

Exploring Expository Writing/Historical Context: Puritan Religion and Beliefs

Frustrated by the Church of England, early Puritans came to America to escape persecution and to establish a new sect in which God's law was held supreme. They believed that the Bible and its message were above man's law, and therefore, it was the key to salvation. Most of the dissenters settled in New England, and it was in these new colonies that they established a close-knit community governed by absolute religious faith and strict discipline.

The Puritans believed in predestination – that people were either born sinful and bound to a life in Hell, or they were destined to be saved. Nothing could be done to change one's destiny except to live a life of purity and pray that God would save them at the time of their death. Puritans believed in a life of hard work, self-discipline, and religious duty. Those who engaged in gossip, dancing, drunkenness, adultery, and other activities which were seen as the work of the Devil and a threat to the conformity of the community were subjected to public humiliation and punishment.

This strict, oppressive environment created tension in the community. Satan was ever-present in their daily lives, as death, drought, flood, and other natural disasters were blamed on Satan and his followers. As a result, Puritans became paranoid and suspicious of each other, and were often quick to place blame. This tension and paranoia created the perfect equation for the Salem Witch Hunt in 1692.

Spurred by political and social unrest in the community, and religious leaders such as Cotton Mather who wrote the book *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions* (1689), the hysteria in Salem spread like wildfire. By the end of the trials in 1692, nineteen men and women were hanged, one man was pressed to death, and many others died in prison while awaiting trial.

Directions: Choose the letter of the best response. Write the letter of the correct answer on the line provided.

1. _____ What is the main purpose of the article above?
 - a. to compare the Puritan ideals and beliefs to the beliefs of Quakers
 - b. to analyze the relationship between the Puritans' ideals and beliefs and the witchcraft accusations
 - c. to persuade the reader to take the side of the Puritans
 - d. to describe the influence Cotton Mather had on the Puritans
2. _____ During the Colonial period, fear of the Devil was prevalent. This is *most* apparent in which of the following paragraphs?
 - a. paragraphs 1 and 4
 - b. paragraphs 1 and 2
 - a. paragraphs 2 and 3
 - d. paragraphs 3 and 4
3. _____ Which of the following would probably be the *best* source of information for a research report on this topic?
 - a. *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*
 - b. *The Witch Hunts of Europe and America*
 - c. *The Salem Herald*
 - d. *Puritan History: From the Outcasts to the Accusers*
4. _____ Which of the following research questions would be *most* useful in finding out more about Puritan religion and beliefs?
 - a. What holidays did the Puritans celebrate?
 - b. How did the Puritans feel about the Native Americans they encountered in America?
 - c. What ideals were the Puritans taught in church and school?
 - d. How many Puritans left the church to join a different religion?
5. On a separate piece of paper, use the above article to summarize what life was like for the Puritans in America. Then compare the life of the Puritans to your own – are there similarities? What are the differences? Explain using examples from the article and your own life experiences.