

Original Paper

The Application of Puritanism in American Early Literature

Zhu Xiaoyun¹

¹ Department of Foreign Language, Taiyuan Normal University, Jinzhong, China

Received: April 14, 2023

Accepted: May 1, 2023

Online Published: May 21, 2023

doi:10.22158/elsr.v4n2p93

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v4n2p93>

Abstract

Puritanism is an important cornerstone of American society and culture, and it has exerted a very important influence on the economy, politics, religion and social life of American society. It has a profound influence on the American people's thoughts and culture from all aspects, and has laid the keynote of American society and American spirit, and shaped the American people's character of hard work, thrift, piety sobriety. Early American literary works were also influenced by Puritanism, showing the characteristics of simplicity, directness and freshness. This paper discusses the cause and connotation of Puritanism, as well as its influence on the American character. Based on this, this passage takes the Autobiography of Franklin and the Declaration of Independence as examples to analyze the specific application of Puritanism in early American literary works.

Keywords

Puritanism, Autobiography of Franklin, The Declaration of Independence

1. The Definition of Puritanism

1.1 Origin of Puritans

Puritanism appeared in the period of the English Reformation, which took the Gallic theory as the main theory and thought of the reform of the Church of England. Most of the Puritans fled to the United States after being persecuted and established colonies here. Therefore, generally speaking, Puritans refer to the Puritans in the United States, while their Puritanism was born in England, but its later development and reality were all carried out in the North American colonies. The existence of Puritanism in the United States successfully contributed to ideological emancipation, the formation of career concepts, the formation of wealth concepts, and the establishment of the country's future development goals.

1.2 The Ideology of Puritanism

The American Puritans, like their brothers back in England, were idealists, believing that the church should be restored to complete "purity". They accepted the doctrine of predestination, original sin, and total depravity, and limited atonement through a special infusion of grace from God. Puritans' lives were

extremely disciplined and hard. They drove out of their settlements all those opinions that seemed dangerous to them, and history has criticized their actions. Yet in the persecution of what they considered an error, the Puritans were no worse than many other movements in history. As a cultural heritage, Puritanism did have a profound influence on the early American mind. American Puritanism also had an enduring influence on American literature. It had become, to some extent, so much a part of the national cultural atmosphere, rather than a set of tenets.

2. The Influence of Puritanism on the American Character

In the colonial era of the United States, Puritanism, as a religious idea, played the role of political theory in the colonial era. Its spread and infiltration were accompanied by the whole process of early immigrants' colonization and settlement in North America. In the United States, Puritanism is not only a religious concept but also a philosophy, a way of life, values, and ethical concepts. It has had a profound influence on the American people's thoughts and culture from all aspects, has laid the keynote of American society and American spirit, and shaped the American people's character of hard work, thrift, piety sobriety. Influenced by Puritanism, Americans pursue democracy and advocate freedom and individualism. In addition, they believed that individual success could not be achieved without diligence, hard work, and struggle and that they could create wealth and value with their own hands. It was this belief that forged the American Dream in their minds.

3. The Influence of Puritanism on the Writing Style of Early American Literature

In terms of writing style, the simplicity of Puritan works left a clear impression on American literature. Reading early Puritan works, we are impressed by the freshness, simplicity, and directness of the language. The Puritans had many reasons for their preference for simplicity and their opposition to pomp. Their simple religious ceremonies, the subtle influence of the concise style of the Bible, and the appreciation of the New England congregation and readers all contributed to the simplicity of their style of writing.

4. The Application of Puritanism in *The Autobiography of Franklin*

The Autobiography of Franklin, a Puritan document, is one of the most important and widely read autobiographies ever written in the United States, inspiring and encouraging generations of Americans. It is of epoch-making significance in the history of American culture. It is an inspirational book that has influenced generations of Americans for more than two hundred years. It contains true insights into life struggle and success, as well as moral truths of goodness and beauty. It is widely regarded as the book of the American spirit that has changed the lives of countless people. At the same time, it is a successful history based on concise words, which records a person's life experience from poverty to wealth and material success, namely the struggle history of a Puritan. When Franklin was 65 years old, he began to write his autobiography, which was divided into four parts. The first part is set against the background

of printing, and he talks about the ins and outs of his practice. The second part, completed in 1784, is the heart of the autobiography, and it is “The Project of Moral Perfection”, which is the Thirteen Virtues. The third part of his autobiography is Public Service, written in 1788. A few months before he died, Franklin finished the fourth part of his autobiography, which lasted until 1789. According to its writing style and content, we can clearly feel the embodiment and application of Puritanism in this book.

To begin with, *The Bible* is the most basic cultural reading book for generations of immigrants in North America. Puritan writers have been deeply influenced by the Bible since they were young and gradually formed a literary style characterized by simplicity freshness, and directness. This style of writing exerted an extremely important influence on later American literature, which is reflected in the formation process of the colloquial style of American literary language. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* was written in amiable, plain-spoken English. The simplicity of the narration, the plainness of the style, as well as lucidity of the meaning, all involves in this great book, evoking no sense of affectation and hypocrisy. This writing style is the salient pattern of Puritan simplicity, directness, and concision.

Moreover, it is hard to argue that Benjamin Franklin was a devout Puritan, especially when he became the spokesman of the American Enlightenment, openly presenting himself as a rational deist; However, as a person from a Calvinist background, raised in a devout Puritan family, he could not escape the lifelong influence of Puritanism, which had burned its way into the very texture of his consciousness and served as an enduring and powerful shaping factor in American culture. Autobiography is clearly a Puritan document of self-examination, and the thirteen virtues that Franklin sets for himself to achieve moral perfection is, as it were, the continuum of Puritan self-improvement. In his explanation, he said: “I wish to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might let me into.” For him, the reason for this arduous and bold project of moral perfection was that he was a man of virtue, and not inclined to do evil, as strict Puritan doctrines required. As a type, the Puritans were very much given to self-analysis. Derived from Calvinism, Puritans faithfully believed in predestination, original sin and total depravity, and limited atonement. According to Calvinist tenets, man is inherently evil because Adam and Eva have lost their innocence by stealing the Forbidden Apple; Thus Paradise disappeared and humanity suffered a hereditary corruption and was enslaved by his sense of sin. It was God who would infuse his Grace into the sinful and savaged him. But this divine salvation is limited—only a select few will be cleansed, while the rest must experience hellfire after death. At the same time, God’s chosen people are predestined, and no one can change it. Influenced by this doctrine, and by the desire to prove that they are God’s chosen ones and that morality is sufficient to meet God’s moral standards, the Puritans constantly examined their own consciences to determine what should be grasped to ensure salvation. So the Puritans were always keeping diaries and analyzing themselves. Franklin is such the case. The thirteen virtues courses he rigorously adhered to helped purify his evil mind, the little book he kept to record his daily progress, the charts he made to track his daily self-reflection—all these added testimonies to the fact that Franklin was a passionate Puritan, and Puritan moral codes remained in evidence in Franklin’s moral formation.

Besides, the most influential thirteen virtues—Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Chastity as well as Humanity, also evidently embody the ethics that Puritans advocate. Puritans were a group of people who believed in simple tastes, a strict moral code, and a quiet way of life. They emphasized self-restraint and self-discipline to a certain extent. For example, Temperance, the top virtue observed by Franklin, falls particularly into this category. “Eat not too dullness; drink not to elevation”, the precept given to this virtue is consistent with the Puritan code of drinking in moderation so as to keep a sober mind. Silence, Sincerity, Justice, Cleanliness, Tranquility, and Chastity all dwells on the endeavor of a man to be simple, serene, noble, sincere as well as innocent before this secular world, immune from natural evil desire. Above all, the most predominant of these virtues are Industry and Frugality, as Franklin’s own career amply illustrated. In terms of Frugality, he stressed “waste nothing”, while in terms of Industry, he gave prominence to “lose no time; cut off all unnecessary actions.” In a manner of speaking, the emphasis of two virtues lies in cherishing time, hard-working, and fulfilling the right course. According to the Puritan ethic, Industry is based on the idea that hard work is an integral part of one’s mission and a visible sign or result of one’s personal salvation. God is omnipotent and therefore predetermined. Material life is at the same time spiritual; Each stage of life, surrounded by God’s plan, has its own meaning. Thus, a man’s career is a Holy calling, a sign of obedience to the will of God, to obtain prosperity through industry; As for time and fate, which are also appointed by God’s divine plan, they have a special meaning, and should not be wasted, but should be saved for charity. In this context, Franklin’s frugality and industry are clearly related to the Puritan fear of God. As for resolution and order, there is no doubt that it was necessary to carry out these Puritan practices. Suffice it to say here that Franklin’s last virtue, Humility, is a perfect example of his devotion to God: no matter how successful he became, happiness was always a blessing from God. Above all, it can be stated safely that the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is a mirror of the Puritan influence on his philosophical formation.

5. The Application of Puritanism in *The Declaration of Independence*

Early American literature mostly focuses on theology and political areas. *The Declaration of Independence* is another work that perfectly applied the thought of Puritanism. Since, ideas written or spoken word, inspire and direct men’s actions, the writers held vitally important places in the movement for American independence. Freedom was won as much by the fiery rhetoric of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and the eloquence of the Declaration of Independence by the weapons of Washington or Lafayette. *The Declaration of Independence* heralded not only the birth of a new nation but also a philosophy of human freedom, an important force in the Western world. It was founded on particular grievances, but more so on the broad individual liberties and individual will that Americans hold dear. Both here and in American literature, Americans defend their freedom, however, they choose to interpret it.

The Puritans believed they had a mission to redeem the world, determined to “be free to live as one wishes in a desolate place and to bring Christ to this far world.” American democracy is a successful

example of world democracy. *The Declaration of Independence* in 1776 clarified the idea of democracy. The establishment of the American democratic system depends on early Puritanism. For example, in the statement—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that they are among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, it emphasizes human rights, democracy, freedom and pursuit of happiness, which coincides with the spirit of Puritanism.

In a word, Puritanism had a profound influence on American literature. Under the influence of Puritan culture, various writers applied Puritanism to their works, which formed a unique style of early American literature.

References

- Benjamin. *Franklin*, translated by Shi Zhaoying. (2004, August). first edition. China International Broadcasting Press.
- Chang, Y. X. (2008). *A Brief history of American Literature* (3rd ed., p. 35). Tianjin: Nankai University Press.
- Chang, Y. X. (n.d.). *Selected reviews of American literary studies*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press.
- Hu, Y. Y. (2013). A preliminary exploration of Puritanism in *The Autobiography of Franklin*. *New West*, 2013(36).
- Li, Y. C. (2011, April). The Puritanism of the Thirteen Virtues in Franklin’s *Autobiography*. *Cultural Forum*.
- Tang, R. F., & Hao, F. Q. (2016). Puritanism and the characteristics of early American literature. *Journal of North China Electric Power University*, 10(5).
- Xuan, N. N. (2013, August). The Roots of American National Spirituality: Puritanism and Its Influence. *Knowledge Window*.
- Zhang, Y. (n.d.). On the influence of Puritanism on early American literature. *Literary Review, Foreign Literature*.
- Zou, X. Y. (n.d.). Puritanism in early American literature. *Literary Review, Foreign Literature*.