

# Module: Literary Texts

Level : 2<sup>nd</sup> year

Teacher: Dr. Nassima Amirouche

## Lecture 1

### I. The Pilgrims and Pilgrim Fathers in Colonial America

The Pilgrims were a group of English colonists who emigrated to New England and established Plymouth Plantation — or Plymouth Colony — in 1620. Many of the Pilgrims were Puritan Separatists. In England, people were required to attend and participate in the services of the Church of England, however, the Separatists — who were part of the Puritan movement — wanted to separate from the Church of England. They first moved to the Netherlands but found they were losing their identity as Englishmen. They decided to emigrate to America, where they could have religious freedom and retain their English customs and way of life. The other passengers on the Mayflower were looking for a new life in the New World.

The Mayflower left Plymouth on September 6, 1620, and arrived off the coast of Cape Cod on November 9, 1620. The trip took 65 days.

#### The “Mayflower Compact”

The Mayflower Compact is a foundational document in American history, created by the Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower ship in 1620. It was essentially a social contract that established a form of self-government for the Plymouth Colony, laying the groundwork for democratic principles in the New World.

Here are the key points about the Mayflower Compact:

**Origins:** The Mayflower Compact was drafted and signed by the Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower, a ship that carried them from England to present-day Massachusetts in 1620. The Pilgrims were seeking religious freedom and had landed far north of their intended destination, in what is now Provincetown Harbor, Cape Cod.

**Purpose:** The Pilgrims drafted the Mayflower Compact to establish a governing framework and ensure order and cooperation among the settlers. They recognized the need for a formal agreement to maintain unity and establish legitimate authority in the absence of a royal charter for the colony.

**Content:** The Mayflower Compact begins with a preamble affirming the settlers' loyalty to King James I of England and their desire to establish a civil society based on principles of self-government and the general good. It declares their intention to form a "civil body politic" and to enact laws and ordinances for the general good of the colony.

**Signatories:** The Mayflower Compact was signed by 41 of the adult male passengers aboard the Mayflower, including both Pilgrims and non-Pilgrims. Notably, it was one of the earliest examples of a written constitution or agreement for self-government in the English colonies of North America.

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**Impact:** The Mayflower Compact is considered a foundational document in American political and legal history. It established the precedent of popular consent and the idea that government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, laying the groundwork for democratic governance in America.

## II. Characteristics of Puritan Literature

There are a few key characteristics of Puritan Literature that are important to keep in mind. Although there is variation among genres (sermons, poems, letters, historical narratives, etc.) in Puritan Literature, there are many key similarities across all of them.

### 1. First Person Point of View

Many Puritan authors chose to write their pieces from the first person point of view. By writing in the first-person point of view, Puritan authors were making the written pieces more personable. It also helped show how the narrator incorporated God and the Bible into their everyday lives. By creating a personable connection with the reader, the reader is more likely to accept the underlying message of the written piece and abide by it. Especially when in the form of a sermon or letter, the values of the author are displayed.

And when I could no longer look,  
I blest His name that gave and took,  
That laid my goods now in the dust.  
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.  
It was his own, it was not mine,  
Far be it that I should repine;  
He might of all justly bereft  
But yet sufficient for us left,"

(Lines 13-20, "The Burning of Our House", Anne Bradstreet, 1666)

In the poem, the speaker's home is burning down and all of her possessions have been burnt to dust. However, she prays to God and accepts this is God's will. The message here is that the reader should let go of any attachment to possession and vanity, as God can give just as quickly as he can take away.

### 2. Religious Themes

Puritan Literature was not meant to be entertaining. It was meant to provide the reader with lessons on religious themes and on how to live a more virtuous and pious life by God's word. The main theme was predestination, which meant that everyone is born a sinner and that a select few had been chosen by the will

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of God to enter heaven. Because it is unknown whether a person has been selected by God or not, everyone should live virtuously and morally.

Oh get a part in Christ, And make the Judge thy Friend;

So shalt thou be assuréd of A happy, glorious end"

(Stanza 15, "The Day of Doom", Michael Wigglesworth, 1662)

### **3. Simple Writing Style**

The main goal of Puritan Literature was to teach and provide frameworks on how to live a life that follows the teachings of God and the Bible. Puritans did not view literature as a form of entertainment; therefore, they shunned elaborate and complex forms of writing. Rather, they wrote simply and directly. This allowed the author to reach their point faster and more clearly. It also allowed the author to write for a wider audience, as it appealed to multiple levels of education in society.

"It pleased God, before they came half seas over, to smite the young man with a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first to be thrown overboard. Thus his curses fell upon his own head, which astonished all his mates for they saw it was the just hand of God upon him," (Chapter 9, Book 1, Of Plymouth Plantation (1630-1651), William Bradford).

This is an example of the simple writing style of many Puritan writers. The language used in Bradford's journal Of Plymouth Plantation is plain and clearly describes events, people, and situations, without the use of heightened or elaborate language.

### **4. Biblical Allusions**

The Bible was the main framework by which Puritans lived. Therefore, Biblical allusions commonly appear in Puritan Literature.

Biblical allusions most often come in the form of the author referencing a biblical character or event, indirectly comparing that biblical character or event to a character or event in the work of literature. Puritan authors would also use allusions to draw comparisons between a contemporary struggle to a struggle found in the Bible, with the hopes it would help the reader find clarity or a solution to the problem.

### **5. Instillment of Fear**

Puritanism and Puritan Literature used fear often. By instilling a reader with a fear of God's power, they are more likely to make changes in their lives to live in accordance with the word of God and the Bible. Puritan authors would often describe the eternal damnation waiting for a sinner if they lived a life that went

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against the word of God and the Bible. Emotional tactics such as fear had great influence and impact, especially when it concerned the afterlife.

For it is said, that when that due time, or appointed time comes, their foot shall slide. Then they shall be left to fall, as they are inclined by their own weight. God will not hold them up in these slippery places any longer, but will let them go; and then, at that very instant, they shall fall into destruction," (Number 4, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", Rev. Jonathan Edwards, 1741)

In this sermon given by Rev. Jonathan Edwards in 1741, Rev. Edwards uses fear to remind the congregation what will happen if they don't believe in God. He is referencing the "unbelieving Israelites" (Number 1), who did not live by the word of God or believe in him. When they fell into hard times, God did not help them. In this example of a "fire and brimstone" sermon, Edwards is warning the congregation that if they turn their backs to God, God will do the same to them.

## **Examples of Puritan Literature**

### **Of Plymouth Plantation (1630-1651) by William Bradford**

*Of Plymouth Plantation* is the personal journal kept by William Bradford, who was the leader of the Plymouth colony. It begins with the story of the pilgrims heading to the Dutch Republic in 1608, followed by the Mayflower voyage in 1620, and ends in 1651 with an account of where all the pilgrims are. *Of Plymouth Plantation* is regarded as a key piece of Puritan Literature because it gives an intimate and detailed account of the early lives of pilgrims in the Massachusetts colonies. It reveals many aspects of the Puritan way of life, such as what was considered virtuous and what was considered sinful.

But still more lamentable, and of all sorrows most heavy to be borne, was that many of the children, influenced by these conditions, the great licentiousness of the young people of the country, and the many temptations of the city were led by evil example into dangerous courses, getting the reins off their necks and leaving their parents," (Chapter 4, Book 1).

In this excerpt from *Of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford discusses the children of the Puritans who came to the New England Colonies. He is disturbed to see that they have been influenced by sin and led astray. Notice how Bradford says they were led by evil examples. Puritan Literature was meant to be an example of good Puritan behavior and allowed readers to model their lifestyles on the virtuous Puritan way of life they read about. Here, Bradford is saying that the younger people of the colonies are following bad examples such as licentious behavior. Puritans, like Bradford, placed heavy emphasis on living as sin-free as possible in the chance they are chosen by God to go to heaven. Bradford is concerned for the younger people in the colonies who are leading sinful lives and risking their chances of being saved.

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### **"To My Dear Beloved Husband" (1650) by Anne Bradstreet**

Anne Bradstreet was a Puritan pilgrim living in the colony of Massachusetts and was known for her Puritan poetry. Her poem "To My Dear Beloved Husband" provides a glimpse into an aspect of Puritan life not often seen in Puritan literature. It allows the reader to see the relationship between a husband and wife and how that is shaped by Puritanism.

If ever two were one, then surely we.  
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.  
If ever wife was happy in a man,  
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.  
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,  
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.  
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,  
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.  
Thy love is such I can no way repay;  
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.  
Then while we live, in love let's so persevere,  
That when we live no more, we may live ever"

In the 17th century, it was common for many people to have arranged marriages that were advantageous to their families either financially or socially. Puritans, however, believed marriage should be based on mutual love and that people had free will to choose their partners. In this poem, one can see that the speaker loves her husband and is upholding the Puritan value of marriage based on love.

### **Puritan Literature: List of Influential Authors**

Here is a list of influential Puritan authors. This list does not cover every Puritan author, but it provides a good set of names one should be familiar with.

- William Bradford (1590-1657)
- Rev. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
- Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)
- Thomas Vincent (1634-1678)
- John Flavel (1628-1691)

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## **The Influence of Puritan Literature**

Puritan Literature is still highly influential, just as it was during its peak in the 17th century. Puritan Literature, with its simple writing style and accessibility to the everyday person, was easily circulated among members of society, particularly those in the New England Colonies. The circulation of Puritan Literature and ultimately its spread of Puritanism remained influential even after Puritanism lost its popularity in the 18th century. Puritan values such as working hard, avoiding promiscuous activities, and having an intimate relationship with God are still values held by many Americans today.