

Marina Boonyaprasop

Hawthorne's Wilderness

Nature and Puritanism in Hawthorne's
The Scarlet Letter and "Young Goodman Brown"



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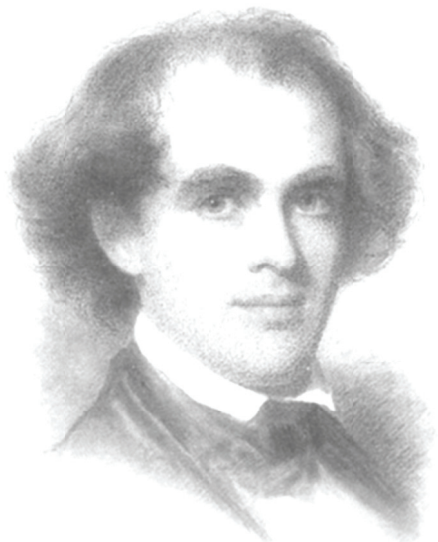
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“The book, if you would see anything in it, requires to be read in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which it was written; if opened in the sunshine, it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to *Twice-Told Tales* 9



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1 Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of America's most noted and highly praised writers, and a key figure of US literature. His works have contributed to the national identity and can be found in almost any curriculum of North American Literature Studies worldwide. Although Hawthorne struggled to become an acknowledged author for most parts of his life, today his work "stands in the limelight of the American literary consciousness" (Graham 5). Even Edgar Allan Poe, who usually had many unflattering things to say about his contemporary, honored him as "*the example, par excellence*, in this country of the privately admired and publicly unappreciated man of genius" ("Tale Writing" 21). During his lifespan, Hawthorne composed eight novels – some of them left unfinished, – several children's books, close to a hundred short stories, and various non-fictional writings. Until today, his most appreciated and famous achievement is the romance novel *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850. Since the author's passing 150 years ago, numerous scholars have discussed his works, addressing topics such as the extended use of symbolism, the didacticism of moral lessons, and the dark and gloomy atmosphere within Hawthorne's historic fictions.

Being a direct descendant of Massachusetts Bay colonists, the Puritan era of 17th and 18th century New England served as a lifelong preoccupation for Hawthorne and inspired many of his best-known stories. Hence, in order to understand the author and his works, it is crucial to apprehend the historical background from which they arose. Awareness of both the Puritan legacy in Hawthorne's time and their Calvinist beliefs, which contributed to the establishment of American identity, serves as a basis for fathoming the intention behind Hawthorne's writings. His forefathers' concept of wilderness was an important part of their religious life, and in many of Hawthorne's tales, nature can be perceived as an active agent for both plot and moral message. Therefore, it is indispensable to consider the development behind the Puritan perception as well as the prevailing opinion on nature during the writer's lifetime.

After the historical background has been depicted, I will turn the focus on the author himself. His ambiguous character and non-persistent lifestyle are the source of many themes which can be retrieved from his works. Thus, understanding the man behind the stories is necessary in order to analyze the tales themselves. Seclusion, nature, and Puritanism are constantly recurring topics in both the author's life and works, wherefore particular attention will be paid to these. To be familiar with Hawthorne's relation to nature, his ancestors, and religion in general is essential in order

to understand the vast amount of symbols that can be found in his stories. The writer is known for his frequent use of this stylistic device and uses it for the conveyance of his didactic messages which I will explain before turning the focus to their realization in Hawthorne's tales.

Based on the study of both historical and biographical facts underlying many of the writer's works and being aware of his style and purpose of writing, his stories can be brought into focus. The second part of this book will analyze two of the author's most eminent and esteemed works according to the use of nature symbolism and the underlying moral intention. By depicting various images within "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*, I will examine to which extent they correspond to the formerly explained historical facts and Hawthorne's emphasized characteristic features. The comparison of the two works will focus on the didactic lesson Hawthorne tried to include in all of his works and will thus provide an in-depth understanding of the author's intentions and his utilization of both Puritanism and nature perception. What could be more vital to a student and teacher of US History and Literature than to understand the motives and quintessence behind some of America's greatest literary achievements: The work of a "man of genius," Nathaniel Hawthorne.

2 Historical Background

In order to fully understand Hawthorne, his works, and the symbolism within, history has to be taken into account. On the supposition that no author is fully free of personal and national history and the mindset of his time, one needs to understand these backgrounds and sources of inspiration. With regard to the focus of this paper, especially the history of the Puritans, their beliefs, and the Western concept of nature should be considered, as those were main influences in Hawthorne's life and works.

2.1 *The Puritans*

When studying Hawthorne and his writings, the comprehension of Puritanism is indispensable, as the author's engagement with their beliefs and history cannot be denied. His lifelong preoccupation in the early colonial history, which was for large parts also a genealogical research (Wineapple 60; Rogers 13), led to the fact that many scholars perceive him as "more a man of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than of his own" (Waggoner 33). Referring to his ancestry, some even go as far as calling him the "capital son of the old Puritans" (James 45). Before this paper focuses on Hawthorne's attitude towards this religious movement, the origin and beliefs of Puritanism will be discussed.

2.1.1 *The Rise of Puritanism in England*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* together with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* have shaped today's perception of Puritanism probably more than anything else (Person 17). It is due to them that this religious movement is nowadays mostly associated with "superstition, excessive moralism, intolerance, and patriarchal oppression" (Person 17). *De facto*, these reproaches have accompanied Puritans ever since their appearance in the 1530s. The term *Puritan* itself was initially given by Anti-Puritans (cf. Collinson) "in a spirit of mockery" (Heimert and Delbanco 1). It played on their primary concern, the purification of existing religious beliefs, and thus bore a negative connotation from the beginning onwards.

The Puritan movement began to emerge when King Henry VIII repudiated the authority of the pope and founded the Church of England through the Act of Supremacy in 1534, investing himself as "the supreme head". For certain Englishmen, the newly-formed denomination did not renounce far enough from the papal reigned church, as many elements of Roman Catholic liturgy were still to be found in its ritu-

als (Delbanco 890). The demand for a further reformation united the people who would later be known as Puritans. Despite this common ground, they were divided into at least two different groups: The first, also called *separating Puritans* (Campbell), believed the Church of England to be corrupt and wrong in its ecclesiastical approach and therefore claimed autonomy for some individual communities, such as themselves (Delbanco 890). The second, less radical party, the *non-separating Puritans* (Campbell), aimed at reforming the doctrines and liturgy of the Church of England instead of separating from it (Delbanco 890; Campbell).

This discrepancy shows that Puritanism as such does not describe a single unanimous set of beliefs, but can rather be seen as a generic term for various groups within a fairly wide spectrum of beliefs. Nevertheless, these dissensions were – at least for now – of no great importance for the different congregations themselves since the Puritan distribution stretched over entire England, facilitating autonomous communities with slightly differing notions.

The ongoing dissatisfaction with the Church of England and the opposition within their own country led to an increasing number of Puritan emigrations, as their convictions were popular in some parts of continental Europe, as well. Throughout the first decades of the 17th century, the Netherlands was the most popular refuge, attracting as many immigrants as New England in the 1630s. However, the former got increasingly unappealing during the 1620s, as the Thirty Years' War broke out. Additionally, the English government pressured the Dutch to set an end to their acquiescence of Puritan autonomy (Bremer, *Puritanism* 15-16). Nevertheless, a return to their initial home country was beyond dispute for most Puritans, as they believed physical separation to be the only way to both implement and enhance their religious ideals (Graham 60). One of the groups that moved to the Netherlands and later on to North America were the Pilgrims, separating Puritans who came to the New World *inter alia* onboard the *Mayflower* and founded Plymouth Colony in 1620 (Delbanco 891). Meanwhile, Charles I ascended the throne of England in 1625. He was highly influenced by his wife, Henrietta-Marie de Bourbon, a Roman-Catholic (Neal, Toulmin, and Choules 279) and the current Archbishop of London, William Laud. Both of his advisors considered the Puritans to be a direct threat to the Church of England and the Roman Catholic tradition alike. The growing religious intolerance, accompanied by the policy of uniformity in worship drove even more Puritans “to undertake

the perilous journey” (Graham 60) towards a better and devout life in the New World.

2.1.2 Puritanism in North America

One decade after the foundation of Plymouth Colony, another group of worshippers – mostly non-separating Puritans this time (Campbell), – started their voyage to the New World, marking the beginning of the Great Migration. On board the *Arbella* were several prestigious passengers, who would later shape the identity of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Among them was John Winthrop, who was elected first Governor prior to the departure, and William Hathorne, great-great-great-grandfather of the renowned author (“The Paternal Ancestors”). By the 1840s, approximately 20,000 fugitives had migrated to New England, spreading even beyond the territories of what are known as Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine today (Delbanco 892). The Great Migration was, contrary to norm, dominated by the exodus of whole families and contained an unusually low amount of illiterates (Delbanco 892).

Although some emigrants had embarked on the journey out of economic ambition, most voyagers saw their flight as “a self-removal from a land of buzzing distraction to a place better-suited for concentrated worship” (Heimert and Delbanco 15). Having escaped the burdens of their past, the Puritans now faced a land which they could freely transform into their own social and religious ideal. Nevertheless, “American Puritanism . . . was more complicated” (Person 17). Their diverse beliefs and backgrounds turned out to be challenging in the attempt to create a new society (Bremer, “The Puritan Experiment” 128). While the different Puritan subgroups were able to autonomously hold and further their respective beliefs in Europe, they assembled and clashed in the New England colonies. Not only did they have to find a consensus on the governmental aspect of their newly-found society, but regarding religious topics as well. During the first decade after the arrival of the *Arbella*, the Puritans managed to agree on a colonial government and a way of church organization (cf. Bremer, *Puritanism* 20). The resulting regime is usually referred to as *theocracy*, although it consisted of a clear separation of clerical and state powers. However, despite the actual disunity, both parties supported each other in promoting and maintaining the Calvinist doctrines and the purity of faith. Hence, church membership and

colonial citizenship were inevitably connected and only the Elect¹ eligible for partaking (Campbell). Another way of coping with the divers takes on Puritanism, was the division into several self-governing colonies, such as New Haven, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. In the course of the establishment of a proper educational system, Harvard College was founded in 1636 as the “crown” (Bremer, “The Puritan Experiment” 129) thereof. With Yale, a second Ivy League university has its roots in the Puritan era (Coffey and Lim 7).

Still, religious dividedness persisted and challenged the newly-found societies. The “key controversy in early Puritan New England” (Person 18) was the Antinomian Crisis of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636-38, which predominantly centered on Anne Hutchinson. On the one hand, some Christians, following the teachings of Antinomianism, believed that only God Himself could decide upon a person’s fate which would implicate the possibility of civil, moral, and ethic disobedience, since no earthly deed could change the Lord’s predestination (Covenant of Grace). Puritans, on the other hand, clearly rejected this thought, being convinced that the Elect had to work constantly on their faith and devoutness to God in order to achieve salvation (Covenant of Works) (Bremer, *Puritanism* 21; Ritter Dailey 530; Hutchinson). Anne Hutchinson, despite being a citizen of Massachusetts Bay Colony, strongly believed in the former idea, advocating it to such a large extent that she is described as having been “radical” and “extreme” (Ritter Dailey 530). The crucial factor of the scandal she provoked was the fact that she hosted increasingly popular and well-frequented devotional meetings in her private house (J. R. Holmes). One of her followers was then-Governor Sir Henry Vane the Younger, who started attending her lessons in 1636 (J. R. Holmes). Being supported and endorsed by a man of such high rank, Hutchinson began promoting her views more openly, and even publicly attacked the colonial religious authority. She blamed all church leaders of New England for overemphasizing the Covenant of Works (Hutchinson) and claimed that they were not only “spiritually starving” (Bremer, *Puritanism* 21) their parishioners, but first and foremost accused them of “teaching error” (J. R. Holmes). In May 1637, Winthrop was reelected Governor. Being one of Hutchinson’s “most prominent opponents” (J. R. Holmes), he charged her with sedition in November 1637. As the theocratic regimen of Massachusetts Bay Colony based both its cleric and state powers upon the Calvinist teachings, an assault on the church was tantamount to an as-

¹ See “2.1.3 Puritan Beliefs” for further information on the meaning of the term *Elect*.