

Sample Format Essay

Sweezo 1

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The Evolving View Of Body And Soul From Puritanism To Transcendentalism

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Were the lines quoted above written by a Puritan writer in 17th century Massachusetts Bay Colony? Puritans had, after all, a strict view of good and evil, sin and virtue. Are they from an autobiography of a typical member of the colony who saw the body in conflict with the soul? Actually they were written by an influential writer from the 1st century of the common era—Paul, author of many books in the New Testament of the Bible, to the Christian community in Rome. From the writings of the Puritans, however, we can see the influence this view had on people whose lives were infused with Biblical teaching. Puritans had a very definite sense of the dichotomy of the body and soul—that the body with its carnal desires was at constant war with the soul in its quest for Heaven. The view of the connection between body and soul changed dramatically from the colonial period to the 19th century. Whereas the Puritans saw a daily conflict between body and soul, this view evolved through the time of the Transcendentalists eventually to a view of harmony between body and soul. Where the Puritans saw the body as inferior to the soul, the Transcendentalists gradually came to see the two as equals. This evolution of the relationship between body and soul can be seen in the works of Anne Bradstreet, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.

Bradstreet's writing contains frequent references to the dichotomy of body and soul, which are locked in opposition for the length of the body's life, and emphasizes the inferiority of the body to the soul. The Puritans lived a life that was influenced daily by Bible reading and church teaching. The Bible was used as a guide for all facets of Puritan life, such that "even the most trivial problems were referred to biblical interpretation for a solution" (Unger, 104).

Puritan theology leaned heavily on the Old Testament belief of an angry and vengeful God and constantly reminded members that Satan and sin were lying in wait to trap them. This can be seen most clearly in Bradstreet's poem, "The Flesh and the Spirit," written in 1768.

According to Bradstreet biographer Piercy (88), "The Flesh and The Spirit" is the result of Bradstreet's troubled conscience, caught between physical passion for her much beloved husband and Puritan opposition to the flesh and Satan. The poem is an account of an imagined conversation between two sisters named "Flesh" and "Spirit". They are pictured in opposition to one another, with Flesh and "her eye/on worldly wealth and vanity" (lines 5-6), in contrast with Spirit, "who did rear/her thoughts unto a higher sphere" (lines 7-8). Flesh's antagonism toward Spirit shows in the lines:

Art fancy sick, or turned a sot
 To catch at shadows which are not?
 Come, come, I'll show unto thy sense,
 Industry hath its recompense. (lines 19-22)

Here Flesh is calling Spirit a drunkard, saying she lives in her imagination, and also saying that labors of the flesh are rewarded. This is in direct opposition to the Puritan emphasis on the Bible and the soul. This may be seen as Bradstreet's passion for her husband questioning her Puritan teachings. Spirit returns the animosity, speaking of her sister Flesh as an enemy in combat:

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