed in avoiding involvement in the war between France and Britain between 1793 and 1815. The peace ended in 1812 when the United States went to war with Britain following the latter’s continued interference with American trade and shipping: in 1814 the British captured the city of Washington and burnt the Capitol and other government buildings. A fervent tide of nationalist sentiment followed and many Americans volunteered to fight against the British. The war ended in 1814 with very little gained by either side, although Americans had acquired new self confidence and unity.

**THE ‘ERA OF GOOD FEELING’**

The peaceful period which followed the war is sometimes known as ‘The Era of Good Feeling’, imbued as it was with a spirit of unity, optimism and peace. By 1819 the population had grown from 3, 240, 000 to over 9 million. America concentrated on its own affairs, adopting, in 1816, a form of economic protectionism known as the ‘American System’. Under this system domestic manufacturers benefited from the tariffs imposed on imported goods. A new Bank of the United States was chartered in the same year and the transport system (most notably the National Road) was improved; many national building projects were undertaken. New territories in the form of the Red River Basin and Florida were added in 1818 and 1819 respectively.

This prevailing spirit of optimism and wellbeing was, however, undermined by an issue which was later to prove decisive in affecting the course of events: slavery. In contrast to their southern neighbours, many northerners increasingly saw slavery as an abomination and began strongly hinting at its eventual abolition. The retired Jefferson correctly interpreted the growing conflict between the two parties as an indication of imminent disaster. It was, he said, ‘like a fireball in the night’. The spirit of nationalism uniting the American people after 1812 was, then, tempered by an opposing tendency towards sectionalism based on conflicting economic and social outlooks in different parts of the country.

**LITERARY CONTEXT**

Political independence preceded by a good number of years literary autonomy in the United States, and it was still to be some time before American writers were in a position to speak of a truly ‘national’ literature. English models continued to prevail, especially in the south, and writers found it difficult to compete with British authors, whose works were sold in inexpensive editions all over the country. There was a sense that other things were of greater importance than literature during this age of transition. General Washington argued that American genius was scientific rather than imaginative, a view which Franklin did much encourage.

An important landmark in the development of an independent cultural identity was the publication of the first American dictionary in 1806. Its compiler, Noah Webster, insisted that American usage was as good as British usage, and argued that, ‘As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of language as well as in government.’

Despite the differences between north and south, demand for a national literature began to grow as the country developed a more united sense of identity. Before 1800 Franklin had attracted international attention, but more as a scientist and statesman than as a writer. Only with **Washington Irving** (1783-1859) did the United States gain its first truly internationally recognized author of prose. As the English novelist Thackeray was to remark, ‘Irving was the first ambassador whom the New World of letters sent to the Old.’

New York was becoming the centre of literary activity in America at the time, and Irving – a New Yorker himself – established his reputation with a collection of satirical essays and poems on the inhabitants of Manhattan in *The Salmagundi Papers* (1807). *The Satirical Knickerbocker’s History of New York* (1809) confirmed his talents, but it was with the publication of *The Sketch Book* ten years later that his international reputation was secured. While dealing with American themes, many of the essays and tales contained within his volume took their inspiration from old European folk stories: *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* are among the most famous tales in his book. Thus Irving is credited with showing that the short story was the American literary form par excellence.

The novel also made its first appearance in America during this period. **William Hill Brown** (1765-1793) wrote an epistolary novel about tragic, incestuous love called *Power of Sympathy* (1789). Close to the English novelist, Richardson, in its sentimental style, it was the first American novel to be published. Modelling his works on the Gothic novels of late eighteenth-century England, **Charles Brockden Brown** (1771-1810) is known as the ‘Father of the American novel’. Horror and terror are characteristics of his works, the most famous of which are *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntley* (1799).

With one notable exception, **William Cullen Bryant** (1794-1878), very little was achieved in the field of poetry during these years. Bryant was known as the ‘American Wordsworth’. He was heavily influenced first by Pope and then by the English Romantics, in particular those of the so called ‘Graveyard School’. At the age of only 17 he wrote his most famous poem, *Thanatopsis* (Greek for ‘a view of death’), but it was not published until 1817. He secured his reputation with the publication of *Poems* in 1821.