

Cats, Dogs, and Idle Fools: Education in Early America

America today is a nation of readers. Literacy is something that is expected, permeating our society. Popular culture might not promote the consumption of classic texts, but it makes good use of written language, sealing the importance of language in contemporary American culture. When people think about literature, they don't usually think about the alphabet; the category of literature is associated with dense, tricky texts dredged up by academics. Without learning the basics, though, it would be impossible to tackle these more difficult texts—or any others. The alphabet anchors early education and has done so since the founding of this country. Today's culture of letters builds on a long tradition of literacy education that can be traced back to Puritan schoolbooks of the 18th century. The educational primers of Puritan New England predate the Constitution, the Revolutionary War, and even the Declaration of Independence, laying the foundations of a culture steeped in words. The methods used to teach reading and writing have changed dramatically since the 18th century, but childhood education remains an important factor in shaping American society today. From its roots in 18th century Puritan primers, childhood education in America is built on a tradition of constantly evolving texts that blend nature, religion, and the rudiments of language to impart foundational beliefs about language and children's place in the world.

The New-England Primer was one of the earliest and most popular educational texts in early America, dominating classrooms for over a century. Printed and reprinted, the *Primer* appeared in various forms, adapting to different temporal and spatial contexts, but retaining its core values and teachings. Scholar Daniel Cohen estimates that six to eight million copies of *The New-England Primer* were printed between 1680 and 1830 (53). The earliest surviving copy of the *Primer* is from 1727, but its origins date back to 17th century London, though it is somewhat

unclear who printed it first (Cohen 53-55). The text evolved along with American identity, transitioning from a European colony to an independent nation, but although religious content and references to governmental structures fluctuated, the core values and structure were retained (Roberts 496). Kyle Roberts cautions against “thinking of the *Primer* as a backward-looking vehicle for the transmission of ‘Puritan’ values” due to the “forward-looking ways in which the text engaged with the religious, political, and economic transformations happening across America” (493). Although *The New-England Primer* is often considered a stable, historical artifact, it actually reflects a fluidity of meaning linked to the evolution of American identity.

The term “primer” originally referred to a prayer book or devotional guide for laypeople, but its definition evolved to mean “introductory reading text” (Monaghan 84). Cohen argues that one of the reasons the *Primer* was established as a cornerstone of early American education was that it was well-suited not only to the “stern Puritan ethic of the New England community,” but also to the “equally austere New England landscape” (52). *The New-England Primer* was embedded in the very land for which it was named, linking literacy to nature and grounding education in the natural world. The 1727 *Primer* begins with the alphabet and introduction to common words of one, two, three, and four syllables, then transitions to a series of prayers, catechisms, and other religious materials (*The New-England Primer*).¹ Written in question-and-answer form, catechisms communicated basic Christian beliefs and by design, encouraged children to memorize predetermined answers to questions posed by their parents or teachers (Monaghan 85). Unlike the Bible, catechisms varied depending on the author’s beliefs and values, reflecting a particular individual’s interpretation of God’s word rather than presenting one fixed meaning of a sacred text (Monaghan 86).

¹ Note that 1727 *The New-England Primer* is not paginated so in-text citations will not include page numbers.

One of the *Primer's* most striking features is the illustrated alphabet that appears at its beginning. Although some of the images and rhymes changed to reflect temporal and geographical differences in different editions, adapting to new contexts, the pictorial alphabet was one of the *Primer's* key components that was consistently included regardless of version (Roberts 493). Best known for its memorable first rhyme: "In Adam's Fall/We Sinned All," *The New-England Primer* introduces Puritan children to the doctrine of original sin before they had even learned the alphabet (*New-England Primer*). A curious mix of everything from the tenets of Puritan theology to rhymes about animals, this introduction to literacy is very different from the books that children read today. It is worth noting that although many of the rhymes include biblical references, tying literacy to the spiritual, many of the images were actually inspired by tavern and inn signs. Graphics featuring the Bible and Heart, Lion and Lamb, Royal Oak, and the Cat and the Fiddle originated in secular, economic settings rather than spiritual (Monaghan 99-100). In this way, nature and the realities of daily life crept into the alphabet, blending the earthly with the supernatural. The three-way intersection of reading, religion, and reality in this text suggests the close connection between these domains in Puritan culture.

Scholar Patricia Crain observes that the association of an image and rhyme with each letter gives the alphabet a kind of meaning that it otherwise lacks (18). Moreover, the meaning attached to each letter reflects something about the culture that produced *The New-England Primer*. Crain writes that, "Where a culture goes to make sense of itself is where the alphabet too scavenges" (18). Although individual letters taken by themselves do not have inherent meaning, their association with rhymes and images imparts meaning relevant to a particular snapshot in time. Crain also points out that beginning the alphabet with "Adam's fall" frames literacy as mastering "fallen language" (39). While reading was of the utmost importance in Puritan culture

because it allowed people to experience the word of God, conceiving of language as “fallen” also seems to acknowledge the limits of written communication. Letters, like people, are imperfect and cannot fully overcome original sin. According to Crain, the rhyme associated with “A” prompts readers to interpret the rest of the alphabet, and perhaps words in general, as connected to the spiritual project of the Puritans. Though many of the rhymes are secular in nature, beginning with a hard-hitting rhyme that communicated a tenet of Puritan ideology sets up a framework to be used in understanding the rest of the alphabet (Crain 43). Since the alphabet is the most fundamental building block of literacy, this framing technique also informs the concept of reading in general, dictating how and why one should read.

Two rhymes in particular emphasize the importance of reading, connecting language to both the hope of salvation and physical existence. After the gloomy introduction to Adam’s fall in the “A” rhyme, the reader is offered some hope in the next rhyme: “Thy Life to Mend/This Book Attend” (*New-England Primer*). Reading offers a way out, a path to potential spiritual redemption despite the inevitable sin that forever clouds humanity. Literacy is connected to spiritual salvation, making it a solemn and high stakes endeavor. Jumping ahead, the rhyme for “H” reinforces the significance of learning to read: “My Book and Heart/Shall never part” (*New-England Primer*). The book goes unnamed, but considering the importance of the Bible in Puritan culture, it seems likely that the rhyme refers to the Bible. Alternatively, perhaps the book in question is currently the *Primer*, but ultimately refers to the Bible, a text for which the *Primer* provides a necessary stepping-stone. Either way, this rhyme reveals a strong connection between meaning and being, language and existence, both physical and spiritual. Invoking the heart suggests emotional commitment, but it also links words to the continuation of a person’s physical existence.

Although many of the rhymes in the *Primer* are directly connected to biblical stories and Puritan theology, nature also plays a significant role in the illustrated alphabet. Of the 26 rhymes, nine explicitly reference nature in some form (*The New-England Primer*). While it is tempting to take these rhymes at face value—easy for children to memorize and making simple statements about the natural world—the way that nature figures in these rhymes offers insight into the Puritan world view. The link between nature and culture is not necessarily a happy one and in many cases, nature is presented as hostile and unforgiving. Monaghan notes that in the pictorial alphabet of the *Primer*, “The natural world is savage at worst, indifferent to humanity at best; cats play then slap; dogs bite thieves at night; and as the eagle soars out of sight its savage intent is implicit” (100). The natural world is not a hospitable place and children are led to form an impression of nature as a force opposed to the orderliness of society. Starting with the alphabet, the nature of Puritan New England is conceptualized as a threat to society’s neat categorization of the world. However, God’s dominion easily trumps the power of the natural world, as shown in the “W” rhyme: “Whales in the Sea/God’s Voice obey” (*The New-England Primer*). Like humanity, nature is subject to God’s authority, placing the supernatural above the natural in the hierarchical structure of Puritan thought. While the natural world was unpredictable and fearsome, Puritan children could take comfort in the notion that God would deliver them this savagery.

Yet even in an introductory reading text like *The New-England Primer*, the Puritan view of nature is more nuanced than it might initially appear. The prevalence of nature in a text that is very much concerned with the supernatural suggests that the Puritans connected their earthly, everyday experiences to their relationship with the divine, using language as a link between the two realms. The natural world cannot be reduced to merely a savage wilderness, which becomes

clear in the last rhyme in the illustrated alphabet: “Zacheus he/Did climb the Tree/His Lord to see” (*The New-England Primer*). In this case, nature becomes a medium by which to access the supernatural, providing a means of connecting with God. Nature is not only a savage unknown, but also a bridge between humanity and God, suggesting some flexibility in the generally rigid hierarchical structure of Puritan culture. Language, in the form of the last letter of the alphabet, connects humanity, nature, and the divine, allowing Zacheus to use earthly means to access the spiritual. In nature, people can find their way to seeing more truly—seeing beyond the earthly. Although a tree was complicit in Adam’s fall, which plunged humanity from the divine garden to the punishment of earthly toil, the tree that appears at the end of the alphabet offers a means of salvation. Both the “A” and “Z” images feature a tree, bookending the illustrated alphabet, and using nature to frame this introduction to literacy. In Puritan literary tradition, nature acts as an intermediary between humanity and the supernatural as well as an unpredictable and wild force.

Not only does the natural world sometimes figure as a lurking threat in *The New-England Primer*, but other forms of danger loom over Puritan children as they learn their alphabet as well. For instance, “The Idle Fool/Is whipt at School” and “Time cuts down all/Both great and small” (*The New-England Primer*). Monaghan writes that “the overwhelming impression conveyed by the alphabet verses is that of danger and death. Animals may indulge their wild nature, but man does so at his peril” (101). Obedience to parents, teachers, and God is of the utmost importance; failure to heed one’s superiors is just cause for punishment. *The New-England Primer* is written for the “dutiful child” and reflects the rigidity of Puritan expectations (*The New-England Primer*). From the very beginning of their education, children were expected to act within strict boundaries demarcated by words. These rigid societal structures, communicated at a young age in conjunction with language acquisition, imparted a strong sense of limits and bounded a child’s

place in the world. David Watters explains that *The New-England Primer* “leads the child to envision a self limited by the authority of God and parents” (194). More specifically, the *Primer* presents God by way of various different metaphors, by which “Puritan children learn that these metaphors have a special linguistic authority sanctioned by the words of parents and the Word of God...The root metaphors of Calvinist theology operate in the *Primer* to define the child’s being in terms of human disobedience to God’s authority” (Watters 194). Meaning and being are entangled in the Puritan concept of self, as words convey authority and the child is reminded of “the limits of the self by pain, hunger, sleep, death, familiar, civil and religious custom and law” (Watters 195). As children learn their letters, they also learn their place in the world, both in relation to human society and in relation to the supernatural.

Words play a key role in maintaining the proper hierarchy of authority sanctioned by God, connecting language, action, and children’s spiritual fate. Even the dutiful child cannot escape the transience of life, another prominent theme in the illustrated alphabet and in the *Primer* in general. “Time cuts down all,” advises the rhyme for “T,” leaving no illusions about the brevity of life on earth (*The New-England Primer*). While hope for salvation comes from reading the Bible and accessing the supernatural, Puritan children learned early that earthly existence is marked by impermanence. Like the strict limits of divine and parental authority, human mortality also bounded a child’s place in the world, bounding his or her existence and capacity for growth. These limits are reinforced throughout *The New-England Primer*, beginning with the illustrated alphabet and continuing through the series of catechisms and prayers that follow it. In the 1727 version of the *Primer*, these values are further expounded in John Cotton’s “Milk for Babes,” a supplementary text at the end of the *Primer*. Written in catechism form, this text was intended to reinforce children’s understanding of Puritan theology and societal structure

by engaging in a preconceived dialogue with their parents, regurgitating the proper answers laid out by John Cotton.

The full title for John Cotton's addendum to the 1727 *Primer* is "Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes Drawn out of the Breaths of both Testaments, for their Souls Nourishment" (*New-England Primer*). This title reflects the intimate connection between words, or meaning, and one's physical state of being. In Puritan culture, words provided spiritual sustenance, which was vital to life, connecting the earthly to the divine. In order to navigate the earthly and engage with the spiritual, it was necessary to carefully attend to language, starting with the most basic introductory reading texts. For the Puritans, literacy was not merely the ability to interpret letters and make meaning of them; it was also a practice that connected people to God. Just as milk nourished children's bodies, words acted as nourishment for their souls. Moreover, the Bible's sacred texts had a kind of vitality—their "breath" provided the basic nutrients needed for children's souls to flourish. Children accessed this life-giving breath through their attainment of literacy, absorbing words to cultivate their spirituality just as they absorbed nutrients to support their physical growth. At the heart of the Puritan literary project was spiritual betterment and the cultivation of a personal relationship with God. From *The New-England Primer*, Puritan children learned that words were essential to sustaining the soul, paralleling the role that nature plays in sustaining the physical body.

John Cotton's "Milk for Babes" appeared in more than one educational primer during the early 18th century. The 1720 version of the so-called *Indian Primer* also included Cotton's spiritual nourishment for children. While it contained similar material to 1727 *New-England Primer*, *The Indian Primer* undertook a slightly different project than *The New-England Primer*. Although both aimed to promote literacy and cultivation of the Puritan faith, *The Indian Primer*

had the additional purpose of promoting cultural assimilation. In this text, the power of words is reinforced not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the manipulation of societal structures. During this era, European settlers became more insistent that the indigenous population of New England needed to learn English (Monaghan 78-79). In contrast to earlier educational manuals directed toward native populations, which typically focused on promoting religious conversion and literacy in their own language for the attainment of a personal relationship with God, this edition of the *Indian Primer* was the first to be written bilingually in Massachusett and English (Monaghan 67). This primer was intended not only to impart the rudiments of literacy and the basic principles of Christianity, but also impose the English language on native peoples. Words became a form of cultural control as well as a means of cultivating a personal relationship with the Puritan God.

While *The Indian Primer* contained much of the same content as *The New-England Primer* written for its white counterparts, its self-avowed purpose was to teach children to “know truly to read the Indian Language,” though just which language that might be was unspecified (*The Indian Primer* 3). By professing its project to be teaching *the* Indian language, the authors lump all indigenous Americans together as one homogenous mass, ignoring the diversity of the group they sought to assimilate into their own culture. Monaghan points out that in this literacy-directed assimilation process, reading was emphasized over writing because it was so much more important to the Puritan relationship with the divine (70). She also notes that by 1720, there was a critical shift in the attitude of English colonists toward their indigenous neighbors: “The English colonists were clearly losing confidence in a missionary enterprise that was conducted wholly in the language of the natives...Unlike the 1669 primer, which presented Christian texts such as the Lord’s Prayer without any evaluation of Indian character, almost every page of the

new version of 1720 fairly oozed with anti-Indian prejudice and negative stereotyping” (79). In early America, words were not only a powerful source of spiritual sustenance, they were also a means of wresting people considered outsiders into submitting to the rigid hierarchy of Puritan society.

By the end of the 18th century, *The New-England Primer* and *The Indian Primer* were joined by other types of educational materials, including various publications by Noah Webster, father of the American dictionary. Best known for his dictionary and spelling books, Webster also published *The Little Reader's Assistant*, which he describes as “a small book, containing familiar stories in plain language” (2). Intended for slightly more advanced readers than the primers, *The Little Reader's Assistant* contained an eclectic mix of romanticized stories about Columbus and Pocahontas, moral tales about good Christian children, an extensive grammar section, and finally two catechisms: the “federal catechism” and the “farmer’s catechism.” In other words, this small book imparted what Webster considered the fundamentals of American education. Although he makes good use of the classic Puritan medium for rote memorization, the catechism, Webster shifts its focus from Calvinist theology to government and farming, adapting it to a new context in American history. In *The Little Reader's Assistant*, the Puritan literary form of the catechism is adapted to fit the American farmer’s child of 1791, who growing up to be the citizen of an independent nation. The educational primers of the 1720s were written at a strikingly different time in American history than *The Little Reader's Assistant*; the transition from colony to independent country sparked changes in American identity, influencing approaches to teaching literacy along the way.

While *The Little Reader's Assistant* didn’t actually sell very well, it still offers insight into the values and beliefs of America at the close of the 18th century, providing contrast with the

Puritan primers that dominated the earlier half of the century. Richard Venezky observes that during the last decade of the 18th century, “the primer shed most of its religious materials and became primarily an introductory text, either for the speller or...the lowest level reader” (250). Although *The Little Reader’s Assistant* was “poorly received,” it nonetheless marks a new era in early literacy education in America (Venezky 250). Intended for children “when they first begin to read without spelling,” according to the advertisement at its beginning, *The Little Reader’s Assistant* is a modified form of primer. In keeping with foundational myths that persist today, Webster’s book opens with the story of Columbus, painted as a glorious hero who discovered a glowing new world for his European sponsors. Interestingly, Webster chooses to include a small and seemingly trivial anecdote about when Columbus was shipwrecked and wasn’t sure if he would survive the ordeal; his response was to write a “short account of his voyage” and seal it up in a cask so that his story might be preserved (5). While this seems like a small detail, Webster’s decision to include it reflects the continued importance of words and the significance of language in American culture. The recording of a story lends it weight and importance; without written record, the story of a person’s life is lost.

Immediately following the tale of Columbus is the story of Captain John Smith, another early hero of American mythology. In a romanticized tale that is perhaps best described as the 18th century precursor to today’s Disney film, a brief biography of the great hero is given, including his daring escapades amongst the savages of the so-called New World. True to the foundational myths that make up part of the American story, Pocahontas is described as a pretty Indian maiden who can’t bear to see Smith executed (Webster 10). The historical age gap between Smith and Pocahontas is preserved and her marriage to John Rolfe is mentioned; the moral of the story regarding women is that Pocahontas “would have done honor to Christianity

itself” and though she died young, she fulfilled her purpose in life by producing “illustrious” offspring (Webster 11). The moral intended for boys is that they ought to be good and brave, just like Captain Smith. These infamous rewritten tales form part of the mythological origins of America’s creation that persist into the present. While children today might learn a slightly more nuanced version of Columbus’ and John Smith’s stories, the mythological versions remain entangled in this country’s foundational tales.

Following a mix of liberally rewritten historical tales featuring courageous white settlers triumphing over savage Indians and generic stories designed to teach Christian morals, *The Little Reader’s Assistant* transitions to a grammar section, then Webster’s catechisms. The last portion of the book is the “Farmer’s Catechism,” intended to impart the “plain rules of husbandry—and calculated for the use of schools” (Webster 127). It begins boldly, asserting that the “best business a man can do” is farming because it is “the most necessary, the most helthy, the most innocent, and the most agreeable employment of men” (Webster 128). Not only does the “Farmer’s Catechism” offer practical advice regarding agricultural practices, but it also offers a rationale for why the farmer is the ideal citizen. In this series of questions and answers, Webster lays out an early form of the ideal of the American farmer, another prominent mythological figure in the American story we know today. In a sense, Webster’s elevation of the American farmer is a way of planting a pastoral ideal that persists into the present. Like the Puritans, who wholeheartedly believed in the plantation metaphor—that God had decreed that they should create thriving plantations in the soil of the New World—Webster articulates a root-metaphor that he plants in the minds of the “little readers” of his text. *The Little Reader’s Assistant* plants not just a romanticized portrait of the American farmer as ideal citizen but also plants a rewritten version of history in the minds of its readers. Adapting the classic primer and catechism forms,

Webster adapts Puritan educational models to address the needs of a farmer's child in 1791. The "Farmer's Catechism" carries on the link between nature, literacy, and religion put forth in early primers.

Looked at from a historical perspective, the unfolding of literacy education in America is interesting for its own sake, but what relevance do these dusty old primers have in today's world? Amusing, startling, and sometimes downright puzzling, these texts are a fundamental part of America's establishment as a nation built on words. The value we put on reading and writing in the present is connected to the power that words carried in Puritan New England. What we decide to teach children is indicative of the kind of society we live in and the kind of society we want to create. In other words, what we teach makes a difference. Introductory reading texts have something more to teach than merely the alphabet; they also reflect the beliefs and values of a particular snapshot in history. In attempting to better understand that snapshot, perhaps we can not only gain insight into America's literary beginnings, but also think more critically about what literacy means in America today. Beginning with the early Puritan primers, America was a land of letters even before it became an independent political entity and the legacy of these early letters persists today in a pervasive culture of literacy. Going back to the very beginning, to the alphabet, offers a new approach to understanding America's literary foundations. Even more importantly, exploring the educational texts of early America raises questions about the implications of what and how children today learn about nature, culture, and language.

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