

ILLUMINATING THE AMERICAN LITERARY LANDSCAPE: THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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***Abstract.** This article provides The Enlightenment period in America from the 18th to the early 19th century was a period of intellectual and philosophical growth. This period saw a shift towards reason, science and individualism, which greatly influenced the literature of the time. In this article, we will look at how the ideas of the Enlightenment, which shaped the works of famous writers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson, appeared in American literature.*

***Keywords.** Intellectual, individualism, literature, shift towards, philosophical.*

The Enlightenment, that great age of intellectual inquiry and discovery that stretched from roughly 1680 to 1820, drew fundamentally from the European colonization of the Americas. The discovery of the New World prompted a flurry of new questions about society, government, art, religion, and nature. The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was an intellectual and cultural movement in the eighteenth century that emphasized reason over superstition and science over blind faith. The Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that dominated in Europe during the 18th century, was centered around the idea that reason is the primary source of authority and legitimacy, and advocated such ideals as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state. The American Enlightenment applied scientific reasoning to politics, science, and religion. It promoted religious tolerance and restored literature, arts, and music as important disciplines worthy of study in colleges.

A non-denominational moral philosophy replaced theology in many college curricula. The Enlightenment was vital to the American Revolution and the creation of American Government. The Enlightenment beliefs that influenced the American Revolution were natural rights, the social contract, and the right to overthrow the government if the social contract was violated. The aim of this article, however, and its approach in dealing with the Enlightenment in general, i.e. its American version in particular, is to describe and analyze the positions of three important figures of the American Enlightenment and the American Revolution – Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, taking into account the complex economic, social, political and epistemological changes which happened during the 18th century. What needs to be emphasized concerning these deep structural changes is that they cannot be removed from the development of a new system of socioeconomic relations of production, and that is capitalism. This is not to say that, for example, the philosophy and intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, or prominent figures of the Enlightenment, should be reduced to and be equated with capitalism, and therefore reduced to a deterministic and crude class analysis. But rather that the context of a rising capitalism system exerted its influence upon a wide array of concepts which were either being created in the 18th century, or were being reshaped during the same period, and which are still dominant today. Benjamin Franklin was an important American scientist, inventor, and printer who was part of the larger Enlightenment, or Age of Reason. The Enlightenment was an international conversation of ideas that took place in the eighteenth century to increase and classify knowledge about the natural world and human condition through reason and experimentation. Scientists and other thinkers joined learned scientific societies, corresponded with one another, and published their discoveries in scientific journals. Their goals were to improve society and humanity. Benjamin founded the first public lending library in the colonies, the Library Company of Philadelphia, to promote civic knowledge and virtue. He also helped found a hospital, a fire company, and the militia. Paine was born of a

Quaker father and an Anglican mother. His formal education was meagre, just enough to enable him to master reading, writing, and arithmetic. At 13 he began work with his father as a corset maker and then tried various other occupations unsuccessfully, finally becoming an officer of the excise. Paine's life in England was marked by repeated failures. He was unsuccessful or unhappy in every job he tried. Just when his situation appeared hopeless, he met Benjamin Franklin in London, who advised him to seek his fortune in America and gave him letters of introduction. Paine arrived in Philadelphia on November 30, 1774. Bache introduced him to Robert Aitkin, whose Pennsylvania Magazine Paine helped found and edit for 18 months. In addition, Paine published numerous articles and some poetry, anonymously or under pseudonyms. One such article was "African Slavery in America," a scathing denunciation of the African slave trade, which he signed "Justice and Humanity." Paine helped to inspire the Patriots in 1776 to declare independence from Great Britain. His ideas reflected Enlightenment-era ideals of human rights. Thomas Jefferson is an American statesman, author of the Declaration of Independence, 3rd President of the United States, politician, diplomat and philosopher. It was his intention to make the University of Virginia a haven for intellect and enlightenment. Jefferson believed that through education, all men were equal in their rights of choice based in all subjects. The ideology of the Enlightenment was expressed by all of the founding fathers.

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