

Puritanical Beliefs – Background Notes **AP Language and Composition**

The Plymouth Colony:

- Flagship Mayflower arrives in 1620
 - Leader - William Bradford
 - Settlers known as Pilgrims and Separatists
- c. The Mayflower Compact” provides for social, religious, and economic freedom, while still maintaining ties to Great Britain. It was the first mention in American history of an agreement that wasn’t a strict feudal covenant.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony:

- Flagship Arbella arrives in 1630
- Leader - John Winthrop
- Settlers are mostly Puritans or Congregational Puritans
- “The Arbella Covenant” clearly establishes a religious and theocratic settlement, free of ties to Great Britain.

I. Basic Puritan Beliefs (TULIP):

- Total Depravity:* Through Adam and Eve’s fall, every person is born sinful - concept of Original Sin.
- Unconditional Election:* God “saves” those he wishes - only a few are selected for salvation - concept of predestination.
- Limited Atonement:* Jesus died for the chosen only, not for everyone.
- Irresistible Grace:* God’s grace is freely given, it cannot be earned or denied. Grace is defined as the saving and transfiguring power of God.
- Perseverance of the “saints”:* Those elected by God have full power to interpret the will of God, and to live uprightly. If anyone rejects grace after feeling its power in his life, he will be going against the will of God - something impossible in Puritanism.
- OVERALL: Fortune is due to God. Affliction is part of God’s divine plan.*

II. Additional Beliefs:

- Typology:* The belief that God’s intentions are present in human action and in natural phenomenon. Failure to understand these intentions are human limitations. Puritans believed in cyclical or repetitive history; they use “types” - Moses prefigures Jesus, Jonah’s patience is reflected in Jesus’ ordeal on the cross, and Moses’ journey out of Egypt is played out in the Pilgrims’ crossing of the Atlantic. God’s wrath and reward are also present in natural phenomena like flooding, bountiful harvest, the invasion of locusts, and the lightning striking a home.

2. *Manifest Destiny:* The concept of manifest destiny is as old as the first New England settlements. Without using the words, John Winthrop articulated the concept in his famous sermon, the Arbella Covenant (1630), when he said: “...for we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us;...” Winthrop exhorts his listeners to carry on God’s mission and to set a shining example for the rest of the world. From this beginning, the concept has had religious, social, economic, and political consequences. The words manifest destiny were first used by editor John L. O’Sullivan in 1845.

3. *Backsliding:* The belief that “saved” believers, those with visible signs of grace, can fall into temptation and become sinners. To prevent this, believers were expected not to become smug, do constant soul-searching, be introspective, and pray constantly. Satan was particularly interested in snaring such believers.

II. The Function of Puritan Writers

- To transform a mysterious God - mysterious because he is separate from the world.
- To make him more relevant to the universe.
- To glorify God.
- Butler’s Note: Reading Puritan writers is basically reading testimonials (ex – “how God works in OUR lives...”)...the Puritans viewed The Bible as a “survival guide” of sorts...

III. The Style of Puritan Writing

- Protestant - against ornateness; reverence for the Bible.
- Purposiveness - there was a purpose to Puritan writing - described in Part II above.
- Puritan writing reflected the character and scope of the reading public, which was literate and well-grounded in religion.

IV. Reasons for Puritan Literary Dominance

- Puritans were basically middle class and fairly well-educated.
- Puritans were children of the covenant; gave them a drive and a purpose to write.

V. Common Themes in Early Puritan Writing

- Idealism - both religious and political.
- Pragmatism - practicality and purposiveness.

VI. Forces Undermining Puritanism

- A person’s natural desire to do good - this works against predestination.
- Dislike of a “closed” life.
- Resentment of the power of the few over many.
- Change in economic conditions - growth of fishery, farms, etc.
- Presence of the leaders of dissent - Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams.
- The presence of the frontier - concept of self-reliance, individualism, and optimism.
- Change in political conditions - Massachusetts became a Crown colony.
- Theocracy suffered from a lack of flexibility.
- Growth of rationality - use of the mind to know God - less dependence on the Bible.
- Cosmopolitanism of the new immigrants.

VII. Visible Signs of Puritan Decay

- Visible decay of godliness.
- Manifestations of pride - especially among the new rich.
- Presence of “heretics”

a. *Quakers* - Agreed with the Puritans that the Anglican Church had not gone far enough toward purifying itself of the external forms of the Catholic Church. But Quakers went further than the Puritans in their effort to clear the path to a direct and personal religious experience. They rejected the need for clergy or outward sacraments and adopted a plain worship style. Community worship took place not in churches, but in “meetings,” during which members sat in silence until one among them felt moved by the Inner Light to speak. Quaker ethics, or “testimonies,” were rooted in the belief that pride and wastefulness obstructed the path of the purifying Light. Thus they opposed ostentatious dress and other signs of social hierarchy, such as formal greetings, titles, and “doffing the hat” before superiors; insisted on fair business dealings; and refused to take oaths. The Quaker “peace testimony” against raising money or men for wars (deriving from their belief that war, too, was a manifestation of pride) evolved over time to become one of the more distinctive Quaker beliefs), and

b. *Anabaptists* - Anabaptists held that baptism should be postponed until people were capable of understanding the promises made. But the hatred they encountered stemmed from the widespread belief that they intended to overthrow the whole social order. There were different groups within the movement but those anabaptists who held power in Münster 1533-5 were radical, advocating common property and practising polygamy. This served to smear the whole movement and ‘anabaptist’ became a term of abuse. Henry VIII thought them ‘a detestable sect’ and burned a number. James I declared them vile and burned more.

4. Violations of the Sabbath and swearing and sleeping during sermons.

5. Decay in family government.

6. People full of contention - rise in lawsuits and lawyers.

7. Sins of sex and alcohol on the increase.

8. Decay in business morality - lying, laborers underpaid, etc.

9. No disposition to reform.

10. Lacking in social behavior.

VIII. Some Aspects of the Puritan Legacy: each has positive and negative implications

- The need for moral justification for private, public, and governmental acts.
- The Questing for Freedom - personal, political, economic, and social.
- The Puritan work ethic.
- Elegiac verse - morbid fascination with death.
- The “city upon the hill” - concept of manifest destiny.

IX. Important Puritan Writers

1. **William Bradford** (1590-1657)

One of the leaders of colonial America, Bradford arrived at Cape Cod on November 11, 1620, on the flagship *Mayflower*. He was one of the authors of *The Mayflower Compact*. His greatest contribution to early writing is his *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*.

2. **John Winthrop** (1588-1649)

One of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop arrived in 1630 aboard the flagship *Arbella*. As governor of the Colony, he established the center of government at Boston. Winthrop began writing his *Journal* in 1630 and continued it till his death. On board the *Arbella*, he prepared his famous sermon “A Model of Christian Charity.”

3. **Anne Bradstreet** (1612?-1672)

Famous as the first American poet, Bradstreet’s first work, published in London in 1650, was called *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. Her complete works are available in *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse*, edited by J. H. Ellis, 1932.

4. **Michael Wigglesworth** (1631-1705)

A minister, Wigglesworth is today remembered for two works -*The Day of Doom* (1662) and *God’s Controversy with New England* (written in 1662 but published more than two hundred years later). The first book is known as the first American bestseller. It contains an expression of the basic Puritan beliefs described earlier.

5. **Edward Taylor** (1645?-1729)

Known as the best writer of the Puritan times, Taylor’s works were not published until 1939. A minister for sixty years, Taylor’s poetry captures the attitudes of the second generation Puritans in its emphasis on self-examination, particularly in an individual’s relations to God. A good edition of Taylor’s poetry is *The Poems of Edward Taylor* edited by Donald E. Stanford, 1960.

6. **Samuel Sewall** (1652-1730)

Famous for his *Diary*, Sewall was a representative of a new breed of Puritans who took more interest in secular matters like business, politics, and good living. Sewall kept a diary for almost fifty-seven years (1673-1729). It was an excellent indicator of the manners and mores of the times. A good edition is *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* edited by M. Halsey Thomas, 1973.

7. **Cotton Mather** (1663-1728)

A member of the powerful Mather family, Cotton Mather produced 444 volumes of written work. Although his writing is didactic, moralistic, and filled with references to the Bible, it reveals important information on the history and society of his time. His best known work is the *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) which gives an insight into Mather’s views on Puritan society. A good edition of his works is *Selections from Cotton Mather* edited by Kenneth B. Murdock, 1926.