The Scarlet Letter

Historical and Literary Contexts

17TH CENTURY AMERICA

- Many of the British North American colonies that eventually formed the United States of America were settled in the seventeenth century by men and women, who, in the face of European persecution, refused to compromise passionately held religious convictions and fled Europe.
- The New England colonies, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland were conceived and established "as plantations of religion."
- The great majority of settlers left Europe to worship God in the way they believed to be correct.
- They enthusiastically supported the efforts of their leaders to create "a city on a hill" or a "holy experiment," whose success would prove that God's plan for his churches could be successfully realized in the American wilderness.
The religious persecution that drove settlers from Europe to the British North American colonies sprang from the conviction, held by Protestants and Catholics alike, that uniformity of religion must exist in any given society.

This conviction rested on the belief that there was one true religion and that it was the duty of the civil authorities to impose it, forcibly if necessary, in the interest of saving the souls of all citizens.

Nonconformists could expect no mercy and might be executed as heretics.

In some areas Catholics persecuted Protestants, in others Protestants persecuted Catholics, and in still others Catholics and Protestants persecuted wayward coreligionists.

Although England renounced religious persecution in 1689, it persisted on the European continent.
CROSSING THE OCEAN TO KEEP FAITH: THE PURITANS

- Puritans were English Protestants who wished to reform and purify the Church of England of what they considered to be unacceptable residues of Roman Catholicism.
- In the 1620s leaders of the English state and church grew increasingly unsympathetic to Puritan demands. They insisted that the Puritans conform to religious practices that they abhorred, removing their ministers from office and threatening them with "extirpation from the earth" if they did not fall in line.
- Zealous Puritan laymen received savage punishments. For example, in 1630 a man was sentenced to life imprisonment, had his property confiscated, his nose slit, an ear cut off, and his forehead branded "S.S." (sower of sedition).

JOHN ROGERS'S EXECUTION

- Two centuries after John Rogers's execution, his ordeal became a staple of The New England Primer.
- The Primer supplemented the picture of Rogers' immolation with a long, versified speech, said to be the dying martyr's advice to his children, which urged them to "Keep always God before your Eyes" and to "Abhor the arrant Whore of Rome, and all her Blasphemies."
- This recommendation, read by generations of young New Englanders, doubtless helped to fuel the anti-Catholic prejudice that flourished in that region well into the nineteenth century.
CROSSING THE OCEAN TO KEEP FAITH: THE PURITANS

- Beginning in 1630 as many as 20,000 Puritans emigrated to America from England to gain the liberty to worship God as they chose. Most settled in New England, but some went as far as the West Indies.
- Theologically, the Puritans were "non-separating Congregationalists." Unlike the Pilgrims, who came to Massachusetts in 1620, the Puritans believed that the Church of England was a true church, though in need of major reforms.
- Puritan leaders hoped (futilely, as it turned out) that, once their experiment was successful, England would imitate it by instituting a church order modeled after the New England Way.

PERSECUTION IN AMERICA

- Although they were victims of religious persecution in Europe, the Puritans supported the Old World theory that sanctioned it, the need for uniformity of religion in the state.
- Puritans expelled dissenters from their colonies, a fate that in 1636 befell Roger Williams and in 1638 Anne Hutchinson, America's first major female religious leader.
- Those who defied the Puritans by persistently returning to their jurisdictions risked capital punishment, a penalty imposed on four Quakers between 1659 and 1661.
EXECUTION OF QUAKERS

- Mary Dyer (d. 1660) first ran afoul of Massachusetts authorities for supporting theological dissenter Anne Hutchinson.
- As a result Dyer and her family were forced to move to Rhode Island in 1638.
- Converted to Quakerism in England in the 1650s, Dyer returned to New England and was three times arrested and banished from Massachusetts for spreading Quaker principles.
- Returning to Massachusetts a fourth time, she was hanged on June 1, 1660.

COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

- The government of Massachusetts was by no means a democracy. Rather, it was a theocracy—a state governed by its church.
- The General Court had decided, early on, that only church members could become freemen of Massachusetts. That is, only church members could take part in the government of the colony.
- The ministers—the officials of the church—were not actually political leaders, but they held great power and influence over all church members.
- Ministers’ interpretation of the Bible and their “management” of moral codes and conduct applied to all residents of the colony, whether a lowly freeman or the governor himself.
THE BIBLE COMMONWEALTHS

- The New England colonies have often been called "Bible Commonwealths" because they sought the guidance of the scriptures in regulating all aspects of the lives of their citizens.
- Criminal laws in the early New England colonies were based on the scriptures, especially the Old Testament. Many civil laws and procedures were modeled after the English common law.

COLONIAL LAWS

- Laws in colonial Massachusetts covered everything from swearing to excessive decoration on women's caps to murder.
- Whipping, branding, and other forms of public humiliation were relatively common practices in the colonies.
- Hester Prynne’s punishment was mild by Puritan standards.
ANNE HUTCHINSON

- Anne Hutchinson, an outspoken woman, began holding meetings in her house, teaching her own concepts of God and religion.
- She opposed the Puritan concept of morality, which she considered to be unnecessarily legalistic. She also opposed the authority of the Boston clergy.
- Governor Winthrop had Hutchinson tried for questioning the authority of the ministers.
- Hutchinson was banished from the colony. Six years later Hutchinson and all but one of her children were killed by Native Americans on Long Island Sound.
- Hutchinson had supporters, and her group of admirers later included Nathaniel Hawthorne, who refers to her as the “sainted Ann Hutchinson” in Chapter 1 of *The Scarlet Letter*.

THE LITERATE PURITANS

- It is likely that no other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans.
- Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern section of the United States, known as New England, as in the mother country -- an astounding fact when one considers that most educated people of the time were aristocrats who were unwilling to risk their lives in wilderness conditions.
- The self-made and often self-educated Puritans were notable exceptions. They wanted education to understand and execute God’s will as they established their colonies throughout New England.
**PURITAN LITERARY TASTES**

- The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced on Earth.
- Puritan style varied enormously -- from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history.
- Whatever the style or genre, certain themes remained constant:
  - Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss.
  - This world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, a formidable enemy with many disguises.
  - Many Puritans excitedly awaited the "millennium," when Jesus would return to Earth, end human misery, and inaugurate 1,000 years of peace and prosperity.

**PURITANISM & CAPITALISM**

- In early colonial writings there is a clear link between Puritanism and capitalism: Both rest on ambition, hard work, and an intense striving for success.
- Although individual Puritans could not know, in strict theological terms, whether they were "saved" and among the elect who would go to heaven, Puritans tended to feel that earthly success was a sign of election.
- Wealth and status were sought not only for themselves, but as welcome reassurances of spiritual health and promises of eternal life.
INTERSECTION OF SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

- The Puritans interpreted all things and events as symbols with deeper spiritual meanings, and felt that in advancing their own profit and their community's well-being, they were also furthering God's plans.
- They did not draw lines of distinction between the secular and religious spheres: All of life was an expression of the divine will -- a belief that later resurfaces in Transcendentalism.

THE BIBLE AND PURITAN WRITING

- In recording ordinary events to reveal their spiritual meaning, Puritan authors commonly cited the Bible, chapter and verse.
- History was a symbolic religious panorama leading to the Puritan triumph over the New World and to God's kingdom on Earth.
- They interpreted the Bible literally. They read and acted on the text of the Second Book of Corinthians -- "Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord."
THE BIBLE AND PURITAN WRITING

- The age of the Bible, so much older than the Roman church, made it authoritative to Puritan eyes.
- New England Puritans clung to the tales of the Jews in the Old Testament, believing that they, like the Jews, were persecuted for their faith, that they knew the one true God, and that they were the chosen elect who would establish the New Jerusalem -- a heaven on Earth.
- The first copy of the King James Bible known to have been brought into the colonies was carried by John Winthrop to Massachusetts in 1630.

COTTON MATHER (1663-1728)

- The third in the four-generation Mather dynasty of Massachusetts Bay, he wrote at length of New England in over 500 books and pamphlets.
- In May of 1692, as the Salem witch trials began, Mather was asked by the judges to write a formal summary of the proceedings: “The Wonders of the Invisible World” is the result of that effort.
- His zeal somewhat redeems his pompousness: “I write the wonders of the Christian religion, flying from the deprivations of Europe to the American strand.”
From the 1720s to the 1740s, the colonies experienced the Great Awakening, a time of religious revival marked by mass conversions to Christianity. Edwards, the most famous preacher of his time, converted thousands of New Englanders with his fiery sermons.

He is best known for his frightening, powerful sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God".

Edwards was molded by his extreme sense of duty and by the rigid Puritan environment, which conspired to make him defend strict and gloomy Calvinism from the forces of liberalism springing up around him.

Edwards's sermons had enormous impact, sending whole congregations into hysterical fits of weeping.

In the long run, though, their grotesque harshness alienated people from the Calvinism that Edwards defended.
THE ROMANTIC PERIOD, 1820-1860

- Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, and the Transcendentalists represent the first great literary generation produced in the United States (sometimes called the “American Renaissance”).
- In the case of the novelists, the Romantic vision tended to express itself in the form Hawthorne called the "Romance," a heightened, emotional, and symbolic form of the novel.
- Romances were not love stories, but serious novels that used special techniques to communicate complex and subtle meanings.

ROMANTIC PROTAGONISTS

- Instead of carefully defining realistic characters through a wealth of detail, as most English or continental novelists did, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe shaped heroic figures larger than life, burning with mythic significance.
- The typical protagonists of the American Romance are haunted, alienated individuals.
- Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale or Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville's Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and the many isolated and obsessed characters of Poe's tales are lonely protagonists pitted against unknowable, dark fates that, in some mysterious way, grow out of their deepest unconscious selves.
THE ISOLATED ROMANTIC HERO

- Virtually all the great American protagonists have been "loners."
- Americans won their independence and were then faced with the bewildering dilemma of discovering their identity apart from old authorities.
- This scenario was played out countless times on the frontier, to the extent that, in fiction, isolation often seems the basic American condition of life.
- The democratic American individual had, as a consequence of his/her time and environment, to invent himself/herself.

THE ISOLATED ROMANTIC HERO

- The Romance form is dark and forbidding, indicating how difficult it is to create an identity without a stable society (unlike in the Old World).
- Most of the Romantic heroes die in the end: All the sailors except Ishmael are drowned in Moby-Dick, and the sensitive but sinful minister Arthur Dimmesdale dies at the end of The Scarlet Letter.
- For its time, The Scarlet Letter was a daring and even subversive book.
- It treated issues that were usually suppressed in 19th-century America, such as the impact of the new, liberating democratic experience on individual behavior, especially on sexual and religious freedom.
HAWTHORNE’S ROMANTICISM

- A masterwork of symbolism, The Scarlet Letter embodies Hawthorne's romanticism and his deep interest in the relationship between God and man.
- In true transcendental fashion, Hawthorne makes of the elements of nature messages from God—an A made of stars in the sky, a rose that grows beside the prison door, a woods where Hester and Dimmesdale feel a measure of freedom.
- In doing so, he ultimately overturns the Puritan conception of God in favor of an Emersonian God who resides as spirit in all of us and in all of nature (immanence) and who ultimately sanctifies our lives and actions even when society does not.