**Lecture Two: Democracy & Revolutionary Literature**

This crucial period in American history marked an equally and concurrent period in intellectual and literary production. This was a high time of defining the American character: *what is American? Who are Americans?* American literature of late 18th and early 19th century strived to answer these questions. Works of Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and the later Ralph Waldo Emerson were heavily engaged in this debate aiming to find a definition for the American character on both levels: the individual and the community.

**Socio-Political and Intellectual Scene:**

The American society moved slowly but progressively from the strict puritan grip toward more tolerant and accepting individualism. This process was not really radical, though producing drastic shift in American thought; it moved shiftingly from one phase to another. The *Great Awakening*marked the beginning of this progress. It is the era between 1730-1750, where preachers addressed the hearts of American people rather than the discourse of obedience and strict moral rules of the puritan thought. Jonathan Edwards was the greatest preacher and writer of the era. He was very active in theology and natural sciences. Gradually, the intellectual scene adopted *Individualism,* based on European philosophy of John Locke and Isaac Newton, arguing that universe is a constructed (or rather created) on schemes of order and balance. Thus, reality could not be fully comprehended only through reason and intellect. This perspective, of course, goes against the puritan belief that asserts the creation of world according to Godly plans far from human understanding and could be achieved only through revelation and gnosticism. Later, the growing interest in human, as a reasonable being, helped the spread of movements to extend individual rights, such as abolition of slavery, Native American rights, women’s rights, etc. The sum of the two phases, or world philosophies, led to the emergence of a completely different system of belief: *Deism.* Deists are mostly intellectual and men of letter who do believe in a benevolent Creator, but reject anything that could not be reasonably proven.

On the political scene, the most important event, which indeed started the nation-state, was the American Revolution (1775-1783). Simultaneously, on the international level, Europe witnessed what is later referred to as the Age of Reason or Enlightenment. This philosophy asserts that human reason is the ultimate means of evaluation for both natural and social sciences, unlike the old puritan thought that sees man as a sinful failure. All over the Western world, Enlightenment grew increasingly and steadily: people were moving from a God-centered world to a man-centered world. John Locke planted the belief that people could govern themselves, control their fate and destiny. Aristocrats in northern American colonies, even before the revolution, built saloons and libraries (inspired by the Greco-Roman architecture of Athenaeums), where citizens could go and read a book or listen to a debate. The architecture was similar to Greek and Roman landmarks, symbolizing democratic tradition in the great Western civilization. These buildings were metaphors of American ideals of equality and freedom.

Along with the fight for political independence, American thinkers, who were also military generals or state diplomats, wanted to become culturally independent. This issue was the main concern of leaders and thinkers of the Founding Fathers. Since the new nation was morally and intellectually adrift, moving with no direction nor clear purpose, new culture was needed to direct the American people. Enlightenment ideas and the growth of printing industry helped the spread of moral essays, a genre of short texts about political and social matters written in a literary style. This made *Common sense* known by almost every citizen in American colonies.

**Main Authors:**

While Common Sense is the most important text during the revolution and afterwards, Benjamin Franklin was the most important figure. A self-educated, self-made man, he authentically represented the American Dream. He rejected the Puritan belief of original sin and believed that man is born like a tabula rasa (blanc paper), where he could shape his own destiny. He writes that the individual could improve himself and thus serve the his/her community (self-improvement meant national improvement). His writings were in a funny plain style, full of moral values, with practical information and instructions for farmers and workers, most of the time. Many of his sayings are still used in American culture: “*God helps them who help themselves*.” And “*Lost time is never found again.*” His *The Way to Wealth*, a collection of sayings is still sold all over the globe. He even developed a technique of writing known as “hoax” a story that is clearly untrue, humorous and expresses moral values. His *Autobiography* is of great values in American literature. Later on, the form of autobiographies written in literary style became an important style for American authors and thinkers. Frederic Douglass, for instance, wrote about educating himself and how he worked hard to better off.

Other politicians also wrote pamphlets, some in favor of the monarchy, and others for the revolution and independence, but the most important text was Thomas Paine’s. Born in England, the author met Benjamin Franklin and was convinced by the latter to go to America. In addition to *Common Sense,* he wrote pamphlets during the Revolutionary Era: *The Crisis* (a series of 13 pamphlets) and *The Rights of Man* which supports the French Revolution.

Thomas Jefferson was also one of the founding fathers and the writer of the constitution, which is considered as the most important official document in the history of the United States. Building on John Locke’s philosophy, the text is in plain, direct style, logical flow of ideas and free from emotional appeals (though written in difficult times of war). He published other works, too: *Notes on the State of Virginia* is a beautiful description of the new founded state and also known for condemning slavery (though Jefferson had owned slaves before writing this notes). As a typical Enlightenment thinker, he sees goodness in man and invited people to not depend on God, but on themselves.

**Food for Thought:**

The following are some questions I sought to write here for students to enlarge their personal perspective about the importance of this era and the literary productions published at the time:

* Would you consider the founding fathers as anti-Christian radicals or humanitarian figures who cared more about citizens’ welfare?
* In his 13 virtues, Franklin listed virtues in terms of concepts and brief instructions: “***Temperance****. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.* ***Silence****. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.”* the last one goes thus: “***Humility****. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.”* Why do you think Ben mentioned the two in the last virtue?
* In the writing of Ben Franklin, he addresses the American Dream, but were the opportunities equally distributed among all Americans? Was the American Dream myth or reality?