

**Ms. Deepika Tiwari**

Assistant Professor

Patna Women's College

Email ID – [dtdeepikatiwari@gmail.com](mailto:dtdeepikatiwari@gmail.com)

**B.A I, (semester 2)**

**CC204, Unit – I**

**Paper Name – Introduction to 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Century Literature**

**Puritan Age (1649-1660)**

**Introduction and Historical Background of the Age:**

The Puritan age is named after the rise of the Puritan movement in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Puritans, were a group of English speaking Protestants who were dissatisfied with the religious reformation movement carried out during the reign of queen Elizabeth. They wanted a complete purification of Church of England and removal of practices such as hierarchical leadership, clerical vestments and various rituals of the church, which were associated with Rome. They stood for what they believed was pure Christianity (hence, the name Puritan).

The Puritans emerged as a strong political force during the English Civil War (1642-1651). The English Civil war was a series of conflicts between Charles I and his supporters called the Cavaliers on the one hand and the Parliamentarians or the Roundheads on the other hand. The Roundheads mainly comprised the Puritan middle classes. The war ended in 1651 with the victory of the Parliamentarians. Charles I was executed while his son, Charles II fled to France. Any hopes of monarchy were demolished and the monarchical rule was replaced first

with Commonwealth of England (1649 – 53) and then with a Protectorate (1653-59), under Oliver Cromwell's personal rule. The establishment of a Protectorate under Cromwell was a victory for the Puritans. The Puritans remained in ascendancy till 1660, when Charles II was restored to the throne.

Though, the Puritans as a group are often denounced as narrow-minded and repressive, yet in reality they also aimed for religious and civil liberty. According to WH Hudson, The Puritans 'had strict rules regarding life and conduct' and 'an uncompromising spirit', which sought to 'confine literature within the circumscribed field of its own particular interests'.

### **Literature of the Puritan Age:**

Literature of the Puritan Age was Characterised by a spirit of sombreness and pensiveness. In keeping with the religious ideals and political standards of the Puritans; religious verse, theological tracts and political treatises replaced romantic poetry. According to John Richard Greene, a great 'moral change' came over the people of England; "England became the people of a book and that book was the Bible".

With the outbreak of the Civil War, theatres were closed down. In 1642, under the influence of the Puritans, the English Parliament issued an Ordinance suppressing all stage plays in the theatres. The strict religious views of the Puritans spread to encompass many social activities within England. Therefore, this time period saw very little theatrical activity in England as the Puritan considered theatre as 'immoral and depraved'.

WJ Long identifies three main characteristics, in which Puritan literature differs from that of the proceeding age.

First, even though Elizabethan literature was diverse in form, it had a "marked unity in spirit, resulting from the Patriotism of all classes and their devotion to a queen who with all her faults, sought first the nation's welfare". However, with the Puritan age no such devotion to

the crown could be seen, since the monarch ruled in despotic manner earning the ire of the masses. England became divided by the struggle for political and religious liberty. And literature also became “divided in spirit”.

Second, while Elizabethan literature was full of youth and vitality; the literature of Puritan age is characterised by sadness and pessimism.

Third, unlike Elizabethan literature which was intensely romantic, Puritan age Literature lacks romantic ardour. Even in love poems such as those of Donne, an intellectual spirit replaces the spontaneous emotion of love and passion.

### **Major poet of Puritan Age:**

(**Note:** Since we cannot separate the ages into water tight compartments, you may witness a particular writer writing in two or more ages. In few books you’ll find Puritan Age beginning from 1625 or 1642 or 1649. It may vary. So, don’t get confused. I have tried to simplify for you all).

### **John Milton (1608-1674):**

John Milton is the representative poet of the age. Milton was born in London. He studied at Paul’s school and Christ’s College, Cambridge. During his Cambridge years, Milton became friends with Edward King, to whom he later dedicated an elegy *Lycidas*.

At Cambridge, Milton also wrote a number of poems such as ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’. His companion poems, *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. Meaning ‘the happy man’ and ‘the melancholy man’. In these companion pieces, Milton compares and contrasts two impulses in human nature: “the active and contemplative, the social and solitary, the mirthful and melancholic, the cheerful and meditative, the erotic and platonic”.

After completing his masters, Milton retired to Hammersmith, his father's new home. In 1638 he embarked on a tour to France and Italy. Four years later, he married Mary Powell, who was almost half his age. Their relationship did not succeed and gave Milton inspiration to write his divorce tracts, which argued for separation on grounds of incompatibility. Milton later married twice. Milton was appointed secretary for foreign tongues by the council of State in March 1649. The year 1652 was a dark period for Milton, since he lost his eyesight completely.

After the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, Milton was arrested as a defender of Commonwealth, fined and soon released. He spent writing his most famous works *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Milton died of gout in November, 1674 and was buried in the church of St Giles, Cripplegate.

**Important Note:** Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* was originally published in ten books in 1667. But in the second edition of 1674 the poem came out in twelve books. It is based on Biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve. Milton announces his main subject as 'Man's disobedience' and overall theme of his epic poem as 'Justifying the ways of God to Men'.

Other poets writing during this time were 'Spenserian poets.' That included Phineas Fletcher, Giles Fletcher, William Browne, George Wither and William Drummond.

#### **Major Prose writers of Puritan Age:**

1. John Bunyan (1628-1688)
2. Robert Burton (1577-1640)
3. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)
4. Izaak Walton (1593-1683)
5. Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682)
6. Thomas Fuller (1608-1661)

