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Guilt and Sin in American Puritan Society presented in Hawthorne's short stories
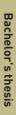
How Hawthorne adressed the themes of guilt and sin in his short stories about New England Puritan society

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of how Hawthorne addresses the themes of guilt and sin in American Puritan society in his short stories "The Maypole of Merry Mount", "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil" written in the 1830s. This thesis will show how Hawthorne's view on sin and guilt is connected to his own experience with the Puritan society in New England and how he views the nature of the man. I will recant the traits of the time and then move on to explain Hawthorne's relationship to Puritanism and how it relates to some events of his life. Then I will analyze each of the short stories individually, look at the themes and the traits of the texts and then compare them in my conclusion.

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Introduction

The United States of America in the early 19th century was in a state of cultural confusion. Independence from the British was a fact, although not without incident, and the search for true American culture was afoot. Where some traveled out west to look for it, others looked inwards. Literature became a great part of the search for cultural identity in a marked that had almost no competition. But what could you write about that would appeal to a people living in a society that had not yet found its identity? The nation was characterized by the growing conflict between abolitionists and the slavery supporters, and the division between North and South created a split economy and social development where the north focused on manufacturing and the south's economy was centered around the cotton production. At the same time American Individualism and the notion of Manifest Destiny was reinforced by the United States new territory and western expansion. This was the belief that it was the destiny of all Americans to ensure that the United States possessed all the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to achieve true individual freedom. Therefore, multiple Americans uprooted themselves to move out west, without the government saying so, because they believed it was their right to do so. Thus, American individualism was on the rise as the people moved for personal gain, no matter if it was for property, money or destiny (Woods, 2012, pp. 415-439). One author knew where to look, and that was Nathaniel Hawthorne. Coming from a traditional family in Salem, Massachusetts, he wrote short stories and novels where Puritanism had a heavy influence. The Puritans of New England were one of the original settlers of the New World and Hawthorne reckoned their stories, lore and tales to be closest to what could be called American prose. In the genre of Dark Romanticism, he wrote three short stories I will discuss in this thesis – "The Maypole of Merry Mount", "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil" – because of their Puritan themes, critique and motifs. Several critics have said that Hawthorne was very successful when he addressed puritan themes in his work and almost exclusively *not successful* when he did not. In this thesis I will answer how Hawthorne addresses guilt and sin in his short stories about the Puritan society of New England, why the texts where he discussed Puritan themes were so successful and how the way he handles these themes represents his view on Puritanism.

Hawthorne and Puritanism

Under the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, and the year after the ratification of the Louisiana Purchase, Nathaniel Hathorne was born to US Navy captain Nathaniel Hathorne and Elizabeth Manning Hathorne in Salem, Massachusetts. Captain Hathorne died in 1808 and Elizabeth's brothers started to look out for the family financially. Nathaniel came from a family of Puritan heritage. Puritanism was a religious reform movement that originated in the 16th century. The supporters were settlers of the New World who wanted to remove all that was left of Catholicism in the Church of England.

> Puritans believed that it was necessary to be in a covenant relationship with God in order to be redeemed from one's sinful condition, that God had chosen to reveal salvation through preaching, and that the Holy Spirit was the energizing instrument of salvation (Puritanism, 2018).

The religious persuasion and cultural aspects connected to Puritanism is a common for his stories. His family had strong connections to Salem and its community, as his ancestor was a judge at the Salem Witch trials. Nathaniel Hawthorne probably added the "w" in his early twenties, perhaps as an attempt to dissociate himself with the family legacy or possibly because he thought it was more distinguished. In his young days Hawthorne is considered to have been a transcendentalist. Transcendentalism is a political, philosophical and literary movement that was stimulated by European romanticism, bible criticism and skepticism. They were connected to nature and believed a new age for mankind was afoot. Because Hawthorne existed in the period after the Enlightenment he relished in the contrast of the intellectual history – in the distinction between the reasonable and the emotional (Davis, 2015, p. xi). At some point during his adult years, Hawthorne experienced a change of heart and started writing Dark Romantic literature. There is a significant difference between the two because transcendentalists thought perfection was a part of mankind and that we had some innate divine quality so that utopia was possible to achieve. Dark Romantics, on the other hand, believed humans gravitated towards the evil and self-destructive and that utopia would be difficult, or impossible, to achieve and that mankind did not deserve it. Him being a romantic author does not mean he wrote stories about sexual attraction between main characters, but rather about the inner emotional lives of his characters and that was the focus of the stories. He wrote several short story collections that came into critical favor, especially in New England where he grew up, lived and placed most of his stories. He based them in the

Puritan society that was so familiar to him but had his own spin on the action and symbolism in the narratives. Encyclopedia of World Biography characterizes his style of writing as complex;

> Lucid, graceful, and well composed, they combine an old-fashioned neoclassic purity of diction with a latent and hard complexity of meaning. They are broadly allegorical but infused with imaginative passion. (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2004)

As mentioned, Hawthorne wrote in the genre of Dark Romanticism, or negative romanticism as it is also referred to as. Where light romantic literature told stories of hope and joy in balance with nature, dark romantic literature from the time focused on the depravities of the human soul, mind and nature.

> The typical symbols of negative romanticism are individuals who are filled with guilt, despair, and cosmic and social alienation. They are often presented, for instance, as having committed some horrible and unmentionable crime in the past. They are outcasts from men and from God; they are almost always wanderers on the face of the earth. Dinçer, 2010, p. 219)

The short stories I have chosen for this thesis have themes like this. "The Maypole of Merry Mount" tells the story of a wedding that is interrupted by Puritans who believe the merrymakers are sinning as they are dancing in animal skins around their maypole. The Puritans attack their celebrations and want to punish them all, but the married couple are spared as they join the fold. A theme for this story is "the fallibility of man". The other story I wanted to include is "Young Goodman Brown" which tells the story of a man that looses his faith and alienates himself from society after seeing what he believes to be his community's "hidden sin" and does not wish to be part of it any more. A theme for this story is "the depravity of man" or "the corruptible soul". The last story I will discuss is "The Minister's Black Veil" and this short story depicts the events spurred by a local minister who suddenly starts wearing a black veil. We see the community judging him, trying to figure out what sin he must have, surely, committed. A theme for this story is "underlying guilt" and shows what happens when we start to reflect on our own lives. Hawthorne narrators take the role as one of moralistic and didactic value. All the stories are set in New England some time during the 17th century, and comments on Hawthorne's thoughts of the Puritan heritage left in America at his time. These short stories are ambiguous and allegorical, which is typical for

Hawthorne's work. They each address the effect sin and guilt has on the human mind, the soul and how it can even affect whole communities.

The Maypole of Merry Mount

This short story was written in 1832 and was first introduced in *The Token and Atlantic Souvenir* to then later be included in *Twice-Told Tales.* The story is set in what is today known as Quincy, Massachusetts, on the "Merry Mount" formerly known as Mount Wallaston. On a midsummer's eve, the inhabitants are celebrating the wedding of Edith and Edgar by dancing around the maypole. Edith, however, has sadness in her eyes as she fears that this merriment is all a façade. Suddenly, they are attacked by their Puritan neighbors. They wish to punish the inhabitants of Merry Mount for blasphemy and not accepting "the sober truths of life not even to be truly blest" (Hawthorne, 1832). However, the Puritan leader Endicott recognizes a pure love between the wed couple and spares them. The couple joins the Puritans without looking back. This story is one of ambiguity. The ending can be interpreted one of two ways; Endicott shows mercy because he believes in the couple's true love or he sees an opportunity to include him in his fold and merely capitalizes on that. What the reader interprets depends on his belief in a happy ending, and Endicott's compassion, or not. Hawthorne starts off the text by including some historical facts about the period, allegorizing the events of New England history to suit his fancies.

> The old Puritans (…) were to him a sober lot who dourly frowned upon frivolity even when it wore a harmless face. Thus it was that in his story the Puritan band became the expression of grimness itself. (…) [I]n such stories as this, Hawthorne's share of responsibility for an historical misconception becomes apparent for the fact that the practical, common, livable Puritan has been transformed into a mere symbol of conscience and sternness, and that his human traits have been hidden beneath cast-iron clothing (Orians, 1938, p. 166).

In this journal article, Orians makes a point of how Hawthorne has twisted the historical facts, or he presents them in such a way that will further the plot of his story. By presenting the even such, he gets a contrast in the narrative. The two groups of people are like to polar opposites he wishes to throw at one another. The inhabitants of Merry Mount display a jollity while the Puritans are described as "grim". Hawthorne writes that "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire" and we do not need to ask whom is representing what in this

narrative. The Puritans are given the role of oppressors while the inhabitants of Merry Mount become prisoners, reminding us they were "free spirits". It is hard not to compare the inhabitants to an early version of hippies as they are dancing around a pole in flowers. However, the Puritans see them as unrefined and primitive, not conforming to the same rules of society and community as the Puritans themselves. Edith remarks something similar, in fact, that the inhabitants seem ignorant or unaware of the reality around them. As if they are pretending there is no bitterness in the world. During narrative of the story Edith and Edgar realize that it is the contrast in life, the highs *and* the lows, that makes life worth living. That the struggles and hardships are what makes you appreciate what you have. That is why they decide to join the Puritans in the end, and do not seem to have any regret or doubt. What is important to take notice of is that both parties of the story are persecuted minorities seeking refuge in this New World. The Puritans seem frustrated, however, by the fact that the inhabitants of Merry Mount are living so frivolously, pretending not to have a care in the world, while the Puritans seem hardened and without much sympathy for their situation even though it may be very similar to their own.

The theme of the story I have deemed to be the fall from grace, or actually the fallibility of man. This is a theme that is common for Dark Romantic literature and the religious allusions are normal to Hawthorne. The narrative bears resemblance to man's eviction from Paradise. The couple being a man and a woman, her name even similar to Eve's, that are suddenly skeptical of the reality around them and how they are taken away from an environment that is supposed to be without worries. The fact that they choose to live in ignorance, even though they know their "mirth" is not real is similar to how Adam and Eve lived in ignorance by choosing not to eat the forbidden fruit because God told them they would be happier without wisdom. The inhabitants are described wearing animal skins, dancing around the maypole that is covered in flowers so beautifully it looks as if they must have sprung out from it. The maypole itself could be a symbol for the tree of the forbidden fruit or even the representation of the dream that is paradise. As it is cut down, it is like the magic mist that has been over the scene suddenly disappears and the harsh reality is around them. Hawthorne's narrating does not side with either group, although the Puritans are presented as a bit heavy-handed, and the couple seems content with their choice. Hawthorne shows how rigid he finds the religion however by writing the scene about cutting Edgar's hair, however, and how harsh they can be dealing with what they deem to be hedonistic individuals. We are left to wonder, though, if the couple would have left on their own. Would they have left the community had the

Puritans not attacked them that night? In this story, the Puritans have decided that the inhabitants of Merry Mount are sinners that need to be punished so they take matters into their own hands.

Young Goodman Brown

This next short story also deals with a fall from grace, and the strict intolerance Hawthorne believes the Puritan religion to possess. "Young Goodman Brown" was written in 1835 and is set in 17th century Salem, Massachusetts. This is the story of young Goodman Brown who has an errand in the woods one night and is led to a gathering of witches and devil worshippers he knows to be the members of his congregation and community. He is so shocked by seeing his friends and wife there that he loses all faith and virtue when he wakes up the next day. Throughout the rest of his life he alienates himself from the community because he can not trust them to be sincere about their faith again and even his "dying hour was gloom" (Hawthorne, 1835). This narrative is layered thick with ambiguity, allusiveness and suggestiveness as the narrator of the story is very questionable. It could all have been a dream as it happens at night, it abruptly ends, and Brown believes to see people he knows to be dead. Yet he seems so convinced it must be true that he lives the rest of his life in constant skepticism and paranoia.

> I should say rather that these ambiguities of meaning are intentional, an integral part of his purpose. Hawthorne wishes to propose, not flatly that man is primarily evil, but instead the gnawing doubt lest this should indeed be true (Fogle, 1945, p. 448)

Hawthorne has a method to the madness, Fogle comments. The author's ingenious ability to produce an intentionally confusing narrative without losing the reader is what makes him such a distinguished writer. There are elements we can be certain of, however. When Goodman Brown is home, at the beginning of the narrative, he is an integrated part of society. When he enters the forest and encounters familiar people he is in a sort of dreamlike state. The subtleties in narration creates a mood that seems to be woolen and intangible. When Brown finds himself back home again, he is a changed man. He is cold towards his wife and withdraws into himself. He can not handle the fact that there is evil in the people around him. This seems to be Hawthorne's comment on Puritan society's stubbornness to realize the duality of man that Hawthorne likes to depict. This is what makes him a dark

romantic. He believes that there is evil and sin in everyone and that mankind tends to lean towards the more sinful side.

This story's narrative can be interpreted in several ways, as I have pointed out. As Fogle (1945) says, "Nowhere does he permit us a simple meaning, a merely single interpretation" (p. 449). One way to interpret Brown's journey into the woods is one of self-scrutiny. He could have been fully aware that he was about to embark on a sinful journey, led by his curiosity and was then surprised to find other members of his community tempted by the same evil. He is about to turn back several times throughout the story, besting the evil temptation. Brown is never able to do so however, as people who hold greater and greater significance to him are appearing, the peak of this being his wife. The naïve and young Goodman Brown holds his wife in great esteem, as he does with his faith, and sees her as something pure. When she appears in the witch's gathering, he loses all hope and the scene in the woods come to an end. This could suggest that the theme is depravity of man or the corruptibility of the human soul. As Brown sees the distinguished members of their society "sinning", or as he sees their "hidden sin", he can not bear to look at them anymore. He believes them to be hypocritical now and as the world is no longer black and white, he does not want to be part of it anymore. The guilt of, what he perceives to be, their common sin weighs heavy on his soul and he does not manage to listen to the psalms anymore as "an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain" (Hawthorne, 1835). This short story is presented as an allegory about the recognition of evil in ourselves, and our fellow man. The protagonists' names - "Goodman Brown" and "Faith" - depict the pure and innocent that is then distorted and turns into the paradox of the story. The story comments on how one can display outwards moral but still have sin within. That the duality of man is that of the soul and behavior. Brown can no longer trust the members of his society to be good because he believes them to harbor sin within, even if they seem to be moral and upstanding Christians. Although he is the one who turns to misbehaving and acting sinful, he believes this to be better than let sinners close to him. He ventured into the woods that night himself, tempted by sin, but this seems to have slipped his mind. I do believe, though, that the reason he can not rest or find comfort in his religion again is because he himself feels sinful without realizing it. He is so scared of sin that he turns into a sinner himself. Hawthorne could here be trying to comment that sin is a natural part of our nature, or he could be saying that the Puritan standard of being without sin is impossible to attain.

The Minister's Black Veil

This story truly comments on the divide between outwards appeared sinfulness and what truly lies within. "The Minister's Black Veil" was first published in the 1832 edition of *The Token of Atlantic Souvenir* and later appeared in *Twice-Told Tales.* It tells the story of a community who is utterly rattled when their reverend, Mr. Hooper, returns one day with a black veil covering his face. People immediately start to speculate what the meaning behind the veil is. In the beginning it is merely fascination, but as the reverend refuses to take it off even as his fiancée demands it, rumors containing more malice start to wander. He does not take it off again during his life time and people comment on how he has become a figure of terror. Even though Mr. Hooper acts with the greatest respect and care for everyone in the community, they start to avoid him. As they wonder what kind of sin, he must have committed to feel like he must wear a black veil, they start to contemplate their own sins. Soon he stirs up feelings of guilt in everyone he meets, and they can not really bear his presence. Hooper never tells anyone why he has chosen to wear the veil and even at his deathbed he refuses to remove it. Hawthorne never gives the reader an answer to the question, he does not even hint at it, which must mean that the true mystery of the narrative lies elsewhere. This story is clearly ambiguous and does contain allegory as well, like the other two stories. The theme of this story I believe to be that of underlying guilt or hidden sin. The minister is suspected of sin because of his appearance but he is acting righteous while the villagers are the ones who are acting guilty. There is a hypocrisy to this narrative as well as the villagers are so curious what Hooper's sin is even as the veil forces to remember their own. They are so convinced the reverend must have committed a horrible sin and that shame is the reason he is covering his face with the black veil.

> Hawthorne, with his usual assumption of the reality of personal evil, presents no one
> level of his fundamental belief in man's proneness to hide or rationalize his most

private thoughts or guilt. This is the "parable" (of the subtitle) that the Reverend Mr. Hooper seeks to preach with his wearing of the veil. On another level, Hawthorne reaffirms his equally constant belief that man is often guilty of pridefully and harmfully exalting one idea, frequently a valid truth in itself, to the status of an absolute. This is the sin Hooper commits by his self-righteous and self-deceptive insistence upon wearing the veil (Stibitz, 1062, p. 182)

Stibitz suggests that "The Minister's Black Veil" can be made unambiguous if you compare it to other stories by Hawthorne that contains the same theme of hiding your sin and succumbing to the guilt caused by it. However, Stibitz does admit that Hooper's possible crime remains ambiguous. Did something happen that made him start wearing the veil? Did he in fact do something which he regrets. The famous author of the same time period, Edgar Allan Poe, suggested that Hooper had committed adultery with the woman whose funeral he attempts at the beginning of the narrative. Some guest describes seeing him walking hand-in-hand with her ghost. The veil symbolizes puritan obsession with even suspected sin, and this is shown in how the villagers can not let go of the fact that their reverend wears the veil and they do not know why. Their assumption being that he must have done something sinful, is a thought they can not let go of either and this seems to become the accepted truth amongst the villagers. Stibitz believes that Hooper made the choice to wear the veil because he wanted the community to reflect upon their own sins. This can be supported by the fact that he holds a sermon where he stresses the importance of admitting one's sin. If this is true, Hooper himself could represent the Puritan society as he forces his ideals onto the community. Another interpretation is that he wears the veil in an attempt to accept everyone else's sin for them. That he is, in fact, sacrificing himself by listening to their sins and wearing their guilt in such a public fashion to give the villagers some relief. This does not come across to them, however, as he makes them uncomfortable and reminds them of their sins and guilty consciousnesses. The veil holds symbolism, in one way or another, that is clear. It could symbolize the hidden nature of guilt, how we hide our sins in hopes of not being judged for them. There could also be a form of morality behind the meaning of the veil. A moral to the story could be, if you will, that we all must come to terms with our sinful nature. As Hawthorne is a dark romantic, this is not a far-fetched suggestion, but his stories do not usually have such simple solutions. He is, however, again commenting on the strictness of the Puritan religious community by telling us how quick people are to assume you are guilty. He

does seem to find the community more sinful than Hooper, here, in his recant of the events as they are readily judging him based of rumors and accusations only.

Conclusion

These short stories all discuss the ambiguity of sin and guilt. Hawthorne criticizes the Puritans for being self-proclaimed judges and executioners who put to much faith in the divinity of man. As Hawthorne sees it, man is fallible, gravitates towards sin and is judged too harshly for something that is in his nature. In "Maypole of Merry Mount" people are killed because the Puritans believe them to be sinful, in "Young Goodman Brown" the protagonist alienates himself from his own community because he believes them to be sinful, and in "The Minister's Black Veil" a righteous and, before, valued member of society is believed to be a sinner simply because he chooses to wear a veil. These stories are all set in 17th century New England, during the time of the witch hunts and trials which Hawthorne's forefather was a judge for. Hawthorne does seem to comment in these short stories how quick the Puritan congregation is to judge someone for their suspected sin and how they are readily preparing to commit sin on their own, hidden in the countenance of righteousness and piety. Even though these stories are set 200 years prior to Hawthorne's own time he does seem to scrutinize the old Puritans actions and morals while saying that their descendants should not so readily claim pride in their heritage. Hawthorne did perhaps change his name in an attempt to distance himself from his own. I believe his short stories addressing Puritan themes to be successful because in reality they are addressing feelings that are familiar to us all. No one is untouched by sin or guilt. We have all experienced it at some point and in today's society this is a widely accepted facet. At the time of Hawthorne, however, most people were not so ready to admit that and therefore I believe people were attracted to reading about someone else's sin. It was scandalous and gave a thrill, I can imagine. In these short stories, Hawthorne addresses the themes of sin and guilt as way to alienate yourself or someone else from the community. He shows how the Puritans demand that man be infallible and pure is impossible to achieve because even the most innocent, righteous or free is a sinner. Man is both good

and evil and can be outwardly moral, but inwardly sinful. Hawthorne truly is a dark romantic as he lets himself be guided by the sympathies of the heart and saw a humanizing effect in the sins of passion. His pity for the sinner was truly "un-Puritan", and he did seem to believe in redemption and second chances. Yet there is something Christian about his morale here as I am reminded of the famous line from the Bible; "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone". Perhaps that is what upsets him about the Puritans as well, that they have forgotten this simple and widely known utterance.

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