

John Smith

Learning objectives

In unit 1 you will:

- realize how the unfamiliar environment of the New World provided the English explorers and settlers with a great diversity of experiences which demanded a variety of discourses and originated a wide range of literary formulations;
- learn how the adventurer and explorer Captain John Smith, expressing himself in the travel-writing tradition, chronicled the early days of the English colonization of America, and tried to entice his fellow countrymen to leave their homeland and settle in the New World;
- see how colonial policy was justified through the concept of “manifest destiny”: the notion that America made manifest the predestined expansion of European civilization, and therefore, that Europeans had the right to take possession of the whole continent;
- consider how the Native peoples of North America began to be portrayed by English explorers, and how the enduring national myth of Pocahontas was created;
- examine how Captain John Smith’s rhetorical process of self-fashioning and self-representation illustrates issues of reliability which are a matter of concern in the interpretation of many autobiographical literary texts.

Suggestions for how to proceed

Read the introduction to unit 1 (*American Literature to 1900*, pages 13-16) before you approach Captain Smith’s text itself (pages 17-20) so as to be previously acquainted with its biographical and historical context. A good procedure to tackle the excerpt from *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* is to skim it first just to get a general idea of its content, and then reread it carefully, paying special attention to the footnotes. Once you become familiar with the text, answer the ten questions for self-evaluation (pages 21-22), returning repeatedly to any passages that you need to look over, and finally check your choices with the help of the key (page 499). The following activity will show you how to answer exploratory questions 1-12, which you will find in the next section of the study unit (pages 22-24).

Activity

Answering exploratory questions

In each study unit of the coursebook *American Literature to 1900* you will find a series of exploratory questions which are meant to stimulate your personal inquiry if you are studying on your own. They are also meant to offer a springboard for discussion, in order that you may share your experience with others if your course includes tutorials, or if you have access to an electronic forum. In any case, since this sort of activity is intended to add pleasure to your reading experience, you can proceed as best suits you, so that it never becomes tedious or burdensome. You are not expected to answer exhaustively all the exploratory questions in every study unit, but rather to choose the ones you are most interested in, depending on how much time you have.

Unlike the answers to the questions for self-evaluation, which are appended in a key at the end of the volume (pages 499-500), the answers to the exploratory questions are not provided in *American Literature to 1900* for two main reasons: 1. generally there is no single correct answer, but as many different suitable answers to the same question as there are readers, and 2. if this kind of exercise is to be of any use to you, you need to work out the answers for yourself, because it is important that you reflect upon your own impressions of the text rather than memorize suggested answers. For these two reasons, all of the answers to the exploratory questions posed throughout the coursebook are not supplied systematically in this *Guide*. However, twelve sample answers are offered below so as to give you an idea of how you may approach this type of activity, which some students find too demanding at the very beginning of the course.

You are advised not to start by reading the suggested answers, but to reply to the exploratory questions yourself, taking into account all the information which they contain, particularly the definition of any literary terms that you need to apply to your analysis. As was the case of the questions for self-evaluation, now you will probably have to reexamine the text again and again, and perhaps even review the introductory pages of unit 1. Finally, when you feel satisfied with your achievement, compare your own answers with the ones which appear below, bearing in mind that yours will be quite different from these in many respects regarding both form and content. For instance, the suggested length is only approximate, and you may prefer to furnish shorter or longer answers, concentrating on other aspects which can be equally relevant to accomplish this assignment successfully. Your best answers will be the ones

in which you articulate your personal responses in the light of the supporting evidence you will find primarily in the text, supplementing it if you wish with knowledge drawn from other sources.

The following suggested answers to questions 1-12 (pages 22-24) are to be taken as examples or samples, rather than as models to be strictly imitated.

1. Captain John Smith was captured by a large group of bowmen who had previously killed two of his men, and who took him to areas inhabited by various tribes. At last, he was brought to Powhatan's village, Werowocomoco, where he was treated alternately as an enemy and as a guest, and where Pocahontas supposedly saved his life.
2. Captain Smith names the following individuals:
 - George Cassen (line 1). Under torture, he told the bowmen that Captain Smith had gone up the river.
 - Captain Smith (line 1). According to him, the bowmen who had killed Robinson and Emry did not dare to approach him until he was paralyzed with cold in the middle of a small river. After being captured, he offered a dial to Openchancanough, the King of Pamunkey, and was honored and well fed. When he was brought into Powhatan's presence in the village of Werowocomoco, he was submitted to a ritual, in which he felt that his life had been at risk, and after that he remained in Werowocomoco making tools for Powhatan.
 - Robinson and Emry (line 4). They were shot with arrows and slain by the bowmen led by Openchancanough, the King of Pamunkey.
 - Openchancanough (line 13). He was called "the King of Pamunkey" by Captain Smith. He conducted the 300 bowmen who captured Captain Smith, received a dial from him, and held the Captain in custody until he delivered the prisoner to Powhatan.
 - Powhatan (line 51). He was called "the Emperor" by Captain Smith. This Native chief wore a great robe made of raccoon skins (line 55).
 - Queen of Appomattoc (line 62). Her real name, Opossunoquonuske, is not given in the excerpt. She was appointed to bring Captain Smith water to wash his hands.
 - Pocahontas (line 68). She was one of Powhatan's daughters, aged sixteen or eighteen. According to Captain Smith's account, she took his head in her arms and laid her own head upon him to save him from death.

In this particular excerpt, all the individuals whose names are mentioned are characterized by their actions rather than by any detailed descriptions of their physical appearance.

3. The author calls his captors “savages” (lines 1, 5, 9, and 25), “grim courtiers” (line 52), and explicitly compares them to “devils” (line 50) that utter “hellish notes and screeches” (line 33). Such terms are clearly derogatory.
4. The author briefly refers to his captors’ exotic physical appearance, focusing on the way they decorate their bodies with red paint, animal skins, feathers, pieces of copper, white shells, and chains of beads (lines 34-40 and 58-60). As the writer never uses direct or reported speech in this passage, we only learn about his captors from what he says they did. At no time are the Natives presented engaging in conversation or articulately expressing their thoughts, but “singing and yelling out such hellish notes and screeches” (lines 32-33) and giving “a great shout” (line 61).
5. There are three instances in which Captain Smith feels seriously threatened: 1. when he is attacked by the same bowmen who have killed two of his men and uses his guide as his shield (line 6), 2. when he is tied to a tree and is about to be shot with arrows (lines 18-19), and 3. when he is dragged before Powhatan, and his head is placed on two great stones, while a number of people with clubs seem to be ready to beat his brains out (lines 65-68). On the contrary, Captain Smith receives help or feels honored as a valued guest: 1. when his captors pull him out of the icy bog, warm him up by rubbing his limbs by the fire (lines 10-12), and admire the dial he offers to their leader (line 15), 2. when the armed captors lead him to Orapaks, to be “kindly feasted and well used” (line 22), and he is given a great amount of food (line 43), and 3. at Werowocomoco, in Powhatan’s presence, when the Queen of Appomattoc and someone else bring him water and a bunch of feathers to wash and dry his hands, and he is well entertained once more (lines 62-64).
6. The author tried to give the impression that the Natives were moody or temperamental, and totally unpredictable, so that his original audience might easily understand why he was always unsure of his fate. Smith’s contemporary readers probably perceived such behavior as primitive, extravagant and irrational. The changing attitudes ascribed to Natives reinforced any existing prejudice about their mental instability,

unreliability and treacherous nature. However, nowadays most readers tend to question such negative notions about Native Americans, realize their plight, and feel inclined to sympathize with them rather than with the invaders of their territories.

7. The author mentions the following weapons:

- arrows. They are used by the bowmen to slay Robinson and Emry (lines 4-5). The bowmen lay down their arrows when they refrain from shooting Captain Smith (line 20). On each side six men go in single file with their arrows nocked, that is, fitted on the bowstring ready to use (line 26). The King makes his own arrows (line 73).
- bows. The bowmen lay down their bows at a sign of their leader (line 20). Each Bowman dances with a bow in his hand (line 37). The King makes his own bows (line 73).
- pieces (fire-arms) and swords. When these weapons are turned over to Openchancanough, Captain Smith implies that they have been seized but are not being used by the bowmen who have captured him and killed his men (line 24).
- quiver of arrows. Each Bowman carries one (lines 33-34).
- clubs. Each Bowman carries a club at his back (line 34). Clubs seem about to be used to beat out Captain Smith's brains (line 67).
- hatchets. The King makes his own hatches (line 73).

The author also describes very precisely how his captors moved, first in single file, then in a snakelike formation he calls *bissom*, and later in a ring (lines 24-31), thus revealing that he is an expert in warfare, thanks to his military background.

8. Facing the unfamiliar in the New World, colonial writers had to explain it by relying on the familiar, that is, by fitting it into prior conceptualizations and representative modes they knew well. Thus, Captain Smith portrayed the tribesmen and their leaders as if they were soldiers and officers in a European army (lines 29-30), and deliberately focused his audience's attention on military order. Because he wanted to make readers understand differences in rank and authority among his captors, he drew parallelisms with European hierarchical positions, and consequently spoke about the King of Pamunkey, the Queen of Appomattoc, and the Emperor.
9. The main function of the quotation from Seneca (lines 49-50) is to demonize the inhabitants of the New World by presenting them as

devils, and by likening their dwellings to hell. Additionally, this mention of hell—which can be linked to a previous reference to it in the phrase “hellish notes and screeches” (line 33)—underscores Captain Smith’s predicament during his captivity.

10. Captain Smith’s account of his captivity can be examined as an autobiographical text in which he construed himself as a brave hero with knight-like traits. That his account is authentic can neither be proven nor conclusively denied, because of lack of independent testimony regarding the events he records. Among the decisive actions he says he performed to save his life before he was captured are the true facts, or the imaginary feats, that he slew three of his attackers and wounded many others before he slipped into the middle of a slimy creek (lines 6-9). He emphasizes his captors’ fear of him (“all the rest would not come near him,” line 7), and declares that they did not approach him until he was too cold to defend himself (line 10). Then, he explains that he was clever enough to offer a dial to the leader of his captors, thus provoking general admiration (lines 14-16). The references he makes to the repeated entertainment or feasting he receives from his captors are indicative of his valued status (lines 22, 48, 64). At last, he seems convinced that Pocahontas had saved his life, but does not explicitly indicate any action on his part that may have prompted her to intervene. In short, although the author depicts himself as an intrepid, courageous, resourceful and proud hero, readers may perceive him as a consummate self-promoter, over-confident and exaggeratedly boastful.
11. Captain Smith declares that he was not with John Robinson and Thomas Emry when the two Englishmen went ashore (instead of remaining in the barge, as they had been instructed), lit a fire, and were shot with arrows and slain by a group of bowmen (lines 4-5). This passage clearly indicates that there was nothing Captain Smith could have done to prevent these two deaths. Furthermore, the passages that follow reiterate his own helplessness during his capture.
12. Like other explorers of his time, Captain Smith refers to himself using the third person singular because in *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) he wants to distance himself from the narrative voice and give the impression that his account of events objectively reflects what happened. First-person narratives are suitable to express subjective impressions and opinions, but are less effective than third-person narratives when authors want their statements to be unanimously accepted as if they were universal truths.

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