

## CALVINISM

Some understanding of the basic teachings of *Calvinism*--the charter of which is John Calvin's famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536)--is important to the student of American literature. The essential doctrines of the system are frequently summed up in the famous Five Points: (1) *total depravity*, because human beings inherited the corruption from Adam's fall and repeatedly disobey; (2) *unconditional election*, as God elects those to be saved regardless of good works; (3) *irresistible grace*, made available in advance but only to the elect; (4) *perseverance of saints*, the predetermined elect inevitably persevering in the path of holiness; and (5) *limited atonement*, human corruption being only partially atoned for by Christ. This atonement is provided the elect through the Holy Spirit, giving them the power to attempt to obey God's will as it is revealed in the Bible.

### THE FAMOUS FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM

1. Total Depravity: Because of Adam's "original sin" humankind was corrupted for all time: "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." Every human creature is born depraved and deserving of damnation. Man is nothing, God is all.
2. Unconditional Election: In his mercy and wisdom, God elects a few to be saved, with no reference to Faith or good works, just arbitrarily.
3. Limited Atonement: Christ did not die for all, only for the elected few. If he had not sacrificed himself, none could be saved.
4. Irresistible Grace: God's grace (salvation) can neither be earned nor refused. Grace is the saving and transfiguring power of God, bringing rebirth, forgiveness of sins, the strength to resist temptation, and peace of mind and spirit.
5. Perseverance of the Saints: The elect, or saints, have the strength to do God's will and to live uprightly to the end.
6. Predestination (implicit): History is a drama already written by God. Each man enacts a role, anxious to see what he will do next, looking for signs that he is among the Elect.

### CALVINISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE

"This system developed both zeal and intolerance on the part of the elect. It fostered education, however, which in early New England was regarded as a religious duty, and thereby profoundly affected the development of American culture. To this attitude of the Calvinistic Puritans may be traced much of the inspiration for such things as the founding of many colleges and universities, the creation of a system of public schools, and the great activity of early printing presses in America--as well as the development of religious sects....In New England the Covenant Theology early softened and modified Calvinism... [According to sociologist Max Weber] the 'Protestant ethic,' specifically in the form of Calvinism, generated an emphasis on industry and frugality, which in turn generated the conditions that made modern capitalism possible." Calvinism made the difference between North and South America.

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon  
*A Handbook to Literature* (sixth edition, 1992)

### CALVINISM IN PURITAN LITERATURE

Calvinist ministers of the 17th century debated each other endlessly over points of doctrine. Calvinism takes different forms among the early American Puritans, depending on circumstances, education, sensibility and gender. For example, there is more heart in William Bradford than in John Winthrop, the legalistic Calvinist who contributed to exiling Anne Hutchinson in 1638. Calvinism at its best and worst is

embodied in Cotton Mather, who contributed to starting and to stopping the witchcraft trials in 1692. Michael Wigglesworth versified Calvinist doctrines for school children in his horrific poem *The Day of Doom* (1662), which became the first bestseller in America. Wigglesworth in his diaries, agonizing over “carnal dreams,” may have been Hawthorne’s model for Dimmesdale.

A more humane and less doctrinaire Calvinist is Thomas Shepard, a humble man in his touching autobiography. Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), the first notable American poet, transcends Calvinist doctrine by affirming a balance of head and heart, anticipating Hawthorne and the Victorians. The minister Edward Taylor (c.1645-1729) was a mystical poet of sublime eloquence, the American Metaphysical poet who far surpassed Wigglesworth in rendering Calvinist doctrine in *God’s Determinations Touching His Elect*.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), considered the greatest American theologian, was a mystic like Taylor, who likewise represents Calvinism at its most authentic. The earlier Puritans softened Calvinism in their Covenant Theology, establishing a rational, more practical and legalistic basis for their theocracies. As Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) shows in “Young Goodman Brown,” an orthodox Calvinist would believe that everybody including himself is depraved. That doctrine contributed to the witchcraft mania of 1692. People went insane.

As a minister Jonathan Edwards tried to revive orthodox Calvinism. He was a disciplined mystic actually capable of living a Calvinist life. His famous horrific sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” conveys what he was preaching. By the early 18th century, however, he was too late. His congregation kicked him out. Edwards was a rarity, both a mystic and a scientist, arguably a genius in both head and sensibility, of lesser magnitude yet comparable in that respect to Leonardo DaVinci. In his “Personal Narrative” (1739), he describes his first conversion as false, merely superficial Romanticism.

Only when he fully accepts the Calvinist doctrine of total innate depravity—“the bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit there was in my heart”—does he receive the grace of God. The worse he sees himself, the more he exalts God: “My heart panted after this, to lie low before God, as in the dust; that I might be *nothing*, and that God might be ALL, that I might become as a little child.” God can only be ALL if Edwards is nothing. Paradoxically, the doctrine of depravity led to the most intense and ecstatic mystical exaltation, because when he receives God’s grace, God is now within him and God is ALL! The doctrine empowered believers with the spirit of an Almighty God, with righteous zeal and with the puritan virtues that inspired New Englanders westward and created a dynamic capitalist economy that contrasts the United States with Catholic countries such as Mexico and with most other countries in the world.

## TWO IMPORTANT DOCTRINES

Only *two* Calvinist doctrines are very important in American literature after Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: (1) *total depravity* and (2) *predestination*, implicit in the Five Points. Calvinists believed that history is like a book already written by God. They read the minutiae of everyday life for signs of their fates in His plot--His “determinations.” In one of his diaries, Cotton Mather records that a dog had been seen urinating on his meeting house and he tortures himself trying to interpret the meaning of the event. Hawthorne would know.

## FROM PURITANISM TO NEOCLASSICISM

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) embodies the transition in American cultural history from Calvinist Puritanism to Neoclassical Puritanism, symbolized by his move from Boston to Philadelphia in 1723. He is said to epitomize the Age of Reason. The Calvinist culture had always been severely rational. Franklin grew up a rationalist Puritan and simply dropped the ideology, becoming a free thinker and satirical moralist, while developing the most impressive resume in American history to this day. His character, writing and career affirm principles deriving from his Puritan upbringing and the influence of Calvinists such as Cotton Mather, as seen especially in *The Dogood Papers* (1722), *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (1732-1757), “The Way to Wealth” (1758) and *The Autobiography* (1789). At the same time, his writing exemplifies all the Neoclassical aesthetic values.

## FROM NEOCLASSICISM TO ROMANTICISM

Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) allegorizes American cultural history in *Wieland* (1798) by embodying the old order in the Old Calvinist Wieland, who blows up by spontaneous combustion while praying. Washington Irving (1783-1859) belittles Calvinism in the form of Ichabod Crane and James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) makes his New England ministers fools who are seen by the Indians as crazy, establishing a popular stereotype common later in Hollywood movies, especially westerns. In the movies, a crazy Calvinist minister is a stock cartoon intended to belittle all religion. The Gothicism of Brown and Poe (1809-1849) was informed by Calvinist tradition and determinist philosophy was revived at the end of the 19th century with Naturalism.

Hawthorne repeatedly portrays the destructive effects of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. In his journals, he records that he recoiled from the doctrine while watching his little girl at play. He had already rejected it in stories such as "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil" and "The Man of Adamant," depicting Calvinists whose lives are destroyed by their belief in total depravity. "The Gentle Boy" dramatizes the heartless cruelty generated by that doctrine. In *The Scarlet Letter* Chillingworth rationalizes his evil with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination: "My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me...It has all been a dark necessity." Hawthorne portrays the Puritans with historical accuracy and also uses them as personifications in allegories. He depicts puritanism as a force in human nature transcending the Calvinist Puritans. In "The Maypole of Merry Mount," the Puritans represent the reality principle, embodying "the sternest cares of life."

Herman Melville (1819-1891) makes Ahab a Calvinistic Quaker, a capitalist Puritan dissociated from Nature and divine Truth in the form of the white whale. Like Chillingworth, Ahab rationalizes his evil with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination: "This whole act's immutably decreed... I am the Fate's lieutenant; I act under orders." Ahab's puritanical mentality is contrasted throughout the book with the expanding and ultimately transcendent consciousness of the pantheistic narrator Ishmael. After he evolved into a conservative, Melville took a more complex view in *Billy Budd* (1891), especially with respect to Claggart: According to Plato, "'Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature.' A definition which, though savoring of Calvinism, by no means involves Calvin's dogmas as to total mankind. Evidently its intent makes it applicable but to individuals."

## COLLAPSE OF CALVINISM

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) allegorized the collapse of Calvinist theology as a logical system in "The Deacon's Masterpiece" (1858). Yet the Calvinist frame of mind persisted, as in the righteous pulpit rhetoric of Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which became so influential that Abraham Lincoln credited her with starting the Civil War. On the whole, however, Stowe was a critic of "masculinist" Calvinism, a reformer who applied her feminine sensibility and resembled Hawthorne more than Cotton Mather. William Dean Howells (1837-1920) affirms the Puritan tradition in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), even naming characters after early Puritans. Edith Wharton (1862-1937) depicts the tradition as decadent in *Ethan Frome* (1911), a grim deterministic novel about a man doomed by his New England conscience. In "The Beast in the Jungle" Henry James (1843-1916) portrays a man as foolish who fails to live because he believes his life is predetermined. Sherwood Anderson portrays Jesse Bentley as a Calvinist fanatic in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Hollywood often embodies religion in a fanatical Calvinist minister like *Bent-ley*, especially in westerns.

## TRADITION OF DETERMINISM

Whenever the issues of determinism or fundamental human nature arise in American literature, the tradition of Calvinist thinking is revived. For example, although Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) is a Catholic, the severity of her vision in *Wise Blood* (1952) is comparable to Calvinism. Arthur Miller (1915-2005) portrays the 17th-century Calvinists accurately in *The Crucible* (1953), while making a false analogy between the witchcraft trials and the investigation of Communist propagandists in the media and spies in the federal government passing secrets to our enemy the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Determinism in philosophy, science and popular culture during the 20th century have kept Calvinism alive, as in the

Postmodernist fiction of Thomas Pynchon--an Atheist. In contrast, currently, Marilynne Robinson is a Christian realist who believes in predestination and defends John Calvin.

Michael Hollister (2015)