



Examining
The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter



- novel (notice title is italicized)
- written by Nathaniel Hawthorne (b. 1804)
- written about 1850
- set in Boston, Mass. about 1690

Setting: *The Scarlet Letter*

- The setting of Hawthorne's novel is critical to the plot
- 1690's Boston was a Puritan village
- Like other Puritan settlements in New England, the local and colonial governments were theocracies.

theocracy

- word comes from Greek
- *theo* = God
- *cratos* = rule

...so, a *theocracy* is a government where the civil laws are based (in whole or in part) on religious laws; civil leaders in theocracies are probably also important religious leaders

theocracy, cont.

- In Afghanistan before 2001, the Taliban controlled religious and civil laws. Besides having to wear *burqas* in public, women in Afghanistan were not allowed to attend school or drive cars.
 - In Saudi Arabia, women cannot drive or vote. Because Islam forbids it, no place in Saudi Arabia sells alcohol or pork.



Theocracy as Extremism

Ironically, it is largely because of the Puritans – who themselves established a theocratic government in the New World – that we in America tend to view most theocratic governments as extremist.

Puritanism

- Began in England in the mid-1500' s
- A sect of Calvinists
- Calvinism named after Swiss theologian John Calvin
- Calvinism =
 - predetermination
 - no religious authority BUT Scripture

“Puritans”

- “Puritans” intended as a derogatory term
- “Puritans” usually referred to themselves as “the Godly” (theopedia.com)
- Puritans fell quickly out of favor in England, where the king was the head of the Church of England.
- They recognized neither the king’s secular or religious authority, and so quickly became enemies of civil and religious leaders.

The Puritan Role in Development of “American” Character, cont.

- Because Scripture was central to religion and government, scholarship was a highly valued right (reserved, of course, to men only).
- The role of religious leaders was to present Scripture and guide other church members in its understanding and application.
- Puritan religious leaders were NEVER seen as intermediaries or intercessors.

The Puritan Role in Development of “American” Character, cont.

- “Puritan leaders were highly trained scholars, whose education tended to translate into positions that were often authoritarian.”
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PURITAN/purhist.html>
- “There was a built-in hierarchism in this sense, but one which mostly reflected the age.”
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PURITAN/purhist.html>
- Very Important: Anybody (theoretically) could rise to the same level of authority.

So...

The Puritan emphasis on:

- self-reliance
- independence
- individual achievement
- individual responsibility
- personal accountability
- power through ability
(education)



Romanticism

- Idealized the past, and country life
- Individual > society
- Butted heads with the Enlightenment philosophy of rational detachment
- Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*:
“ordinary things [were worth writing about] and should be presented to the mind in an unusual way”

How does an author do this?

Romanticism continued...

- **SUBLIME** and **PICTURESQUE** are important words in the Romantic imagination:



Romanticism continued...

- Edmund Burke wrote extensively on the sublime, and in his *1757 Treatise*, wrote:

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible subjects...is a source of the sublime”

“ ...terror as producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves...and consequently must be a source of the sublime, though it should have no idea of danger connected with it.”

What does Hawthorne have to do with all this? Where do you see elements of the sublime in the novel?

Gothic

- The romance also contains American Gothic elements – meaning:
 - Supernatural elements that defy logical explanation
 - Focus on the condemning nature of Puritan society
 - Horror, and the darkness of human nature
 - A character wracked with guilt, or driven mad with revenge