

# [Puritans in literature essay sample](https://assignbuster.com/puritans-in-literature-essay-sample/)

The Puritans, a very religious group of people, thrived in the northern British colonies in the 17th century. Religion governed the way these people lived at the time. “[…] The Puritans were concerned, perhaps even obsessed, with establishing a system wherein religion would flourish and their values and beliefs would penetrate every aspect of life, both sacred and secular” (Friedman). Famous for their incorporation of religion in laws and the famous witch trials which they held, the Puritans found their way into literature.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter and Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, the Puritans play a significant role as most of the characters in both pieces of literature are Puritans themselves. The Puritans believed in the ideas of sin, defined as “ An immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law” (Oxford 773), redemption, defined as “ The action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil” (Oxford 700), and justice, defined as “ Just behavior or treatment” (Oxford 452).

Within the Puritan societies set in The Scarlet Letter and The Crucible, the characters also believed in and acted upon these ideas, to a certain extent. In The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne constructs a Puritan society quite like those that existed in the 17th century. This is illustrated at the beginning of the literature. Hawthorne represents the stern and threatening force of Puritan society in the first sentence of the first chapter, where he describes a ‘ throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray,’ who stand before the prison door ‘ which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes,’ and behind which was Hester. ” (Gale).

The melancholy scene set before the reader indicates the kind of people the Puritans are, contributing to the overall mood within the literature. It is soon acknowledged that the Puritans are a morose group, which Hawthorne describes himself. […] the Puritans compressed whatever mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human infirmity […]” (Hawthorne 344).

The Puritans set within this piece of literature allow their beliefs to overtake all aspects of their lives, including joyous ones. This is evident as the actions taken by the residents of the town against Hester and her newborn daughter are harsh considering she had just brought forth the miracle of life and had to raise the child herself. Threats to kill the “ illegitimate child” further indicate the devout obsession the Puritans had in their religion.

The Puritans in The Crucible also believe greatly in their religion. However, those set in Arthur Miller’s literature have an obvious fear of the Devil and witchcraft. “ The Crucible presents us with the picture of a small village falling prey to a collective fear that witchcraft is about, lurking in some of its citizens” (Bonnet). The residents of this community turn to their religion to relieve and rationalize their fears. Many of their actions are the results of their fears, such as the infamous witch trials which resulted in the murder of innocent people because of irrational religious fears.

The Puritans’ religion in the literature governed their lives, mostly out of fear. In both The Scarlet Letter and The Crucible, the Puritan society that exists in both pieces of literature is composed of devout believers. Most aspects of the daily lives of the characters in both pieces of literature are tremendously influenced by the Puritans’ religion. This includes the laws set by the government, shown as a result of Hester being jailed for adultery and suspected witches being murdered by rule of the court. “ This woman [Hester] has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die; Is there not law for it?

Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book” (Hawthorne 79). While minor sins are looked down upon harshly, major sins are, effectively, outlawed. The idea of sin in The Scarlet Letter is most readily exemplified by Hester, who is punished and ridiculed by almost everyone in her hometown. She sinned by committing adultery, which resulted in the creation of an “ illegitimate child. ” “ Hester’s religious heritage and her community pronounced her utterly guilty; she had sinned ‘ in the most sacred quality of human life’” (Sewall).

Hester was no longer treated the same and was sentenced to wearing a scarlet letter “ A” on her chest. This symbolized the sin that she committed, and caused her to be ridiculed and shunned by the people in her community. In The Crucible, Abagail, the antagonist, portrays sin the most. Her jealousy of Goody Proctor, John, Proctor’s wife, caused her to lie to the court, claiming that Goody Proctor was a witch. She also drank a charm made with blood and committed other voodoo practices with Tituba, who she later claims is also a witch.

She does not allow anyone to reveal her secret, and backs herself up with threats. “ Let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word, about the other things, and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you. […] I saw Indians smash my dear parents’ heads on the pillow next to mine and I have seen some reddish work done at night, and I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down! ” (Miller 175) Abagail is not the only character who sinned, however.

The reader is also made aware that John Proctor had an affair with Abagail, though this is not made known to the community at that time. Though these characters had both sinned in respect to their Puritan beliefs, Abagail from The Crucible committed sin with a greater intention for malice. She lied and knowingly had innocent people murdered in order to have her own personal gain. Hester, on the other hand, also did sin, but not out of spite. She had only thought her husband would not come as he was supposed to. These sins were, in fact, major sins in the Puritan society, but Abagail’s sins prove to be more extreme.

Though Hester’s sin affected her for the rest of her life, she is able to find peace within herself as well as her daughter, Pearl. She sewed garments for those in her town as she was known for her elaborate embroidery. Hester learned what she had done, and accepted the consequences. “‘ Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred! ’” (Hawthorne 177). As the quote from Hawthorne suggests, Hester continued to be herself as being truthful would be best, otherwise lies would just lead to pain.

Even though Hester’s redemption was never given to her by her community, in this sense her redemption was found by herself as she dies with the scarlet letter, which had become ambiguous at that point. Her escape to Boston also brought a better chance for her daughter to have a better life. Redemption in The Crucible is not gained by Abagail, but rather John Proctor. Abagail continues her sins to the end, causing the murder of various innocent people. John Proctor, however, acknowledges his sin and, instead of being accused of a crime he did not commit, he chooses to die praying instead.

In this way, John Proctor does earn his redemption. In both pieces of literature, redemption is not directly gained and ultimately ended with the death of the characters who did earn some redemption. Hester finds redemption within herself by acknowledging and accepting the consequences for her sins. John Proctor, however, finds it by accepting death rather than live the rest of his life in a lie, and spends his last breaths praying. In The Scarlet Letter, justice is served to Hester by the punishment she receives, including the time she spent in jail as well as her being forced to wear the scarlet letter for the rest of her life.

Dimmesdale’s guilt overtook him and ultimately caused him to die. Dimmesdale’s death caused Chillingworth’s death, as he no longer had any reason to live. Justice was served to everyone in one way, shape, or form in The Scarlet Letter, so it seems. The Crucible, on the other hand, lacks proper justice. Abagail got away with causing the murder of innocent people. She did not, however, get John Proctor and instead her lies had him hanged as well. However, Arthur Miller highlighted the injustice of the Salem witch trials, therefore justice was not served in the play.

Justice in The Scarlet Letter seems to be adequate as everyone seems to have had consequences for what they had done. In The Crucible, however, the reader is presented with injustice at the end of the play, as those who are innocent die. The antagonist, Abagail, does not experience any consequences other than her having to run away and being the cause John Proctor’s death. The Puritans, whom practically have the word “ pure” in their name, were to be just that. Being as religious as they were, it was important not to sin, and seek redemption if one did as well as face the consequences.

Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Arthur Miller exposed the injustices within the Puritan society. In The Scarlet Letter, justice seemed to have been served, but justice could not possibly have been served correctly by people who continuously sinned themselves, as they instead hurt people such as Hester with ridicule and shunning when they should be helping her to seek redemption. The Crucible is a prime example of injustice and how Puritan beliefs and fears could be used to hurt innocent people.