

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## American Literature

1. Read and annotate the article.
2. Annotations should consist of section summaries
3. Complete the comparison chart thoroughly. Use direct quotes from the article and the novel.

**Extended response:** Minimum three paragraphs, typed

How accurately does *The Scarlett Letter* portray the Puritan society? Provide specific examples and textual support.

## Puritanism

Puritanism was a religious reform movement that arose within the Church of England in the late sixteenth century. Under siege from church and crown, it sent an offshoot in the third and fourth decades of the seventeenth century to the northern English colonies in the New World—a migration that laid the foundation for the religious, intellectual, and social order of New England. Puritanism, however, was not only a historically specific phenomenon coincident with the founding of New England; it was also a way of being in the world—a style of response to lived experience—that has reverberated through American life ever since.

The roots of Puritanism are to be found in the beginnings of the English Reformation. The name “Puritans” (they were sometimes called “precisionists”) was a term of contempt assigned to the movement by its enemies. Although the epithet first emerged in the 1560s, the process through which Puritanism developed had been initiated in the 1530s, when King [Henry VIII](#) repudiated papal authority and transformed the Church of Rome into a state Church of England. But the Church of England retained much of the liturgy and ritual of Roman Catholicism and seemed, to many dissenters, to be insufficiently reformed.

### Did You Know?

In keeping with their focus on the home, Puritan migration to the New World usually consisted of entire families, rather than the young, single men who comprised many other early European settlements.

Well into the sixteenth century many priests were barely literate and often very poor. Employment by more than one parish was common, and the resulting itinerancy of priests, along with their immunity to certain penalties of the civil law, fed anticlerical hostility and contributed to their isolation from the spiritual needs of the people.

Through the reigns of the Protestant King Edward VI (1547-1553), who introduced the first vernacular prayer book, and the Catholic Queen Mary (1553-1558), who sent some dissenting clergymen to their deaths and others into exile, the Puritan movement—whether tolerated or suppressed—continued to grow. Some Puritans favored a presbyterian form of church organization; others, more radical, began to claim autonomy for individual congregations. Still others were content to remain within the structure of the national church, but set themselves against the doctrinal and liturgical vestiges of Catholic tradition, especially the vestments that symbolized episcopal authority. As they gained strength, Puritans were portrayed by their enemies as hairsplitters who slavishly followed their Bibles as guides to daily life; or they were caricatured as licentious hypocrites who adopted a grave aspect but cheated the very neighbors

whom they judged inadequate Christians. They appeared in drama and satire as secretly lascivious purveyors of feigned piety.

Yet the Puritan attack on the established church gained popular strength, especially in East Anglia and among the lawyers and merchants of London. The movement found wide support among these new professional classes, in part because it was congenial to their growing discontent with mercantile economic restraints. During the reign of Queen [Elizabeth I](#), an uneasy peace prevailed within English religious life, but the struggle over the tone and purpose of the church continued. Many men and women were more and more forced to contend with the dislocations—emotional as well as physical—that accompanied the beginnings of a market economy. Subsistence farmers were called upon to enter the world of production for profit. Under the rule of primogeniture, younger sons tended to enter the professions (especially the law) with increasing frequency and seek their livelihood in the burgeoning cities. With the growth of a continental market for wool, land enclosure for sheep farming became an attractive alternative for large landowners, who thereby disrupted centuries-old patterns of rural communal life. The English countryside was plagued by scavengers, highwaymen, and vagabonds—a newly visible class of the poor who strained the ancient charity laws and pressed upon the townsfolk new questions of social responsibility.

In the early decades of the seventeenth century some groups of worshipers began to separate themselves from the main body of their local parish church where preaching was inadequate and to engage an energetic “lecturer,” typically a young man with a fresh Cambridge degree, who was a lively speaker and steeped in reform theology. Some congregations went further, declared themselves separated from the national church, and remade themselves into communities of “visible saints,” withdrawn from the English City of Man into a self-proclaimed City of God.

One such faction was a group of separatist believers in the Yorkshire village of Scrooby, who, fearing for their safety, moved to Holland in 1608 and thence, in 1620, to the place they called Plymouth in New England. A decade later, a larger, better-financed group, mostly from East Anglia, migrated to [Massachusetts](#) Bay. There they set up gathered churches on much the same model as the transplanted church at Plymouth (with deacons, preaching elders, and, though not right away, a communion restricted to full church members, or “saints”). These Puritans called themselves “nonseparating congregationalists,” by which they meant that they had not repudiated the Church of England as a false church. But in practice they acted—from the point of view of Episcopalians and even Presbyterians at home—exactly as the separatists were acting. By the 1640s their enterprise at Massachusetts Bay had grown to about ten thousand persons, and through the inevitable centrifugal pressures of land scarcity within the borders of the swelling towns, ecclesiastical quarreling, and sheer restlessness of spirit, they had outgrown the bounds of the original settlement and spread into what would become [Connecticut](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Rhode Island](#), and [Maine](#), and eventually beyond the limits of New England.

The Puritan migration was overwhelmingly a migration of families (unlike other migrations to early America, which were composed largely of young unattached men). The literacy rate was high, and the intensity of devotional life, as recorded in the many surviving diaries, sermon notes, poems, and letters, was seldom to be matched in American life. The Puritans’ ecclesiastical order was as intolerant as the one they had fled. Yet, as a loosely confederated collection of gathered churches, Puritanism contained within itself the seed of its own fragmentation. Following hard upon the arrival in New England, dissident groups within the Puritan sect began to proliferate—Quakers, Antinomians, Baptists—fierce believers who carried the essential Puritan idea of the aloneness of each believer with an inscrutable God so far that even the ministry became an obstruction to faith.

The ensuing religious history of early New England is a tale of conflicts between congregational and synodical authority; between those who stressed the utter helplessness of the individual in the process of salvation and those who began to allow a place for human initiative; between those who believed that the Lord’s Supper was a sacrament reserved for the regenerate and those who believed that it could be a “converting ordinance”; and perhaps most divisively as time went on, between those who regarded baptism as a rite due only to the children of full communing church members and those who believed it could be

safely extended to the children of “half-way” members– second-generation Puritans who had never stepped forward to make the profession of faith that the founders had required for entrance into the true church.

These sorts of disputes—which have a certain inevitability in any community where the quality of true faith is the only value worth disputing—make the history of American Puritanism seem a story of family rancor and, ultimately, of disintegration. But Puritanism as a basic attitude was remarkably durable and can hardly be overestimated as a formative element of early American life. Among its intellectual contributions was a psychological empiricism that has rarely, if ever, been exceeded in categorical subtlety. It furnished Americans with a sense of history as a progressive drama under the direction of God, in which they played a role akin to, if not prophetically aligned with, that of the Old Testament Jews as a new chosen people. Perhaps most important, as Max Weber profoundly understood, was the strength of Puritanism as a way of coping with the contradictory requirements of Christian ethics in a world on the verge of modernity. It supplied an ethics that somehow balanced the injunction to charity and the premium on self-discipline; it counseled moderation within a psychology that virtually ensured exertion toward worldly prosperity as the best sign of divine favor. Such an ethics was particularly urgent in a New World where opportunity can be as obvious as the source of moral authority is obscure.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Puritanism had both declined and shown its tenacity. Every New England generation, especially through the characteristic rhetoric of the jeremiad, sorrowfully proclaimed the end of “the faith once delivered to the saints.” If we measure the purity of Puritanism by its fidelity to its covenant of faith untainted by a covenant of works or to its original principles of restricted baptism and communion, then we must go even further than its severest internal critics and say that Puritanism never really existed in America at all. The burden of its American experience was its discovery that it had been, in essence, an oppositional movement; that life “in the free air of the New World” posed insuperable dangers to its coherence and survival. But if we regard Puritanism as a way of seeing the world, as an excruciating but exquisite program of self-scrutiny by which the stirrings of grace might be acknowledged and the divinely sanctioned energies of the soul put to use—in both benevolent and violently destructive ways—then we must account it the dominant spiritual regimen of early America.

Though “the New England Way” evolved into a relatively minor system of organizing religious experience within the broader American scene, its central themes recur in the related religious communities of Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and a whole range of evangelical Protestants. More recently, the word “Puritan” has once again become a pejorative epithet, meaning prudish, constricted, cold—as in H. L. Mencken’s famous remark that a Puritan is one who suspects “somewhere someone is having a good time.” Puritanism, however, had a more significant persistence in American life than as the religion of black-frocked caricatures. It survived, perhaps most conspicuously, in the transmuted secular form of self-reliance and political localism that became, by the Age of [Enlightenment](#), virtually the definition of Americanism. And in its bequest of intellectual and moral rigor to the New England mind, it established what was arguably the central strand of American cultural life until the twentieth century.

Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, eds., *The Puritans in America* (1985); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953).

Source:

<http://www.history.com/topics/puritanism>

Author: History.com Staff