

Humanities Out There Lesson 2: Meet the Puritans

The purpose of this lesson is to familiarize students with the history of Puritan settlement in New England and the central tenets of Puritan theology. This should help them clarify the historical context of *The Scarlet Letter*, and encourage them to explore the influence of Puritan ideas on contemporary American culture and political rhetoric.

After completing this lesson, students will be able to apply historical and intellectual-historical contexts to interpreting a literary text, compare historical rhetoric to contemporary rhetoric, and critically analyze unfamiliar religious concepts.

Pedagogical Issues to Discuss:

- 1) Students' response from Ms. Wood's email: *Overall the students enjoyed working with the undergraduates. They felt at ease and accepted. Their conversations seem to dart back and forth to the topic at hand to what it is like being a college student. One student expressed disappointment over the fact that the college students are required to read. One student expressed a little frustration. She felt the undergrad working with her group "was nice, but too quiet." Other than that, 90% of the students stated they feel more confident about considering symbolism in literature and the idea that symbols can take on different meanings in a variety of settings. They all expressed their enjoyment and fun. They said they had some what expected the undergrads to be "serious" and liked that they were fun, open, but also so very smart.*
- 2) From class noteboard: "They were quiet during the first exercise and seemed to just want to agree with whatever the first one said." / "I'm not sure whether it was shyness or just not knowing the material." / "People were weary of disagreeing with their classmates."
- 3) From class noteboard: "One student who just kind of tuned me out and didn't write hardly anything down. Both girls in my group contributed a lot to the discussion; the fourth student was very quiet, but he paid close attention from what I could tell."
- 4) From class noteboard: "I think the decision to keep 'b*****t' in the powerpoint worked to your advantage, Aaron. I got the feeling that all the students really woke up at the moment that you said that, judging from all their commentary and chuckles. I thought Ms. Wood's response, "It's okay, it was in quotes", was supportive of our hip college image and use of adult language. No, I was not cursing like a sailor in my small group..."
- 5) From class noteboard: "I had boatloads of fun, for serious."
- 6) Choose your own adventure...

Things you should do to prepare for Wednesday

- 1) Read this packet thoroughly and make sure you are familiar with everything in it. Bring it to the school on Wednesday if you need it for cribnotes.
- 2) Read chapters 6-10 of *The Scarlet Letter*. I'm uncertain what pace the students are going at this point. As you saw, the level of preparation and interest varies widely. We might as well stay ahead of the game; we'll aim to finish the book by our last week.
- 3) Read the essay I posted to the listserv last week if you haven't (B. Thomas, "Citizen Hester").

4) If you haven't already posted to the noteboard for the week, please do. Multiple posts always welcome: <http://eee.uci.edu/toolbox/noteboard/index.php?board=4380>

5) Make sure that your carpool is still OK. Leave early enough to get there. And, um... don't turn right the first time you cross Main Street. It's the second time.

6) I'm giving you a handout Ms. Wood made for me with the students' names from last week. Try to memorize them by process of elimination, although the groups may not be exactly the same the second time around.

0:00-0:05 Aaron's PowerPoint

The purpose of the PowerPoint is to bridge from last week's lesson and introduce some historical and theological concepts through some fun visuals.

1) I will begin by reviewing the revised definition of symbolism that we created last week. This will provide transition to concepts in Puritan theology, because the Puritans were obsessed with interpreting symbols. The *Scarlet Letter* shows us how the Puritans interpreted symbols, and it also encourages its reader to interpret symbols. Not exactly in the Puritan way, but almost.

2) After some slides about why the Puritans sailed to North America and what happened when they got there, I will discuss the notion of Puritan "inheritance" that Hawthorne sets up in "The Custom House." I'll talk about what ideas our own culture might inherit from the Puritans, and whether they are good ideas or bad ideas.

0:05-0:15 Group Socratic Lecture: Thinking Like a Puritan

The goal of this exercise is for students to learn the basic tenets of Puritan theology. This will be a little different from last week because you will teach some content instead of me teaching it all in the PowerPoint.

1) First we will divide into nine groups. They should be mostly the same as last week, but if your group has less than three or more than four, try to trade students in or out with another group. Ms. Wood will also probably rotate the groups that get to go outside, so just let them show you where to go.

2) You'll begin with what is called a Socratic question, asking the students: *Do you attend religious services, and if so what kind?* Most of the students will be Catholic, but we don't want to presume. They will undoubtedly be interested in your own religious affiliation, and you can answer politely without going into extreme detail. This conversation will need some space to breathe, but don't let it go on forever.

3) You will now discuss the major differences between Puritanism and contemporary versions of Catholicism and Protestantism (or whatever else). Your mileage will vary here, but the important thing to remember is that the students, whatever their beliefs, will by no means be theological experts. As above, establish common ground. I'm an agnostic from a mixed marriage, but this lesson isn't about my autobiography, so I would just say I'm Jewish and look to some elements common to Judaism and Catholicism. This is really about how weird the Puritans were, more than anything.

4) *First Difference: Millennialism.* Many religious groups believe in some sort of world-ending event. With the exception of radical evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some others, most

people in the U.S. believe this event will occur sometime in the future, but not really soon. The Puritans were convinced that the end of the world was really, really soon. Like next Monday, or at the longest in their own lifetime. They called it the 'Millenium' because they thought the process, once begun, would take 1000 years.¹ So they believed that the world would end soon, very literally, and this made them alternately anxious and excited.

5) *Second Difference: Predestined Election.* The reason they were so anxious and excited was that Puritans believed that at the end of the world, God would separate the cool people (the elect) from the lame people (the non-elect). This isn't quite the same as heaven and hell because in this way of looking at things, heaven and hell are temporary hang outs before the end of the world. Most religions have some version of election, but the key difference in Puritanism is that election is absolutely and unconditionally not related to your own behavior on earth. In other words, you can't earn it by doing good things, or lose it by doing bad things. Election for the Puritans is by God's grace alone, and has already been predestined at the creation of the world. To a Catholic, a Buddhist, a Hindu, or a middle-of-the-road Protestant, this idea is absolutely insane. These religions believe that good works have at least some role in election, and that election is not predestined.²

6) *Third Difference: Typological Symbolism.* So you're a Puritan. You believe the end of the world is nigh. You also believe that you're living in the only religious community in the world that is practicing true religion, the coolest cool crowd in the end of the world lunch room. But you have no way of being certain about whether you are elect or not, because only God knows, and who are you to tell Him what to do? So you're really anxious about this whole thing. How can you know if you're in or you're out? This is where the symbols come in. The Puritans believe that God does not reveal election directly, but sometimes reveals indirect clues via symbols. Two of the more important clues are a feeling of being 'converted' a.k.a. 'born again'³ and the performance of good works. But wait, Aaron. Didn't you say good works don't count? They don't. They're *symbolic* that you might be a good person, not brownie points. The third type of clue is basically any event in your own life or anything you see going on in the world.

The Puritans thought pretty much *everything* was a symbol. A bird lands on a tree, your neighbor burns her pumpkin pie, the Detroit Tigers win the World Series, whatever. This symbolism is 'typological' because the Puritans tended to relate these events to events in the Bible. A Detroit Tigers victory might be the 'type,' or symbol, of the Israelites' military victory at Jericho in Exodus, or the story of the lions' den in the book of Daniel. That's how typology works. Two examples of typological thinking you might point out to the students. One would be Hester's adultery. Remember, the Puritans believe that they are the only people practicing true religion in the entire world. They came all the way across the Atlantic to get away from all the heathens. When they see

¹ If the students don't notice the connection between the Spanish "mille" and the number 1000 in "millennium," point it out. If the students are curious, the Puritans actually argued between two theories. In 'pre-millennialism' Christ would return and the earth would become a perfect paradise again (as in the Book of Genesis) for 1000 years. In 'post-millennialism' there is a 1000-year sequence of events before Christ's return, which is the real ending. This sequence includes various things like magical battles with Satan and the mass conversion of the Jews. A lot of evangelicals in the U.S. today are post-millennialists, a la the *Left Behind* books.

² More bonus terminology. Again, only go into this if the students are curious. The belief that good works earn election is called 'pelagianism.' The belief that God's grace alone establishes election is called 'arminianism.'

³ Note the similarity to modern evangelical Christianity. The whole thing in practice winds up being a bit like confirmation in Catholicism and Lutheran versions of Protestantism, but it's quite different in theory. There's no timetable for being born again; it doesn't just happen when you turn fourteen or whatever.

symbolic evidence that their community is actually not holy, they get worried. Young women are not supposed to commit adultery in the only true religious community on earth. Even if their husband is presumed dead, and they're really hot, and JT is bringing sexy back. This would be taken as a symbol that the entire community is corrupt, that nobody might be save at the end of the world. To give a real example that will amuse the students, here is an event that actually happened in 17th century Massachusetts. A Puritan dude was caught having sex with a turkey. Again, this isn't the kind of thing that you want if you're the Puritans, because it reflects badly on you and sets a bad example for young people. You might also point out that Puritan couples lived in small one room houses with children and extended relatives all sleeping in the same room, so there was probably some element of sexual frustration behind the turkey incident!

0:15-0:35 Group Exercise: Thinking Like a Puritan

The goal of this exercise is for students to bring alive the abstract concepts from the previous discussion by actually practicing Puritanism. Sort of.

1) OK, so now you've been yakking a lot, although hopefully it was pretty interesting for them and you made it interactive. But here's the fun part. You're now going to let the students wander around. Common sense tells me that you shouldn't let them out of your immediate sight, so that means they have to stay in the classroom / courtyard / garden. But they can go anywhere within that space. They are not allowed to speak with each other. They are on a personal spiritual journey, looking for typological symbols. If they want to do the literal typology with biblical events, that's o.k. Don't give them specific instructions to do that (see italics below). Mainly they're just looking for anything that would symbolize their election or non-election. Most of this will be roses and insects and pencil sharpeners, but you can also tell them that they're allowed to think back on the events of the past week while they're wandering and use those events as symbols too. *This is not actually a religious lesson, so be sure to emphasize that they are pretending to be Puritans rather than actually being Catholics or whatever.* I realize that this distinction is completely untenable, but you should at least state it, because otherwise we are violating the First Amendment like nobody's business.

2) There will come a point when the wandering will no longer hold their attention and it is impossible for them not to start doing math homework or talking to friends. It will be up to you to determine when this is. "Ripeness is all" – Billy Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

3) In the next part of the exercise, they will discuss the symbols and interpretations they wrote down from their journey, and compare. Another good Socratic question to ask at this point would be, *what would it be like to think this way 24/7?* Or if you want to live dangerously, *is this a good a good theology to live by?*

0:35-0:50 Puritan Theology in *The Scarlet Letter*

The purpose of this exercise is to leverage the knowledge of Puritan theology the students have now gained in order to critically analyze depictions of Puritanism in the novel.

1) Like last week, whatever you need to do to guide the students through the text, do it. Vocabulary, context, whatever. There are two sets of textual examples on the worksheet. One set is about what Hawthorne thinks of the Puritans, and another is about how Hawthorne uses Puritan methods of symbolism in his own writing.

2) I warn you that this will be a big letdown from the previous exercise. You need to manage this as best as you can.

Follow Up Exercises for Ms. Wood's Students

1) It would be worthwhile to revisit the final exercise (Puritan Theology in *The Scarlet Letter*) because it may have been somewhat rushed.

2) Write for 10-15 minutes on one or more of the following topics, and then discuss what you wrote with the class: *What is it like having the UCI students visit on Wednesdays? What is it like having class outside of your regular classroom sometimes? What do you think are some of the differences between high school and college?*

3) Now you know that Puritans were obsessed with symbols and looked at everything in the world as a symbol of their own election or non-election. You also know that Puritans valued literacy and loved to write. So you are going to write what the Puritans called a 'spiritual autobiography.' Basically, this is a story of your life that focuses on significant events that you have experienced. But the story has to follow a certain plot. You start with something about your early childhood. You were a good kid. Then you got older, and you started to do some bad stuff that you shouldn't have done. But recently, you've changed your ways. A very important event occurred that showed you (by symbolism) that you were really on the right track after all. Try to include as many symbols as you can throughout.