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From *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* Analysis

## SOAPSTONER

### *Subject*

The subject is the fate of those that Edwards sees as “sinners”, and how God, being angry and omnipotent, may send them to hell at any time, unless they repent.

### *Occasion*

Edwards’ is giving a sermon to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut that is largely nonreligious, or at least apathetic to religion. Edwards is part of a revivalist religious movement, known as the Great Awakening, which prioritized religious fervor and piety. Additionally, this is also placed in the middle of the Enlightenment, a period in European history that saw reason be placed above religion.

### *Audience*

Edwards’ audience is a group of colonists in Enfield, Connecticut, who are skeptical of religion.

### *Purpose*

His purpose is to convince those who are apathetic or skeptical of religion. He urges the “poor sinners” to become religious, “And now you have an extraordinary opportunity a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open”. He argues that God is is

wrathful and angry, asking “How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery”, and by painting their current situation as “dreadful”, Edwards encourages them to “awake and fly from the wrath to come”.

### *Speaker*

John Edwards is the speaker, a puritan and a pastor speaking to a congregation. He reasons through God’s anger and subsequent reaction, “[unconverted men] are now the objects of that very same *anger* and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell” and “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”. In other words, not only does Edwards suggest that is carrying the message of God, but that he also *understands* God and his motivations for doing things, and is explaining those motivations (i.e. God is angry).

### *Stylistic and Linguistic Elements*

Edwards uses many rhetorical techniques throughout the passage. For example, he uses double-negatives to emphasize God’s omnipotence, “So 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.”, and again, “is not because God...is not then very angry with them”.

Edwards uses extremely vivid imagery several times, to convey his message and instill fear of hell in his audience, “unconverted men walk over the **pit of hell** on a **rotten covering**, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak they will not bear their weight”. God’s “arrows of death”, the “fiery pit”, “hell is gaping for them”, that “flames gather and flash about them” create fear in his audience. By comparing humans, specifically sinners, to spiders, “much as one holds a spider...over the fire”, Edwards effectively uses this simile to make his audience feel completely powerless in the face of God.

Edwards also uses repetition several times to great effect. For example, as he calls upon his audience to consider their precarious position, he repeats “wrath” over and over

again, “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”. And then, immediately afterward, he uses anaphora, repeating “nothing” to evoke a sensation of complete helplessness, “**nothing** to lay hold of to save yourself, **nothing** to keep off the flames of wrath, **nothing** of your own, **nothing** that you have ever done, **nothing** you can do”.

Edwards uses parallel and complementary structure several times. In the first line, he compares and contrasts the audience and God, repeating “easy” to build up God’s omnipotence and set the tone of helplessness, “so it is **easy** for us... thus **easy** is it for God when he pleases”. However, he inverts the “it is” to form “is it”, already setting up the contrast between God and the audience. He again uses parallelism to pressure the audience into repenting, as “[Christ] stands in the door **calling** and **crying**... many are **flocking** to him, and **pressing** into the kingdom of God. Many are daily **coming**”, repeating the participle form to grant a sense of urgency and immediacy to his call. Edwards also very effectively uses the “door of mercy” as a metaphor for converting, repenting, and reforming one’s religious life.

Edwards extensively uses loaded language throughout the piece, suggesting sinners are “abominable”, “absolutely despair”, are “abhor[rent]”, suffer “infinite” punishment, feel “awful ... to be left behind”, “mourn for sorrow of heart”, all evoking pity, remorse, and even contempt for sinners.

Finally, Edwards begins the passage by inviting the audience, “we”, to feel contempt for sinners, with the sinners in the third person, “**they** are now the objects”, “their wickedness”, “they have done nothing”, “the devil is waiting for them”. But then, about half way through, he switches to the second person, “The God that holds **you** over the pit of hell”. This pulls the audience in, invites them to agree with Edwards without feeling personally attacked, invites them to scorn the sinners. Then, when Edwards calls them out for being sinners themselves, they have already agreed with him. In effect, Edwards carries out a bait-and-switch.

### *Tone*

The majority of this piece is fear-inducing and dreadful. By repeating loaded language like the “anger and wrath of God”, “torments of hell”, Edwards makes his audience feel small and powerless. Additionally, Edwards builds up imagery, “the fire is made ready”, “the glittering sword is whet”, to make his audience quail in fear. He paints a bleak pictures, “a long forever, a boundless duration, which will swallow up your thoughts”.

However, near the end, the sermon takes a sharp turn, going from imposing and fearful to hopeful. Edwards presents a solution, to repent, to the congregation, and shifts to using language with a more positive connotation like “extraordinary opportunity”, “rejoicing in hope of the glory of God”. However, even when presenting this solution, Edwards keeps giving small hints and reminders of the fear, ending with “awake and fly from the wrath”, contrasting the hopeful “rejoicing and singing” of the saved with more dreadful “sorrow” and “howl for vexation”.

### *Organization*

Edwards organizes his argument inductively. While initially, he does start by reasoning deductively about God’s anger, he takes that and inductively builds up to his final call to action, where he presents the congregation with an “extraordinary opportunity” to escape the bleak and dismal punishment he laid out earlier.

### *Narrative Style*

Edwards begins by drawing the audience in, with “We find it easy”, and he invites them to understand Gods anger, “thus easy is it for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell”. Then, he uses imagery to build up an image of a wrathful God, “God has so many different unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world”. After dramatically building up a scene of a wrathful God, building suspense as “The bow of God’s wrath is

bent”, justice “strains the bow”, Edward monumentally shifts to directly addressing the congregation. He switches from the third person, referring to “sinners” and “wicked men”, to directly speaking to the audience, as God “abhors *you*”, “his wrath towards *you* burns like fire”. Finally, after making his audience feel completely helpless in the face of God, completely tearing them down, Edwards completely inverts the tone of the sermon, and presents them with salvation. He maintains the pressure, “many are daily coming”, “many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in”, but he presents it as a solution, as an escape from the dismal picture he’s painted for their future.

### *Evidence*

Edwards extensively uses religious and fire and brimstone imagery to convey his point. The imagery is often relating to fire and heat, “the fire is made ready”, “the flames gather and flash about them”, “the fire pent up”. There is also imagery intended to make the audience contemptuous of sinners, to see them as small, with allusions to a “rotten covering” and comparisons to a “spider” or a “loathsome insect”.

### *Rhetoric*

#### **Ethos**

Edwards derives most of his ethos from his station, being a priest who has spent significant time speaking as part of the “Great Awakening” movement. His frequent allusions to an “Almighty God” also lend ethos, giving the impression that he knows what God wants.

#### **Pathos**

Edwards constantly appeals to fear in this piece. From the scary imagery, “you hang by a slender thread”, to the repeated tone of helplessness, “nothing of your own, nothing you ever have done, nothing that you can do”, to fear of being left behind invoked as he presents the solution of repenting, “How awful is it to be left behind at such a day?”, Edwards’ entire

argument is based on fear.

### **Logos**

Edwards does not directly invoke much logos in the piece. There aren't really any statistics or any scientific evidence – that's the point. However, his analogy at the beginning, comparing humans in the eyes to God to a worm being crushed, is presented as a logical comparison that can be used to understand God's actions. Edwards uses this to present a veneer of logic to his argument.

### **Precis**

Jonathan Edwards, in the fire and brimstone sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, speaking to a congregation of religious skeptics in Enfield, Connecticut, argues that God is angry with them and has the power to send them to hell at any moment, so they should repent and become more religious. Edwards supports his argument by drawing analogies to make the humans feel small, presenting fearsome and dire imagery of hell and the caprice of God's wrath, and using language to make the congregation feel helpless in the face of God, forcing them to look to the church for salvation. Edwards' purpose is convince members of the congregation to repent for their sins, become more pious and completely subservient to God. Edwards initially speaks in a fearsome and dire tone, painting a bleak picture for the colonists, but then ends on a more slightly hopeful, but still intimidating note, presenting a return to the Church as the only possible solution.

Edwards uses highly manipulative and fear based rhetoric to scare the audience into agreeing with him. Edwards effectively uses repetition several times throughout the piece. By repeating “wrath” over and over again, “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”, Edwards makes the audience feel small while God's wrath begins to feel imposing and suffocating. Then, he builds up a feeling of

helplessness and despair with anaphora, repeating “nothing” in “nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you have ever done, nothing you can do”. By making the audience feel completely helpless, Edwards is able to effectively manipulate the audience into following him and repenting, because he’s convinced them there’s no other choice. He increases the pressure on the congregation to repent by employing a bandwagon fallacy. He presents them with an “extraordinary opportunity”, and says “[m]any are daily coming”, asking “How awful is it to be left behind at such a day!”. By arguing that the congregation should repent merely because many others already have, Edwards very effectively utilizes a bandwagon fallacy, appealing to a fear of missing out, the primal instinct of self-preservation. Although this section is more hopeful, Edwards still includes constant reminders of the bleak future if they do not accept his salvation, suggesting they will end up “pining and perishing”, “mourn for sorry of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit”. Nearly all of Edwards’ evidence is based on extremely vivid imagery based on fear and despair. He makes the sinners feel guilty and powerless, associating them with a “rotten covering”, comparing them to a “spider” or “loathsome insect”, while scaring them with God’s “arrow of death” and his “wrath [that] towards you burns like fire”. Edwards instills a fear in his congregation and uses that fear to beguile them into accepting his conclusion. Fear has always played a critical role in the human psyche and continues to plague political discussions. As fearmongering becomes more and more prevalent in politics, it is important to look to the past to understand what its effects were.