

# The influence of puritanism on american literature essay sample

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The Puritans and Puritanism Most of the early settlers were Puritans, a group of serious, religious people who advocated strict religious and moral principles. \* They wanted to purify the English Church and to restore church worship to the “ pure and unspotted” condition of its earlier days. \* They opposed the elaborate rituals of the English Church. \* They believed that the Bible was the revealed word of God, therefore, people should guide their daily behavior with the Bible. The Puritans brought with them a philosophy of life, which is popularly known as American Puritanism. A dominant factor in American life, Puritanism was one of the most enduring and shaping influences in American thought and American literature. Without true understanding of Puritanism, there would be no real understanding of American literature and American culture.°Puritanism had spoken for the preeminence of the individual, for freedom from oppressive governments, and for the value of learning and education. It led Americans to examine their beliefs, their world, and each other. It gave ordinary men and women a sense of purpose. It encouraged them to scrutinize issues in religion and in government and to speak out.

It helped to create in Americans a sense of duty to their God, their nation, and their fellow men. It taught men and women to labor to be good and to judge others by their lives, not by their birth. At its height, Puritanism served as the dominant force in the creating of American literature.± (McMichael, ed. AAL, 11-12) American Puritanism is a two-fold cultural heritage, one being religious and the other practical. Puritans were therefore called “ practical idealist” or “ doctrinaire opportunist”. On the one hand, Puritanism is a highly strict religious doctrine. The Puritans were determined to find a place

on the new continent where they could worship God in the way they thought true Christians should. When they arrived on the continent, they saw virgin land, virgin forests, vast expanses of wilderness, and therefore believed that they were sent by God for a definite purpose. Contending that there is only one God who rules everything on the earth, these Puritans thought they were “ the selected few”, chosen by God to reestablish a Commonwealth based on the teachings of the Bible, to restore the lost paradise and to build the wilderness into a new Garden of Eden.

“ Therefore the journey to the New World was not just a migration. It was a new Exodus, ordained by God and foretold in the Bible, just as the Bible promised the creation of a New Jerusalem, in America.”(McMichael, ed. AAL, 8)On the other hand, Puritanism also has its practical aspect. When the Puritans first landed on the continent, what they were faced with was wilderness; no shelter, no food and no clothes. Their struggle for survival and the movement of pushing the frontier with them as they moved further and further westward made them more and more preoccupied with business and profits. They had to work hard in order to make a living and be ready for any misfortunes and tragic failures that might lie in wait for them. As far as this respect is concerned, the Puritans learned a lot from the native Indians who helped them through the severe winters. The impact of Puritanism on American literature can be summarized into the following three categories: \* American literature, in a sense, is a literary expression of the pious idealism of the Puritan request. The Puritans dreamed of living under a perfect order and worked with hope and courage toward building a new Garden of Eden. Therefore, they tended to look everything with a big amount of optimism.

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This went into the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and even James. No wonder there appeared a mood of frustration or despair in later periods, because as the old saying goes, “ always at the latter end of weal stands woe”. When the dream did not materialize, when a “ Gilded Age” came instead of the Golden one they dreamed of, how could anyone feel? \* The Puritans’ metaphorical mode of perception brought American literary symbolism into being. To the pious Puritans, the physical world was spiritual, nothing but a symbol of God. The world, therefore, was one of multiple meanings. This idea was distinguishable in the works of such early writers as William Bradford, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards and Emerson. In the works of Hawthorne, Melville and Poe, this developed itself into symbolism. \* The Puritan style of writing is characterized by simplicity. The Puritans have been “ abhorred for their austerity and rigidity in matters of taste”. They formed a distaste for art and for any manifestations of sensual beauty, therefore, the style of their writing was fresh, simple and direct, the rhetoric plain and honest, words simple and spare (not fancy).

The use of metaphors was only to explain their opinions rather than to decorate. They wrote non-fictional prose instead of novels. They were good at writing history, too, and biography was once a popular form of literature. Literary Scene Almost all literatures come from humble origins; diaries, journals, letters, sermons, travel books, etc. So did American literature. In the Colonial Period, personal literature occupied a major position in the literary scene. In content, they served either God or the expansion or both. In form, they were mainly the imitations of the English tradition. Some important writers in this period include: Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), the

first notable poet in America whose lyrics remained unsurpassed by any American women writers for 200 years until the appearance of Emily Dickinson. Her *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) was the first published book of poetry written by a settler in the English colonies. Most of her poems were imitative in form. Edward Taylor (c. 1642-1729), a conservative Puritan minister. He wrote in the tradition of metaphysical poets, expressing divine and elevated ideas in unrelated, homely terms. His poems revealed his efforts to obtain union with God. His manuscripts were discovered in 1930s. Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the author of over 400 works.

His works were filled with classical allusions and aimed at reinvigorating the waning Puritanism of his day. He was the symbol of Puritan decline, an emblem of an orthodox doomed to fail. His representative work was *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Michael-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813), also known as J. Hector St. John. His *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and *Journey Into Northern Pennsylvania and the State of New York* (1801) served as major contribution to the European interpretation of American society. His essay “What is an American” became one of the most influential single reports on America ever written.

Phillis Wheatley (1754-1784), the first important Afro-American poet. Born in Africa, sold as a slave, she was luckily well-treated by her masters and later set free. Her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), a collection of 39 poems, was concerned with abstract liberty. Philip Freneau (1752-1832), the father of American poetry. His poetry was a fusion of

neoclassicism and romanticism. He was famous for his poem, “ The Rising Glory of America”, collaborated with Brackenridge. He also founded the National Gazette, a semi-weekly newspaper that became the voice of liberal democracy in American politics. Jonathan Edwards Benjamin Franklin Text Study \* Jonathan Edwards’ “ Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” \* The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin