

The Puritan Tradition

from *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

Sermon by Jonathan Edwards

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML11-122A



READING 6 Analyze how rhetorical techniques in historically important speeches influence the reader, evoke emotions, and create meaning. **7** Analyze the meaning of biblical allusions in words, phrases, passages, and literary works. **10A** Evaluate how the author's purpose and audience affect the tone of persuasive texts. **RC-11(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jonathan Edwards . . .

- wrote a paper on spiders at age 11.
- died as a result of a smallpox inoculation.
- was the grandfather of Aaron Burr, vice-president under Thomas Jefferson.

Meet the Author

Jonathan Edwards 1703–1758

When Jonathan Edwards delivered a sermon, with its fiery descriptions of hell and eternal damnation, people listened. Edwards believed that religion should be rooted not only in reason but also in emotion. Although 19th-century editors tried to tone down his style, Edwards is recognized today as a masterful preacher. In fact, he is considered by many to be America's greatest religious thinker.

A Spiritual Calling Born in East Windsor, Connecticut, Edwards was a child prodigy and entered what is now Yale University at the age of 12. While a graduate student there, Edwards experienced a spiritual crisis that led to what he later described as “religious joy.” He came to believe that such an intense religious experience was an important step toward salvation.

In 1722, after finishing his education, Edwards followed the path of his father and grandfather and became a Puritan minister. In 1726, Edwards began assisting his grandfather, who was the minister at the parish church in Northampton, Massachusetts. When his grandfather died three years later, Edwards became the church's pastor.

Religious Revivalist Edwards soon became an effective preacher. In 1734 and

1735, he delivered a series of sermons that resulted in a great number of conversions. The converts believed they had felt God's grace and were “born again” when they accepted Jesus Christ.

Edwards's sermons helped trigger the Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept through New England from 1734 to 1750. The movement grew out of a sense among some Puritan ministers that their congregations had grown too self-satisfied. Delivered at the height of the Great Awakening, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is the most famous of Edwards's nearly 1,200 sermons.

Last Years Although Edwards inspired thousands, his church dismissed him in 1750 because he wanted to limit membership to those who had undergone conversion. A year later, Edwards went to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he became a missionary in a Native American settlement. In 1757, he accepted an appointment as president of what is now Princeton University.

By the time of Edwards's death the following year, the extremism of the Great Awakening had been rejected. However, his vision of humanity suspended, like a spider, over the burning pit of hell still maintains its emotional impact.



Author Online



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LITERARY ANALYSIS: PERSUASION

Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards delivered powerfully persuasive sermons. As in all persuasive writing, an Edwards sermon is shaped by the author's **purpose**, his **audience**, and his **context**—that is, his reason for preaching, his Puritan congregation, and the times in which the Puritans lived. One of Edwards's most prominent rhetorical or persuasive techniques is the use of biblical **allusions**—references to figures, events, or places in the Bible that he assumed his congregation would recognize.

As you read Edwards's sermon, look for passages that reveal how purpose and audience affect the tone of his sermon.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Emotional appeals are messages designed to persuade an audience by creating strong feelings. They often include sensory language to create vivid imagery and loaded words to create these types of feelings:

- **fear**, which taps into a fear of losing one's safety or security
- **pity**, which draws on a sympathy or compassion for others
- **guilt**, which relies on one's sense of ethics or morality

As you read, use a chart like the one below to record examples of language that appeals to the emotions.

Examples	Emotional Appeals
"arrows of death fly unseen"	appeals to fear by creating anxiety, unease

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Jonathan Edwards uses the listed words to help convey his spiritual message. Choose a word from the list that is a synonym for each of the numbered words.

WORD LIST	abhor	deliverance	mitigation
	abominable	discern	whet
	appease	incense	
	ascribe	induce	

1. detest
2. easing
3. sharpened
4. anger greatly
5. attribute

What keeps you IN LINE?

A sense of morality probably keeps you from cheating on a test. In other words, you know cheating is wrong. But there are other reasons for behaving morally. Some people are anxious to please. Others fear the consequences of breaking the rules. Jonathan Edwards uses fear to get his point across in the sermon you're about to read.

ROLE-PLAY With a partner, take turns role-playing a conversation with a child who has been stealing. Your mission is to persuade him or her to stop. Before you begin, consider how best to keep the child in line. For example, you might frighten or shame the child or appeal to his or her pride.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Jonathan Edwards

BACKGROUND Jonathan Edwards delivered his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in 1741 to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut. Edwards read the sermon, as he always did, in a composed style, with few gestures or movements. However, the sermon had a dramatic effect on his parishioners, many of whom wept and moaned.

Analyze Visuals ►

This painting by Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo presents an **allegory** of fire. What lesson or message does the painting seem to suggest about the meaning of fire?

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
10 that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell. **A**

A PERSUASION

Reread lines 8–11. Notice that Edwards directly addresses his **audience** in these lines. How do you imagine the audience responded to these words?

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.



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**, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them. . . . **B**

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are
20 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 men² 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
30 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 fain³ 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,⁴ there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of. . . . **C**

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
40 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, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets,⁵ 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. . . . **D**

50 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

whet (hwĕt) *adj.*
sharpened

B EMOTIONAL APPEALS
Reread lines 14–18. What **imagery** does Edwards use in these lines?

discern (dĭ-sŭrn') *v.*
perceive or recognize something

appease (ə-pēz') *v.*
bring peace, quiet, or calm to; to soothe

C EMOTIONAL APPEALS
Loaded language, or words with strong emotional associations, can be used to influence an audience's attitude. What examples of loaded language do you see in lines 27–30?

D PERSUASION
The imagery in lines 38–42 is well suited to the sermon's historical **context**. Why might the bow and arrow have held negative associations for Colonial Americans?

abhor (ăb-hôr') *v.*
regard with disgust

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

3. **would fain**: would rather.

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

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



Babylon Burning. From the *Apocalypse of Saint John* (Revelations 18). Luther Bible, First Edition. 1530. Private collection. Photo © Art Resource, New York.

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 suffered⁶ to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be
 60 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 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.

abominable
 (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-bəl) *adj.*
 thoroughly detestable

ascribe (ə-skrīb') *v.* to
 attribute to a specified
 cause or source

6. **you was suffered:** you were permitted.

Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. **E**

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;⁷ 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 exquisite⁸ horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your

E EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Notice the use of the **simile**, or comparison, in lines 50–65. In what way does comparing the audience to a spider appeal to fear?

incense (ĩn-sěns') v. to cause to be extremely angry

induce (ĩn-dōōs') v. to succeed in persuading someone to do something

7. **burn it asunder** (ə-sŭn'dər): burn it into separate parts or pieces.

8. **exquisite** (ěk'skwĩ-zĩt): intensely felt.



Detail of *Hell*, Hendrik met de Bles, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having
80 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?”⁹

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of
90 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 coming¹⁰ 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
100 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. . . .  

deliverance (dĭ-lĭv’ər-əns)
n. rescue from danger

mitigation (mĭt-ĭ-gā’shən)
n. lessening of something
that causes suffering



TEKS 7

F ALLUSION

Reread lines 75 to the end, and consider how purpose and audience influence Edwards’s language in these lines. As habitual readers of the Bible, members of his congregation would be familiar with the biblical contrast between a God of wrath and a God of mercy. In lines 87–88, they would recognize a **biblical allusion** or reference in the quotation from Psalm 90. In line 99, they would hear echoes of biblical passages that identify Christ as the lamb of God and that associate Christ’s blood with the cleansing of sin. How do allusions such as these increase the persuasive appeal of Edwards’s sermon? Cite evidence from the selection to support your response.

9. “who knows . . . anger?”: an allusion to Psalm 90:11 in the Bible—“Who knoweth the power of thine anger?”

10. **Many . . . coming**: a reference to the hundreds of people who were being converted during the Great Awakening.

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** According to Jonathan Edwards’s sermon, what is a constant threat to all human beings?
- 2. Clarify** In Edwards’s view, what must sinners do to be spared God’s wrath?
- 3. Summarize** What key image does Edwards use to persuade his audience?

Literary Analysis

- 4. Analyze Emotional Appeals** Review the examples of words, phrases, and images you recorded as you read. How does this language effectively appeal to the audience’s emotions and get Edwards’s message across?
- 5. Analyze Persuasion** What role does the appeal to fear or terror play in Edwards’s sermon? How do biblical allusions support the writer’s appeal to fear? Cite evidence from the sermon to support your response.
- 6. Draw Conclusions** How would you describe Jonathan Edwards’s view of the following? Cite specific examples for each.
 - God
 - Christ
 - humanity
- 7. Compare Literary Works** Use a chart like the one shown to compare some of Jonathan Edwards’s and Anne Bradstreet’s attitudes and beliefs. Cite specific details from their writings to support your ideas.

	<i>Edwards</i>	<i>Bradstreet</i>
<i>Eternal Life</i>		
<i>God’s Relation to People</i>		
<i>Religious Beliefs</i>		
<i>Human Frailty</i>		



READING 6 Analyze how rhetorical techniques in historically important speeches influence the reader, evoke emotions, and create meaning. **7** Analyze the meaning of biblical allusions in words, phrases, passages, and literary works. **10A** Evaluate how the author’s purpose and audience affect the tone of persuasive texts. **RC-11(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

Literary Criticism

- 8. Historical Context** In the 18th century, many people died at a much younger age than they do today. How might awareness of the fragility of life have affected people’s receptiveness to Edwards’s sermon?

What keeps you **IN LINE?**

In this well-known sermon, Edwards acknowledges that his listeners may already be moral and religious. If he isn’t trying to “scare” listeners into moral behavior, what is his true purpose?

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Decide whether the boldface words make the statements true or false.

1. If a movie is said to be **abominable**, you should expect to hate it.
2. A good way to **appease** a friend is to criticize her.
3. Feeding the hungry would result in the **mitigation** of their suffering.
4. If you **discern** a difference between two documents, you notice that they are not alike.
5. A person who **abhors** you is probably a close friend.
6. When you **ascribe** a motive to a crime, you explain why someone did it.
7. One way to **incense** someone is to say something complimentary.
8. If you have trouble cutting a steak, it might help to **whet** your knife.
9. An example of **deliverance** is the rescue of passengers from a sinking ship.
10. If I **induce** you to help me do a hard job, I have managed to persuade you.

WORD LIST

abhor
abominable
appease
ascribe
deliverance
discern
incense
induce
mitigation
whet

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• document • illustrate • interpret • promote • reveal

What does Edwards's sermon **reveal** about Puritan thought on the human condition? Do you think the Puritans believed that they had full control over their own lives? Write a paragraph explaining how Puritans saw themselves in relation to God, and use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: CONNOTATION

Though some words may have the same definition, their **connotations**, or shades of meaning, can vary. In Edwards's sermon, for example, the word *incensed* suggests a stronger feeling than *angered*. As you read large sections of text, you can use context clues to determine a word's exact shade of meaning.

PRACTICE Based on context clues, select a more intense word from the following list to replace each boldface word in the paragraph.

• antipathy • disconsolate • contrive • momentous • negligible

Our debate team has placed second in state competition for the past three years. Next year, we have to **figure out** a way to take first place. The difference in our score and those of the teams that beat us has been **minor**, so we haven't been too **unhappy** about placing second. In fact, we have no **dislike** of the other teams. Nevertheless, bringing the trophy home next year will be a **very important** occasion.



READING 1B Analyze textual context (in larger sections of text) to draw conclusions about the nuance in word meanings.

Interactive
Vocabulary



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