Timeline of American Literary History

Puritan Period
1607 to 1765
PURITANS

• Puritans wished to have their feelings radically changed, an experience called GRACE—
  – wished to cleanse themselves of envy, vanity, lust so as to love God and God’s creations wholeheartedly
  – Bible-reading, church-going, prayer ALONE cannot change you— you need the GRACE of God
• Valued PLAINNESS, especially in religion
  – no elaborate cathedrals, but simple, square, wooden buildings (meetinghouses) painted white and devoid of ornamentation
  – dress was simple and understated

• Puritans believed that they were carrying to America true Christianity as decreed by God—therefore viewed their lives in the New World as a DIVINE MISSION
Plain Style vs. Ornate Style

• Puritans preferred **plain style** (simple words in clear order) to **ornate style** (learned references, odd sentence structure, difficult words)  **WHY?**
  – Puritans believed themselves to be the correct interpreters of God’s commandments as revealed in the Bible.
  – So...God’s words could not be improved by human decoration
  – Wanted God’s words to be clear to people of every level of intelligence
Plain Style vs. Ornate Style

• Also... Many felt style suited to the rawness of the New World.

• Best definition of plain style:
  – **Benjamin Franklin**- writing should be “smooth, clear, and short.”

• Later American writers using plain style in various degrees:
  – Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Ernest Hemingway
SOURCES OF AMERICAN 
THOUGHT, ART, LITERATURE
ORIGINAL SIN

• Serpent (Satan) in Garden of Eden tempted Eve with forbidden fruit, Eve tempted Adam—God introduces death to the world, along with heaven and hell.
  
  — “In Adam’s fall, / We sinned all.”— everyone was born flawed, sinful and thus subject to control by a priesthood.

• Original Sin held for centuries— the Church used it to wield power
  
  — Fear of Hell ... constant terror among Puritans
Martin Luther (1483-1546)

- People born without sin but developed a taste for it
- Doctrine of *incurvatus se*, the “inner eye” or “inward looking”:
  - We begin to look inside instead of outward toward God.

John Calvin (1509-1564)

- Because of Original Sin, humans are born depraved (“Original Depravity”). People were so low that God was not obligated to save anyone from damnation. However, God is good so he would save a few.
Source: