THE LITERATURE OF REASON AND REVOLUTION

* The 18th century in America – the Age of **Reason**, the Age of **Neoclassicism**, and the Age of **Engligthenment**.
* New men – scientists, religious rationalists, political philosophers – cool to organized religion and critical of governments.
* Ideas – rooted in the classical worlds of Greece and Rome, in the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation.
* The Age of Reason – developed first in the 17th century England, spread through France and Europe, and finally came to the English colonies in America in the 18th century.
* Descartes (1596 – 1727) – rejection of medieval authoritarianism.
* An age of great discoverers – Isaac Newton – revealed that the universe is not a mystery moving at the whim of an inscrutable God but a mechanism operating by a rational formula that can be understood by any intelligent man or woman.
* Men of the Age of Reason sought order everywhere in the natural world – and found it, not in religion but in the new science.
* Tomas Paine declared that proof of God is not to be found in the Bible but in nature, that perfect expression of God’s omnipotent goodness.
* Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine – continued to doubt miracles and scriptural revelation. They believed in reason rather than in saints.
* From Theism to Deism
* People started to believe that human society must also operate by natural laws.
* The idea of progress – one of the dominant concepts of the age.
* There arose movements for social betterment, for humanitarianism: charities, prison reform; sympathy for the Indian, the slave, the poor, the oppressed.
* Society became eager for political change, they sought salvation through rebellion.
* Calvinist view – mankind of innately evil (original sin) – attacked
* John Locke’s view – *tabula rasa* (human beings were born neither good nor bad; all was the result of experience.
* Writers took their literary models and critical maxims from Greek and Roman literary works (classic – neoclassicism) The ancient ideals of clarity, decorum, and regularity became the measures of 18th century art. Literature was to avoid the ornate, the extravagant, the bombastic. Writing was to exhibit “clear sense” and “mathematical plainness”.
* Prose should approach the rhythm of cultivated speech;
* Poetry should be written in the measured cadances of the heroic couplet;
* Drama should observe the unities of time, place, and action.
* In 1783, the year the United States achieved its independence, Noah Webster declared, “America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics, as famous for the arts as for arms.”
* The first American novel, William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy*, did not appear until 1789. The first popular American novel, Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), was first published in England. Both were based vaguely on American events, but they followed closely the tradition established by the English novelist Samuel Richardson, whose *Pamela* (1740) set a standard for didactic sentimentalism that long dominated American fiction.
* The moral temper of the colonies discouraged development of drama. A Pennsylvania law of 1700 prohibited stage plays and other “rude and riotous” sports.”
* Theater – indecent and corrupting, “dangerous to the soul of men”
* Professional actors – thought to spread sickness, immorality and lice.
* The first American play (Thomas Godfrey’s The Prince of Parthia) was not presented until 1767.
* While imaginative literature in America remained derivative and dependent, the heroic revolutionary ambitions of the age were creating great political pamphleteering and state papers.