

## Puritanism

### I. *Basic Puritan Beliefs and Values*

- Ethnocentrism predominated during the Early Colonial period; the Puritans believed that only their religion was the "correct" one and all others would be damned. See Salem Witchcraft Trials below as an example of the Puritans' intolerance. Roger Williams was also expelled for new and dangerous opinions as he preached a complete separation of church and state. The Puritans also persecuted and killed Quakers for preaching "inner light" doctrines. Anne Hutchinson was persecuted and expelled as well as she believed in individual grace and criticized the dual nature of religion and the government.
- Simplicity was the norm and anything excessive (clothes, decorations, even behavior, etc.) was seriously frowned upon.
- Predestination: the Puritans believed in predestination--all events are fore known and foreordained by God. God would save who is chose to and damn those he chose as well. The question foremost in all Puritan's mind was "Am I saved?" They were born sinners and remained sinners unless redeemed by God; he was their absolute sovereign. Only He, through his Divine Grace, could save them, and no amount of good deeds could result in being saved.
- Education was supported to thwart Satan and his temptations as well as to allow people to become literate enough to read the Bible. God's will, they believed, was revealed in the Bible.
- Divine Mission: The Puritans believed that they would settle the New World for God.

### II. *Puritan Government*

- Church and state were intertwined causing a blurring of political and religious authority. Williams was expelled because he believed the state should have no say over a person's conscience. Roger Williams also held that Native Americans should be paid for their lands.
- Voting was restricted to active church members only.
- Supported Puritan religion by taxation on all, regardless of faith.

### III. *Puritan Contributions*

- Hard work ethic
- Stalwart moral values
- Self-governance and community responsibility (all community members were responsible for the conduct of citizens)
- Education creating literate citizens
- Literary contributions in prose and poetry

### **Historical and Literary Context**

When Written: 1848-1850

Where Written: Salem, Massachusetts

When Published: 1850

**Related Literary Works:** The literary movement known as Transcendentalism flourished during the 1830s and 1840s, primarily in Massachusetts. The Transcendentalists believed in the power of the human mind to shape and determine experience. They favored a more personal view of religion in which people could connect directly with God. The Transcendental view of religion stood in stark contrast to the practices of groups like the Puritans, who believed in strict societal governance of religion. Transcendentalism's most famous works are Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Emerson's *Essays*, most notably "Nature" (1836). Though Hawthorne is not considered a Transcendentalist, many of the movement's central tenets appear in his work.

**Related Historical Events:** The *Scarlet Letter* paints a very unflattering portrait of the Puritans, a religious group that dominated late seventeenth-century English settlement in Massachusetts. Puritanism began in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603). The name “Puritanism” came from the group’s intent to purify the Church of England by making government and religious practice conform more closely to the word of God. The Puritans were often persecuted in England, and a group of them sailed to the New World on the *Mayflower* in 1620 in search of a place to practice their religion without interference. Though today Puritans are often thought of as the foundation of American society, Hawthorne criticizes the Puritans’ harsh religion and society.

## Characters

**Hester Prynne** — The protagonist of the novel, Hester is married to Roger Chillingworth and has an affair with Arthur Dimmesdale. The affair produces a daughter, Pearl. Hester plays many roles in *The Scarlet Letter*: devoted mother, abandoned lover, estranged wife, religious dissenter, feminist, and outcast, to name just a few. Perhaps her most important role is that of an iconoclast, one who opposes established conventions. Hester is not just a rebel, she’s a glorified rebel, and Hawthorne uses her to criticize the Puritan’s strict society. He portrays Hester fondly, as a woman of strength, independence, and kindness, who stands up to the judgments and constraints of her society. Though society tries to demean and disgrace her, Hawthorne emphasizes that Hester never looked more attractive as when she first emerged from prison wearing the scarlet letter.

**Pearl** — The illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl serves as a symbol of her mother’s shame and triumph. At one point the narrator describes Pearl as “the scarlet letter endowed with life.” Like the letter, Pearl is the public consequence of Hester’s very private sin. Yet also like the scarlet letter, Pearl becomes Hester’s source of strength. Pearl defines Hester’s identity and purpose and gives Hester a companion to love. Although she often struggles to understand Pearl’s rebelliousness and devilish spirit, Hester never wavers in her loving devotion to Pearl. Pearl, an outcast, is drawn to other outcasts, such as Mistress Hibbins and her witch friends. Pearl’s affinity for the occult associates her character with sin and evil, but Pearl is first and foremost a product of love, not just sin. Her rumored happiness and success as an adult in Europe make her character a symbol of the triumph of love over a repressed and oppressive society.

**Arthur Dimmesdale** — A well respected Boston reverend who has an affair with Hester Prynne and is the secret father of Pearl. Shy, retiring, and well loved and respected by his public, Dimmesdale is too frightened and selfish to reveal his sin and bear the burden of punishment with Hester. Yet at the same time, Dimmesdale secretly punishes himself for his sin by fasting and whipping himself. Ultimately the suffering and punishment he endures, though self-inflicted, proves far worse than Hester’s or Pearl’s, suggesting that betrayal and selfishness are greater sins than adultery. Dimmesdale’s guilty conscience overwhelms him like a plague, robbing him of his health and preventing him from raising his daughter. His eventual confession comes too late, and he dies a victim of his own pride.

**Roger Chillingworth** — The old scholar who Hester Prynne met and married before coming to Boston. Chillingworth is a forbidding presence. Even his name reflects his haunting, ice-cold aura. Hester’s relationship with Chillingworth, her actual husband, contrasts sharply with her relationship with Dimmesdale, her lover. Chillingworth is an older man whom she married for reasons other than love. Dimmesdale is a beloved reverend with whom she had an affair out of love and irrepressible desire. Chillingworth recognizes this difference and punishes Hester and Dimmesdale covertly by tormenting Dimmesdale almost to the point of killing him.

Meanwhile, he hypocritically makes Hester swear not to reveal his true identity as her husband in order to avoid the humiliation of being associated with their scandalous affair. In the end, by tormenting Dimmesdale, Chillingworth transforms himself into a sick and twisted man, a kind of fiend.

**The Narrator** — The unnamed narrator is inspired to write *The Scarlet Letter* after discovering the scarlet letter and fragments of its story in an attic of the Custom House. He describes the novel as a tale of “human frailty and sorrow” and encourages the reader to heed its moral. Throughout the novel, the narrator favors Hester against the Puritans who persecute her. His writing often reads as if he’s pained to have to tell such a sad story that involves the downfall of innocent victims at the hands of an oppressive society.

**Mistress Hibbins** — Governor Bellingham’s sister. She invites Hester to a witches’ meeting in the woods and becomes the object of Pearl’s fascination. She speaks often of the “Black Man,” another name for the Devil. She is executed for practicing witchcraft about a year after Dimmesdale dies. Her death shows how merciless Puritan society had become in the name of piety and propriety: the Governor would even order the execution of his own sister.

**Governor Bellingham** — The governor of Boston and the brother of Mistress Hibbins. Bellingham conducts himself like an aristocrat, enjoying money, luxury, and the privileges of power. Yet when it comes to the actions of others, Governor Bellingham punishes any behavior that does not fit with the strict Puritan rules of behavior. This makes him a hard-hearted hypocrite. For instance, even while employing Hester to do fancy needlepoint for him, he tries to take Pearl from her, arguing that as an adulterer she’s an unfit mother. Later, he convicts and executes his own sister of practicing witchcraft.

**John Wilson** — A jovial and grandfatherly English pastor who is loved for his kindness and benevolence. He serves as a mentor to Dimmesdale, though his somber and severe preaching style differs sharply from Dimmesdale’s calm compassionate approach.

**Jonathan Pue** — The narrator’s predecessor as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House. Pue wrote the original narrative about the scarlet letter, which the narrator discovered and