

Between Heaven and Hell

The Puritan Tradition

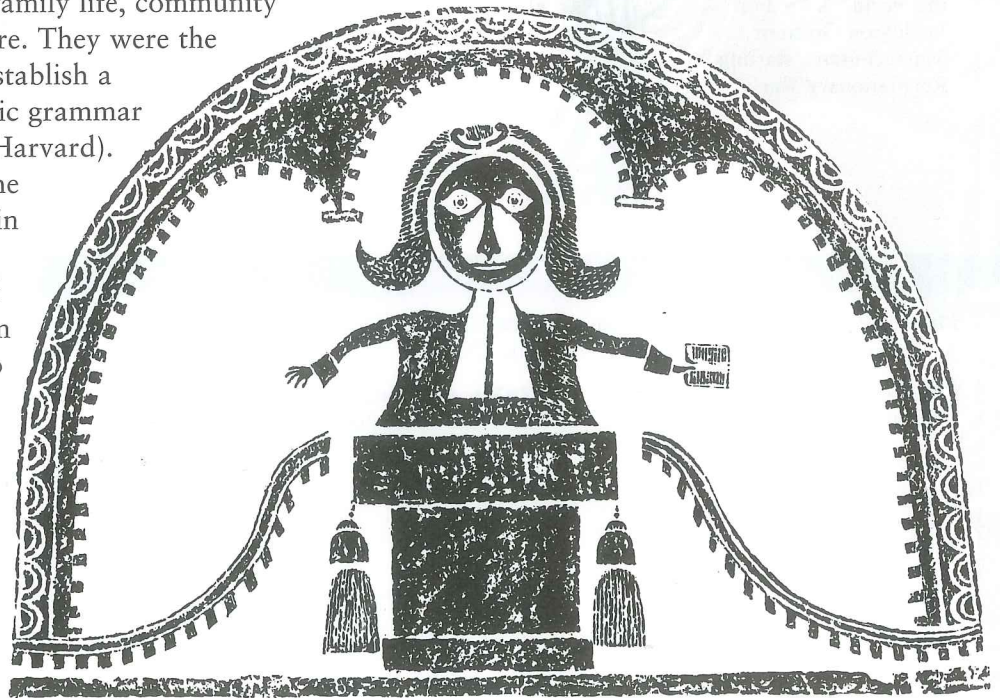
Puritans too often have the reputation of being black-clad moralists self-righteously proclaiming the values of thrift and hard work. According to the American writer and humorist H. L. Mencken, a Puritan is one who suspects that “somewhere someone is having a good time.” To call someone a puritan is usually not a compliment.

This negative image, however, is based on a stereotype of the 16th-century Puritans that, like most stereotypes, is full of half-truths and misconceptions. True, the Puritans did value hard work and self-sacrifice, but they also honored material success. Wealth was considered to be the reward of a virtuous life. Some Puritans, especially the early Pilgrims, wore severe black clothing because that was all they had. Those who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony after 1630, however, were better off financially. They could afford decorative and colorful clothing—when they could find it in the colony, that is. These Puritans were even known to drink beer and other alcoholic beverages on occasion.

Puritans also valued family life, community service, art, and literature. They were the first in the colonies to establish a printing press, free public grammar schools, and a college (Harvard).

On the other hand, the Puritans *were* arrogant in their religious faith and completely intolerant of viewpoints different from their own. Puritans who remained in England

Tombstone design
from Puritan
New England



Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary
(1674), unknown artist. The
Granger Collection, New York.

participated in a revolution that not only toppled the king but had him beheaded as well. Those who had come to North America had even freer rein for their beliefs. With supreme confidence and self-consciousness, they went about setting up their institutions as though not only God but the whole world were watching. "The eyes of all people are on us," proclaimed John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay



Puritan Beliefs

The key to the Puritan heart and soul is religious belief. What follows is a brief explanation of the Puritans' basic convictions:

- *Human beings are inherently evil and so must struggle to overcome their sinful nature.* This belief in original sin was one of the first things a Puritan child learned. "In Adam's fall / We sinned all" is the rhyme that teaches the letter A in *The New England Primer*.
- *Personal salvation depends solely on the grace of God, not on individual effort.* Puritans believed in predestination, the doctrine that only those people who are "elected" by God are saved and go to heaven. The only way an individual could know that he or she was saved was by directly experiencing God's grace in a religious conversion.
- *The Bible is the supreme authority on earth.* Puritans argued that the Bible was the sole guide not only in governing the moral and spiritual life but also in governing the church and society as a whole. One effect of this belief was to make Puritan churches more democratic, organized around their congregations rather than around ruling bishops. On the other hand, it led the Puritans to be more repressive in their political systems and more intolerant of others. For example, they used the Bible to justify their occupation of the land and their use of force against Native Americans: "Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Romans 13:2). In short, the Puritans saw themselves as God's chosen people, like the "children of Israel" in the Old Testament.

from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Sermon by JONATHAN EDWARDS

Connect to Your Life

Power of Persuasion Think about someone who recently persuaded you to do something—perhaps a parent, friend, teacher, coach, or salesperson. What method of persuasion did this person use? For example, what was emphasized—the benefits of taking the action or the drawbacks of not taking the action? Did this person appeal to your emotions, such as love, fear, or pride? Or did this person appeal to principles, such as justice, efficiency, or frugality? Write down what you were persuaded to do, and analyze the method of persuasion that worked on you. With your classmates, talk about effective methods of persuasion.

Build Background

Great Awakening One hundred years after a group of Puritans came to colonial America for religious freedom, some Puritans felt that their congregations had grown too complacent, or self-satisfied. To rekindle the fervor that the early settlers had, Jonathan Edwards and other Puritan ministers led the Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept through New England from 1734 to 1750. Edwards's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," was delivered in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741. In it he warned his congregation that being church members would not automatically save them from hell. He tried to persuade them that they had to personally experience conversion, a transforming moment in which they felt God's grace.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

abhor	incense
abominable	inconceivable
appease	loathsome
ascribe	mitigation
deliverance	wrath

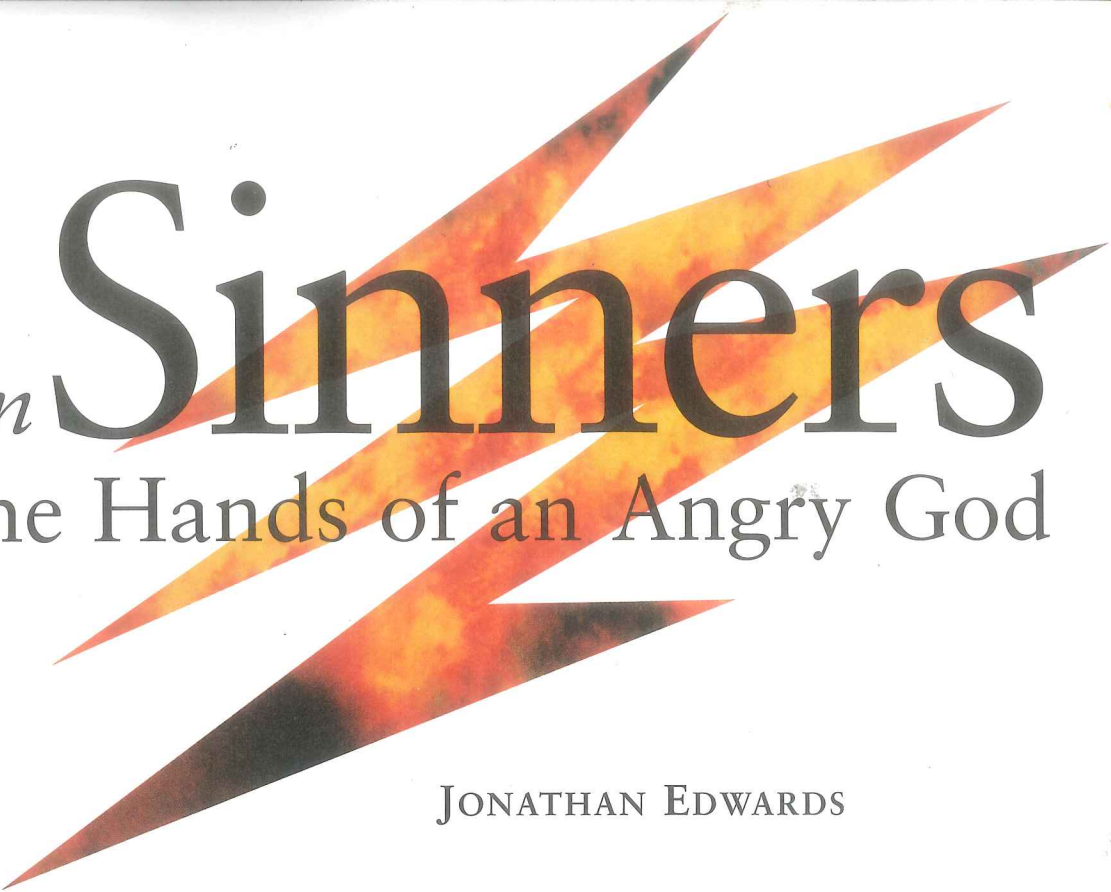
Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS PERSUASIVE WRITING Edwards's sermon is an example of **persuasive writing**, which is intended to convince a reader to adopt a particular opinion or to perform a certain action. Persuasive writing can take many forms, including sermons, political speeches, newspaper editorials, and advertisements. As you read Edwards's sermon, analyze his methods of persuasion: What does he want his audience to do and why does he want them to do it?

ACTIVE READING ANALYZING EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE Persuasive writing often contains **loaded language**—words with strong connotations, or emotional associations. For example, contrast the word *child* with the more loaded words *brat* and *cherub*. A writer would use *brat* to create a negative feeling in the reader and *cherub* to create a positive feeling. Part of what makes Edwards's sermon so effective is his choice of loaded words.

READER'S NOTEBOOK Monitor how you feel as you read the sermon. Create a chart like the one below to list examples of specific words, phrases, and images that Edwards uses to achieve the greatest emotional effect on his audience.

Example	Emotional Impact



from Sinners

in the Hands of an Angry God

JONATHAN EDWARDS

We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so it is easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that any thing hangs by; thus easy is it for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell. . . .

They¹ are now the objects of that very same *anger* and *wrath* of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell. And the reason why they do not go down to hell at each moment, is not because God, in whose power they are, is not then very angry with them; as angry as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell, who there feel and bear the fierceness of his wrath. Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth; yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation,² who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.

So that it is not because God is unmindful of

their wickedness, and does not resent it, that he does not let loose his hand and cut them off. God is not altogether such an one as themselves, though they may imagine him to be so. The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet,³ and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them. . . .

1. **they:** Earlier in the sermon, Edwards refers to all “unconverted men,” whom he considers God’s enemies. Unconverted men are people who have not been “born again,” meaning that they have not accepted Jesus Christ and consequently have not experienced a sense of God’s grace and an assurance of salvation.
2. **this congregation:** the Puritans attending the church service at which Edwards spoke.
3. **whet:** sharpened.

WORDS
TO
KNOW **wrath** (răth) *n.* fierce anger, or punishment resulting from such anger

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight cannot discern them. God has so many different unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world and sending them to hell, that there is nothing to make it appear, that God had need to be at the expense of a miracle, or go out of the ordinary course of his providence, to destroy any wicked man, at any moment. . . .

SO that, thus it is that natural men⁴ are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell; and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain⁵ lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: and they have no interest in any Mediator,⁶ there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of. . . .

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a

great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections,⁷ and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets,⁸ and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. . . .

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered⁹ to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you

4. **natural men:** people who have not been "born again."

5. **fain:** rather.

6. **Mediator:** Jesus Christ, who mediates, or is the means of bringing about, salvation.

7. **affections:** feelings or emotions.

8. **closets:** private rooms for meditation.

9. **suffered:** permitted.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

appease (ə-pēz') *v.* to bring peace, quiet, or calm to; soothe
loathsome (lōth'səm) *adj.* arousing great dislike
abhor (ăb-hôr') *v.* to regard with disgust
abominable (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-bəl) *adj.* thoroughly detestable
ascribe (ə-skrīb') *v.* to attribute to a specified cause or source



Un quadro di fuochi preziosi [A painting of precious fires] (1983), Enzo Cucchi. Oil on canvas with neon, 117½" × 153½", private collection, courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York.

The **pit** is prepared,
the **fire** is made ready,
the **furnace** is now hot,
ready to receive them;
the **flames** do now
rage and **glow**.

have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder;¹⁰ and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. . . .

It is *everlasting* wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite¹¹ horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance; any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: For “who knows the power of God’s anger?”¹²

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. . . .

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming¹³ from the east, west, north, and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a condition? . . .

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. . . . ❖

10. **asunder** (ə-sūn’dər): into separate parts or pieces.

11. **exquisite** (ɛk’skwɪ-zɪt): sharply intense.

12. “**who knows . . . anger?**”: an allusion to Psalm 90:11, “Who knoweth the power of thine anger?”

13. **Many . . . coming**: Edwards is referring to the hundreds of people who were being converted during the Great Awakening.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

incense (ɪn-sɛns’) *v.* to cause to be extremely angry

deliverance (dɪ-lɪv’ər-əns) *n.* rescue from danger

mitigation (mɪt’ɪ-gā’shən) *n.* lessening of something that causes suffering

inconceivable (ɪn’kən-sē’və-bəl) *adj.* not able to be understood or imagined

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

Describe the most vivid image from this sermon and how it made you feel.

Comprehension Check

- According to this sermon, what is a constant threat to all human beings?
- According to this sermon, which people are spared God's wrath?
- What does Edwards say sinners can do to save themselves?

Think Critically

2. Would you want to hear another of Edwards's sermons? Explain why or why not.

3. **ACTIVE READING** **ANALYZING EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE** Review your list of loaded words and phrases, and identify two that you think are the most emotionally charged. Discuss with a classmate their intended effect on the audience. How do you think Edwards's choice of words affects the overall impact of his message?

4. Why do you think people were persuaded to change their lives as a result of Edwards's sermon?

THINK ABOUT

- what he wants his congregation to do and why
- the emotions he appeals to in the first paragraphs and in the last paragraphs of the excerpt

5. What conclusions can you draw about the spiritual beliefs and values of the people who belonged to Edwards's congregation?

6. How would you describe the view of human beings and the view of God presented in this sermon?

Extend Interpretations

7. **Comparing Texts** In your view, is Jonathan Edwards's conception of God consistent with Anne Bradstreet's conception of God? Explain your opinion.

8. **Connect to Life** Are Edwards's methods of persuasion ones that are likely to work on you? Consider what you wrote for the Connect to Your Life activity on page 152.

Literary Analysis

PERSUASIVE WRITING

The goal of **persuasive writing** is to convince a reader to adopt a particular opinion or perform a certain action. The overriding purpose of Edwards's sermon is to change the behavior of his audience and to show them the path toward salvation. Generally, persuasive writing uses both logical and emotional appeals. **Logical appeals** imply that if the readers are reasonable people, they will do or think what the writer desires. **Emotional appeals** sometimes contain very little factual information and instead often rely on highly charged language that triggers intense feelings, such as fear, insecurity, and so on.

Cooperative Learning Activity

Reread Edwards's sermon and find examples of emotional appeals. Responding to criticism of his appeal to emotions rather than reason, Edwards said: "I think it is a reasonable thing to fright persons away from hell. They stand upon its brink, and are just ready to fall into it, and are senseless of their danger. Is it not a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire?" Meet in small groups to debate whether or not you believe his use of scare tactics is justified, considering his goal.