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Summer Sunlight and A Blackness Ten Times Black: Hawthorne's Problem of Sin

Kaity Lindgren

Introduction

In 1850, a contemporary of Nathaniel Hawthorne—Herman Melville—wrote a glowing review of Hawthorne's work titled "Hawthorne and His Mosses." As Hawthorne's contemporary, Melville was especially well positioned to identify the tensions in Hawthorne's writing that would make him one of the fathers of American literature. In praise of Hawthorne's complexity, Melville wrote:

For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black... This great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations... no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free... He is immeasurably deeper than the plummet of the mere critic. For it is not the brain that can test such a man; it is only the heart.¹

The notion that Hawthorne was interested in Puritanism and its repercussions is not a new one. Critics have been exploring the depths of Hawthorne's darkness for some time; his characters are at their most compelling when they struggle with the blackness ten times black. But it is equally necessary to examine the relationship between the Indian summer and the blackness in Hawthorne's work. In "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," and "The Maypole of Merry Mount," the characters are wrestling with this pervasive darkness. Each story produces a different conclusion about the darkness, about Puritanism, and about humanity itself.

These varying conclusions of Hawthorne's stories reveal more than a noncommittal ambivalence about Puritanism. They reveal a tension that was being highlighted with renewed force during Hawthorne's lifetime: the conflict between Puritanism and Unitarianism. The conflict

¹ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *Moby-Dick: Norton Critical Editions*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 521-522.

between these two groups was, on the surface, a doctrinal conflict. But doctrine was changing because culture was changing. Hawthorne's short stories are an intellectual examination of world he lived in, which was constantly in flux. He is plumbing the depths of Puritanism and Unitarianism, original sin and personal responsibility, and community and individualism. By exploring these values through literature, Hawthorne enters the timeless debate about sin and human nature by transcending doctrine through narrative. And, as Melville suggested, to fully appreciate Hawthorne's brilliance we must answer with our more than our minds. We must answer with our hearts.

Puritanism

The mere mention of Puritanism typically brings to mind images of severe men preaching about the fires of hell to their equally severe congregants. For those familiar with *The Scarlet Letter*, the image of a woman publicly humiliated and forced to wear a symbol of her sin for the rest of her life comes to mind. Hawthorne is, in large part, responsible for this; *The Scarlet Letter* is the defining portrait of the Puritans, and it is not a favorable one. In fact, Hawthorne intended for his novel to depict the Puritans in this way. In a letter to the publisher and bookseller George William Childs, Hawthorne wrote:

Perhaps it may interest you to know that "The Scarlet Letter" . . . is thus founded on fact, that such a symbol was actually worn by at least one woman, in the early times of New England. . . . I cannot say . . . whether this mode of ignominious punishment was brought from beyond the Atlantic, or originated with the Puritans. At any rate the idea was so worthy of them that I am piously inclined to allow them all the credit of it.²

Hawthorne's sarcastic tone clearly shows that he had reservations about Puritanism, particularly in the way that transgressions were punished. Yet, if Hawthorne's writing was merely an outright condemnation of the Puritans, there would be little reason for his work to be lauded for its complexity. There was much to praise about Puritanism, and more still to grapple with seriously.

² Nathaniel Hawthorne. "To G.W. Childs, Philadelphia, 16 September 1851," in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Letters, 1843-1853*, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 487.

The Puritans that arrived in America in the 17th century were reformers, above all else. They arrived in the new world with a deep religious zeal, one that was so important to them that they left their lives in Holland and England to start over. Puritan doctrine was, for the most part, aligned with the doctrine of Calvinism³ and hinged on a belief in the absolute authority of God's will.

Predestination, the Puritan tenet most are familiar with, stems from this overarching submission to the will of God. James Truslow Adams succinctly describes the concept of predestination and its implications: "All human beings, including those to whom the gospel had never been preached, and the baby who died at his first breath, were condemned to hell forever. God, however, chose certain individuals as his elect to be saved."⁴ At the beginning of history, God chose whether or not a person was one of the elect; if the person was damned there was nothing he or she could do to remove that decision. Upright, moral behavior was a sign that a person was one of the elect. So, Puritan society was not a free for all in terms of immoral activity. It was quite the opposite. Every person strove to follow the law of God—which was expressly laid out in the Bible. Like most people, past and present, the Puritans believed that their interpretation of the text was the truest.

As modern readers, it may be difficult to imagine why the doctrine of predestination inspired so much religious fervor in the Puritans. However, predestination likely gave hope to the Puritans, because they also believed in the total depravity of all human beings. Total depravity held that the first sin of Adam and Eve was the downfall of humanity. After that first original sin, all people were depraved and inherently sinful, bringing evil into the world because of their nature. Each person, born completely and utterly fallen, was damned unless God chose to bestow his grace upon that person. The possibility at being one of God's elect was a possibility of being spared from the fires of

³ The differences are slight enough that I will not address them in this paper.

⁴ James Truslow Adams, *The Founding of New England* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1933), 77-78.

hell that so many were doomed to be plunged into.⁵ While these doctrinal intricacies may seem harsh, illogical, or otherwise unnecessary, they actually fueled the Puritans' religious passion. Adams describes the vividness of the Puritan doctrine: "Humanity, in their eyes, was so utterly an evil thing, that only by an undeserved act of the grace of God was it possible that even a few human beings could possibly do anything pleasing in his sight."⁶ The Puritan life was an endless attempt to be worthy of the grace of God with the knowledge that such a goal was impossible to achieve; they met the task with gusto.

Though doctrine was a cornerstone of Puritan life, it should not be the only thing for which the Puritans are remembered. The Puritans created remarkably close-knit communities, mutually dependent on each other for almost everything. William Bradford wrote about the importance of the Puritan community: "We are knit together as a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord, of the violation whereof we make great conscience, and by virtue whereof we do hold ourselves straightly tied to all care of each other's good, and of the whole by every one, and so mutually."⁷ As a people covenanted with God, the Puritans had a responsibility to each other, and so to the common good. This awareness of a covenant with God informed many aspects of the Puritans' daily life. The people participated in a government with laws they believed were specified by God in the Bible. They submitted to a hierarchal structure of leadership because God had determined those roles—and the eternal destination every Puritan aimed towards. The men who were given leadership roles were given those roles because they were educated in the minute details of Puritan doctrine. The deep conviction that characterized the Puritans is precisely what enabled

⁵ It is also necessary to note that God's grace was irresistible. If you were one of the elect, there was nothing you could do about it (not that you would want to anyway).

⁶ *Ibid*, 82.

⁷ William Bradford, *Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation, 1606-1646*, ed. William T. Davis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 54-55.

them to have such a remarkably interdependent community. Sometimes, however, the Puritans' tightly knit communities could become exclusionary.

Timothy H. Breen and Stephen Foster note the importance of the Puritans' exclusivity: "The logic of the covenant determined that the towns and churches of New England would be homogenous units. Puritan villagers excluded anyone from their midst whom they believed endangered their way of life, and unwanted strangers were frequently 'warned out' when they failed to meet the community's standards."⁸ Though today the Puritans are only remembered as people who were cold and severe, there were positive effects of that severity as well. Their communities were efficiently organized and committed to improvement of self and other. And, as Perry Miller pointed out,⁹ it was unprecedented for various religious ideologies to exist alongside each other during the 17th century. It was common for dissenters to be silenced, oftentimes via persecution. To berate the Puritans for something that was the norm is unfair.

The primary effect Puritan's exclusivity was heightened social cohesion, but it did not result in widespread institutional intolerance. The various Puritan communities spread throughout colonial America were not part of an organized Puritan church. Each individual community had the authority to make decisions for itself without answering to a higher institution. The congregation was able to participate in the governing of the community, but it was uncommon for members of the congregation to deviate from the opinions of their educated clergymen. In an effort to keep the clergy from shooting off in different directions, Puritan ministers often met to discuss topics that might be problematic in their communities. These meetings, along with the general respect that communities had for their clergymen, further contributed to the communal strength of the Puritans.

⁸ Timothy H. Breen and Stephen Foster, "The Puritan's Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 1 (1973): 12-13.

⁹ Perry Miller, "The Puritan Way of Life," in *Puritanism in Early America*, ed. George M. Waller (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), 51-52.

The frequency with which communities met to worship played an important part in sustaining the community as well. Francis J. Bremer describes the typical features of a service, which took place in the same building as town meetings:

Sabbath services typically opened with an original prayer of about a quarter-hour in length. Next the pastor would read and expound on a chapter of scripture. This was followed by congregational psalm-singing and then a sermon. In at least some churches members of the congregation were initially allowed to ask questions for clarification of the message, or even to offer their own testimony...In the afternoon the congregation would gather again for a similar service, again centered on a service. All members of the community were expected to attend these services.¹⁰

It is unsurprising, then, that the Puritan communities were so tightly knit. The whole community met multiple times on the Sabbath to share in their religious zeal and members were (in at least some spaces) encouraged to improve their understanding of Puritan doctrine. Their Puritan ministers were not only highly educated, but were also devoted enough to prepare lengthy intellectual sermons and lead original prayers. Such devotion and piety was sure to inspire enormous respect among an already pious community.

Hawthorne was acutely aware of the negative effects of the single-mindedness of the Puritan community. Hawthorne's ancestors were Puritans, and his great-great grandfather participated in the Salem witch trials. Yet Hawthorne would have also been aware of the complexity of the Puritans; he was living in a time when Puritan ideals, especially those related to original sin and the importance of community, were on the decline. Situated on the cusp of various religious movements, Hawthorne explored theological and ideological questions with impressive fairness. Edward Wagenknecht demonstrates the care Hawthorne took with portraying Puritanism: "He did not idealize his ancestors; neither did he caricature them; and though he was sure they would have despised him as a frivolous story teller, he knew that 'strong traits of their nature have intertwined

¹⁰ Francis J. Bremer, "The Puritan experiment in New England, 1630-1660," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C.H. Lim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 131-132.

themselves with mine.”¹¹ Intertwined with the Puritans as his nature may have been, Hawthorne did not subscribe to their doctrine. In fact, despite his placement in history¹², he did not subscribe to any specific doctrine. That Hawthorne had a complicated relationship with his Puritan ancestry is apparent. Precisely what such a complicated relationship produced has been the topic of a wide swath of literary scholarship. However, to focus solely on Hawthorne’s treatment of Puritanism is to fix his thinking in the past; it leaves out half of the story. Hawthorne was also deeply intellectually engaged with Unitarianism and Transcendentalism; he had one foot firmly planted in his Puritan past and the other in his ever-changing present.

Unitarianism and Transcendentalism

Unitarianism emerged as a reaction to Puritanism—a reaction that emphasized the importance of applying reason to religion. Unitarians believed that people could pursue moral perfection by exercising reason. The pursuit of moral perfection resulted in a shift away from both the doctrine and the practice of Puritanism. The Unitarians openly refuted the Puritan belief in original sin and total depravity. Furthermore, the Unitarians’ focus on moral perfection placed more emphasis on individualistic goals than on communal ones. In his stories, Hawthorne highlights the tension between the tightly bound communities of the Puritans and the individual intellectuals of Unitarianism, along with the refutation of original sin and total depravity.

In a letter addressed specifically to Calvinists,¹³ Henry Ware Jr., a prominent Unitarian of Harvard, countered principles that were the pillars of Puritanism:

Man is by nature...as he comes from the hands of the Creator; innocent and pure; free from all moral corruption as well as destitute of all positive holiness...He has natural affections, all of them originally good, but liable by a wrong direction to be the occasion of error and sin.

¹¹ Edward Wagenknecht, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Man and Writer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 175.

¹² Hawthorne lived during the decline of Puritanism and the rise of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Enlightenment values were also gaining further prominence.

¹³ The letter is addressed to Trinitarians as well.

He has reason and conscience to direct the conduct of life, and enable him to choose aright... This, and not the scheme of innate moral depravity, is the truth.¹⁴

Ware's outright condemnation of Puritan theology, which he calls "the scheme of innate moral depravity," places Unitarianism directly at odds with Puritanism. The Unitarians' determination to forgo the creation of a specific doctrine required them to state what they were not. And they were not Puritans. Puritans and Unitarians differed in their claims of the very essence of humanity. While the Puritans believed that original sin and total depravity was evidence of the lowliness and wickedness of humanity, the Unitarians believed that every person was essentially good. Ware claimed that sin is not evidence of a wicked human, but of a misinformed conscience that can lead inherently good people astray. This was why it was so important to cultivate moral perfection. Every person was capable of using logic to assess themselves and the world, and thus every person was good and capable of overcoming sin. The Unitarian God was good, just, wise, and the epitome of moral perfection. The Unitarians held that God was perfectly accessible to a person willing to use reason to attain moral perfection; the Puritans held that God was perfect, and in that perfection God became completely inaccessible.

William Ellery Channing, a renowned Unitarian minister, wrote a sermon that briefly described the problem of accessibility within Puritanism. He claimed, "They [the Puritans] take from us our Father in heaven, and substitute him for a being, whom we cannot love if we would, and whom we ought not to love if we could... But we ask our opponents to leave to us a God, worthy of our love and trust, in whom our moral sentiments may delight, in whom our weaknesses and sorrows may find refuge."¹⁵ The Unitarians believed that God must be good, because it was illogical

¹⁴ Henry Ware Jr., "Letters Addressed to Trinitarians and Calvinists," in *American Religious Thought of the 18th and 19th Centuries*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 20-21.

¹⁵ William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity" in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 72-74.

for a deity to act in ways that separated it from its own creations. There could be no reasonable purpose for a wrathful, unforgiving God to exist.

The Puritans' ability to submit to a God that seemed irrational to others only further strengthened the bonds in Puritan communities. However, this was not the case for Unitarianism. Unitarians held that human reason must be applied to God and to the scriptures. Channing wrote about the Unitarian commitment to the rational exploration of God:

The Scriptures demand the exercise of reason...From a variety of possible interpretations, we select that which accords with the nature of the subject and the state of the writer, with the connection of the passage, with the general strain of Scripture, with the known character and will of God, and with the obvious and acknowledged laws of nature...If reason be so dreadfully darkened by the fall...then Christianity...must be abandoned; for the existence and veracity of God, and the Divine original of Christianity, are conclusions of reason, and must stand or fall with it...Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but do so at our peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings.¹⁶

The Unitarians believed that God created humans highly rational, and God's choice to create such beings necessitated the exercise of reason. If original sin stained human judgment completely, then the God who created such a damning system was not worth worshipping.

Despite the importance of reason in Unitarianism, it was hardly the sole tenet of the religion. The Unitarians were determined to hold reason in balance with experiencing powerful affections. It was necessary for Unitarians to cultivate their emotions alongside their intellect in order to experience God fully. An alert, rational nature allowed humans to carefully evaluate the words and teachings God had already left behind; a richly developed emotional nature enabled humans to experience God in ways that had not been written down. However, both of these factors made Unitarianism a more individualistic endeavor than Puritanism. Daniel Walker Howe describes the importance of the self in Unitarianism: "Spiritual advancement was dependent upon men's own efforts...unless one was careful to stimulate the virtuous affections, one would be in danger of

¹⁶ Ibid, 23-28.

falling prey to bad habits and spiritual deadness...For one who achieved refined moral taste, sin would have no further appeal.”¹⁷ Because the cultivation of both the emotions and moral sense were things that needed to be done within the self, Unitarianism was much less dependent on a community. Every person had already been endowed with the ability to become a good Unitarian. The only thing standing in the way was each person’s own convictions.

Hawthorne was exposed to an offshoot of Unitarianism with which most people are familiar: Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalist movement emerged as an outgrowth of Unitarianism; Transcendentalists sought to intensify the religious experience of Unitarianism, with a special emphasis on nature. Of the relationship between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, David Robinson writes: “Almost every principle aspect of Transcendentalist discourse and activity—a mystical emphasis on religious experience, and ethical stress on the cultivation of moral character...a growing aesthetic-spiritual sensibility—can be found in inchoate or even mature form in...Unitarianism.”¹⁸ And if the Unitarians had succeeded in doing away with most dogma, their Transcendentalist successors accomplished the task tenfold. Transcendentalism was an attempt to experience the divine on one’s own terms. There was no dogma, no hierarchy to consult, no text to turn towards. The Transcendental experiment encouraged people to find the divine, to experience it deeply and without confines. One of the most notable Unitarians-turned-Transcendentalists was Ralph Waldo Emerson, a neighbor and contemporary of Hawthorne’s. Hawthorne lived in Concord amongst figures like Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller.¹⁹ Surrounded by Unitarian and Transcendentalist sentiments, it is surprising (but also telling) that Hawthorne was as skeptical of these new religious ideals as he was of Puritanism. Despite pressure from his Unitarian and

¹⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 155.

¹⁸ David Robinson, “The Road Not Taken: From Edwards to Chauncy, to Emerson,” *Arizona Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1992): 56.

¹⁹ William Ellery Channing was also a frequent guest.

Transcendentalist contemporaries, Hawthorne maintained a distance from most religious ideologies.

The Unitarians' combined refutation of original sin and individualistic methods produced a different avenue of understanding sin than the Puritan understanding. If original sin and total depravity were untrue, and religion was largely dependent on a person's own efforts, then sin was not predetermined. Sin was personal responsibility and a product of indulgence of evil affections. Just as with the wholesome affections, the evil affections could be done away with through the careful development of spiritual life. After cultivating one's moral sensibilities, the Unitarians believed that sin would no longer appeal to a person. These clashes between Unitarianism and Puritanism (personal responsibility or original sin²⁰, individualism or collectivism) were the issues that Nathaniel Hawthorne sought to explore and complicate in his work. His hesitancy to commit to a specific religious code enabled him to create works of stunning complexity. Puritanism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism were all unsatisfactory to Hawthorne; because of this, his work cuts beneath the categorizations to reach for truth. This truth, like Hawthorne's short stories, is multivalent and defies strict classification.

Deconstructing the Binaries

While the tensions between Puritanism and Unitarianism better enable us to categorize their cultures—and trace their influences in Hawthorne's short stories—dividing those tensions into binaries can be misleading. Despite its strong communal ties, Puritanism also fostered a sense of personal responsibility. Similarly, the Unitarian emphasis on an individual's personal responsibility to cultivate morality could easily become an intense pressure to attain moral perfection. It is necessary to examine Puritans and Unitarians similarities as well, rather than merely categorizing the Puritans and Unitarians by oppositional traits. By more closely examining their seemingly binary attributes,

²⁰ Both personal responsibility and original sin were Augustinian concepts, despite their seemingly oppositional definitions.

readers will be better able to engage with the Puritans and Unitarians as Hawthorne does: free of essentialism.

In “From Jonathan Edwards to Emerson,” Perry Miller claims that Transcendentalists could trace their roots back to Puritans—not only historically, but spiritually. The Puritans were not only Congregationalists; they had strains of individualism and personal responsibility in their theology as well. Miller writes,

There was in Puritanism a piety, a religious passion, the sense of an inward communication and of the divine symbolism of nature....But in Puritanism there was also another side, an ideal of social conformity, of law and order, of regulation and control. At the core of the theology there was an indestructible element which was mystical...but there was also a social code demanding obedience to external law....It taught men that God is present to their intuitions and in the beauty and terror of nature, but it disciplined them into subjecting their intuitions to the wisdom of society and their impressions of nature to the standards of decorum.²¹

It is unsurprising that the Puritans were caricatured and stereotyped as they were. The Puritans’ focus on doctrine and social order was what people could see; in order to see their intense religious devotion and intuitions one would need to study or live during the 19th century. As the years wore on, the Puritans’ religious realities were lost, while their legalistic social realities were remembered. Miller’s claim that the Puritans shared a mystical, religious zeal with their Transcendentalist descendants breaks down the neat, simplistic, and all too pervasive characterizations of Puritan doctrine and culture.

Miller does not skip over the importance of Unitarianism in his essay. Instead, he critiques the Unitarians in a way that some scholars do not. Unlike those who asserted that Unitarianism—while milder than Transcendentalism—allowed people to throw off the legalistic doctrines of Puritanism, Miller claims that Unitarianism lost their passion along the way. The Harvard elite institutionalized Unitarianism, stripping away the Puritan sense of religious fervor and communal

²¹ Perry Miller, “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson,” *The New England Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1940): 599-600.

governance. Miller described the Unitarians as cold and stiff: “The code of caution and sobriety...would serve quite as well as the old doctrines of original sin and divine transcendence to prevent mankind from reeling and staggering in freedom.”²² Rather than claiming that Unitarianism was a step forward, out of the dark ages of original sin and total depravity, Miller claimed that Unitarianism was a step back. The Unitarians’ focus on careful cultivation of the affections, paired with its institutionalization, resulted in a religion that was bereft of the passion shared by Puritans and Transcendentalists. Unitarianism, individualistic and positive though it may have been, had its darker aspects as well. “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “The Maypole of Merry Mount” each demonstrate Hawthorne’s ability to cut beneath doctrine with narrative.

Hawthorne’s short stories reach for an essential truth that transcends the doctrinal and cultural categories of Puritanism and Unitarianism. His seemingly ambivalent stance on the religious ideologies of his time is more than an unwillingness to commit to a religion. By exploring the experience of sin, Hawthorne taps into truth that doctrine is unable to pin down. Paul Ricoeur details the symbolic realities of narrative as they relate to the concept original sin:

We begin to glimpse the *symbolic function* of original sin....This function is the same as that of the story of the Fall, which is situated not at the level of concepts but at that of mythical images....This story expresses...the unexpressed basis of human experience—which is inexpressible in direct and clear language....Something is discovered, unconcealed, which, without myth, would have remained covered, concealed.²³

Though it goes by other names (storytelling and myth), narrative becomes a tangible explanation for the intangible: the movements of the human heart. Narrative explores the essence of human experience before it is hardened by doctrine—though Ricoeur recognized the importance of doctrine as well. Both narrative and doctrine mediate truth; doctrine mediates truth by enclosing its essence within established parameters, while narrative explores the truth that exists in and beyond

²² Ibid, 607.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, “‘Original Sin’: A Study in Meaning,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1974), 283-284.

those parameters. As a storyteller, a creator of narrative, Hawthorne is exploring the essence of sin through undiluted experience. The symbolic function of original sin, reconfigured in the Fall, is an important theme in Hawthorne's work. The experience of falling, in the Adamic sense, is directly tied to the experience of original sin that, in turn, is tied to lived cultural experiences like individualism and collectivism. A master of narrative, Hawthorne uses the theme of the Fall to undercut the categorization of experience in which doctrine implicitly participates.

Melvin W. Askew has posited that, in Hawthorne's work, the Fall is a purely psychological experience rather than a theological one. Askew places Hawthorne's short stories firmly in the human sphere; he denies that the stories have a substantial connection to the theological or spiritual. Askew asserts, "His [Hawthorne] vision...both of man and his fall, stopped sharply on this side of eternity. Pre-eminently, then, the fall is intimate and personal, and its ramifications in are worked out in the personal life-experience and existence of the fallen. And its greatest significance is the influence it exerts in the conduct and quality of...individual life."²⁴ Though he briefly acknowledges the correlation of the Fall to the short stories, Askew does not call attention to the relationship between human experience and theology (which is, in turn, tied to psychology). Askew is correct to say, "Hawthorne's characters...do not fall from God's grace, or into a theologically conceived hell or heaven....They fall, rather, into the worldly, humanistic, and realistic equivalent of these...they fall into inhumanity or humanity."²⁵ However, the symbolic function of narrative places Hawthorne's work in both the theological and human realm; they are necessarily interconnected. The experience of sin and its repercussions—such as becoming ostracized from the community—is a deeply human, psychological experience. By suggesting that the psychological should be removed from the theological, Askew minimizes rather than strengthens the power of the short stories.

²⁴ Melvin W. Askew, "Hawthorne, the Fall, and the Psychology of Maturity," in *Critical Insights: Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Jack Lynch (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2010), 232.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 239.

“*Young Goodman Brown*”

Dawn Coleman has written a cogent critique of the literary criticism surrounding Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Coleman claims that the novel is a reframing of the renowned Unitarian minister, John Emery Abbot. She makes a pointed statement about current Hawthorne scholarship: “The absence of Abbot’s name...is symptomatic of a pervasive reluctance to see Hawthorne as actively engaged with his Unitarian context...Unitarian origins help explain the attraction to human goodness that eddies through Hawthorne’s writing, pulling like an undertow against his gloomy Puritans.”²⁶ Coleman’s careful attention to the Unitarian influences on Hawthorne’s writing, as well as its tension with the Puritan worldview, is laudable. Coleman does not, however, pinpoint the specific values of either Unitarianism or Puritanism. Instead, she labels them as uplifting and gloomy, respectively. However, to fully understand the way that Hawthorne is using literature to explore the character of sin and human goodness, it is necessary to more carefully apply the values of both Unitarianism and Puritanism to his writing.

“*Young Goodman Brown*” is one of Hawthorne’s earlier explorations of Puritanism. *Young Goodman Brown* leaves his wife, Faith²⁷, at home while he wanders into the forest one night. There he meets his guide, an older man who bears striking resemblance to *Goodman Brown*—and to the devil. As they walk through the forest, *Goodman Brown* sees people from the town he had previously believed to be of upstanding faith, only to find that they, too, meet the devil after dark. After his foray during the night—where he experiences a satanic baptism and the full weight of sin—*Goodman Brown* returns to the town the next day. He is unable to see the good in others, and when he passes away years later, the narrator tells us that he died as he lived: in gloom.

Until his wanderings in the forest, *Goodman Brown* had been convinced that his ancestors

²⁶ Dawn Coleman, “Critiquing Perfection: Hawthorne’s revision of Salem’s Unitarian saint,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 37, no. 1 (2011): 1.

²⁷ The significance of Faith’s name, while obvious, cannot be overstated.

were essentially good, and were probably among God's elect. As the Devil leads into the forest, Goodman Brown exclaims: "My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians...and shall I be the first by the name of Brown that ever took this path and kept—"”²⁸ Up to this point in his life, Goodman Brown has believed that his family was honest and pure. He cannot imagine his father speaking with the devil as he is. But, to his horror, the devil replies:

I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans...I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly...it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot...to set fire to an Indian village, in King Phillip's war. They were my good friends both; and many a pleasant walk we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight.²⁹

The devil reveals to Goodman Brown that his family was not as righteous as he had thought. Such knowledge throws Goodman Brown into doubt about his presumptions. Rather than resting with the comforting assurance that he and his family were among the elect, Goodman Brown considers an alternative. Goodman Brown, despite his union with Faith, may be damned to hell anyway. This realization, coupled with his encounters with other respectable townspeople, drive Goodman Brown to desperation. He calls out for Faith, and her name echoes through the trees, leaving the young man alone to dwell on his newfound terror.

As he reflects on the wretchedness of humanity, Goodman Brown approaches a large clearing with an altar at the center. The devil is at the head of this perverse altar, and every member of the town surrounds him. Once Goodman Brown has concluded the wickedness of humanity, he succumbs to his diabolical guide: "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, Devil; for to thee this world is given."³⁰ His awareness of the sins of others has extended outward; initially

²⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown and Other Tales*, ed. Brian Harding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 113.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

confined to those specific people he saw in the forest, his awareness now encompasses the entire town. The upright citizens mingle with those who have been accused of great crimes, and the devil converts them all. In a horrifying pantomime of a church service, the devil tells his new congregants, “Now ye are undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness. Welcome again, my children, to the communion of your race.”³¹ Ultimately, the reader is sure of only a few facts; Goodman Brown’s adventure did not actually happen, but his life was severely affected by whatever kind of hallucination, dream, or interior musing it may have been.

A significant amount of scholarship exists on “Young Goodman Brown,” it offers no consensus. Some have claimed that the short story is a satiric depiction of Puritan guilt, while others argue that it is an even-handed—even sympathetic—evaluation of Puritanism. Initially, the story seems to align with Unitarian critiques of Puritanism. Goodman Brown, a young Puritan entirely assured of his own blessedness, clings to his religion without much conviction or deep emotional awareness of the divine. As he steals away into the forest Goodman Brown thinks of his wife, Faith, and says: “What a wretch am I to leave her on such an errand.... Methought as she spoke, there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done to-night.... Well, she’s a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven.”³² Foolish Goodman Brown clings to what seems to be an inauthentic, hollow version of religion. He thinks that he can venture into the forest (which he knows is a poor decision), play with the devil for the night, and return to that shell of religion in the morning. All the while, he believes he will be protected: a subtle allusion to the Puritan elect. Then, when confronted with the possibility of his own damnation and the stain of original sin, he becomes obsessed with it. When he comes back to town the next day, he shrinks back from everyone. The world seems dark, and all Goodman Brown

³¹ Ibid, 122.

³² Ibid, 111.

can see is sin. But perhaps the most meaningful thing he shrinks from is Faith. As she runs to him, the very image of joy, the narrator tells readers,

Goodman Brown looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting....A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful...man did he become....When the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen, because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain....Often, awaking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith; and at morning or eventide, when the family knelt down to prayer, he scowled, and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away. And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave...they carved no hopeful verse upon his tomb, for his dying hour was gloom.³³

Goodman Brown becomes that stereotypical image of the gloomy Puritan: so preoccupied with sin that he is blind to the joys of life, stern, solemn, and hopeless until the end of his days. Both his arrogance early in the story and his all-consuming gloom at the end are caricatures of Puritans put forth by the Unitarians.³⁴ However, the story is not a simplistic endorsement of Unitarianism over Puritanism. The story is, like many other pieces of Hawthorne's writing, an exploration of the ramifications of the Fall. When others like Goodman Brown are confronted with the reality of sin, how are they (and we) to respond? Hawthorne provides an ending that suggests that neither Puritanism nor Unitarianism has the capability to give a wholly satisfactory response.

In *The Province of Piety*, Michael Colacurcio has done justice to the theological complexity of Hawthorne's work. Like many others, Colacurcio locates Goodman Brown's tale within the context of Puritanism. He argues that Goodman Brown is representative of many third generation Puritans, for whom doubt was beginning to come to the forefront.³⁵ He writes of Goodman Brown, "He ends by doubting the existence of any unblighted goodness but his own....He clings to the knowledge that he, at least, resisted the wicked one's final invitation to diabolical communion; accordingly, the lurid satisfactions of Satan's anti-covenant are not available to him. But neither are the sweet delights

³³ Ibid, 123-124.

³⁴ Though the Unitarians were not solely responsible for these caricatures.

³⁵ This doubt was coming to the forefront for many reasons, which I will not list exhaustively here. Though I find them compelling, they are largely tangential to my overall points.

of the Communion of Saints....he cannot make his faith in Faith prevail.”³⁶ As he swings from the easy arrogance of an elect Puritan to a gloomy witness of the townspeople’s dark side, Colacurcio argues that the only thing Goodman Brown maintains is his own sense of moral superiority. However, to suggest that Goodman Brown manages to maintain the arrogance he possessed when he entered the forest minimizes the depth of his transformation.

Certainly, Goodman Brown’s steadfast belief in his own holiness at the beginning of the story isn’t how the reader wants him to end his journey. His transformation comes about because he fails to fulfill a Puritan standard of goodness. He enters the forest as a shell of a Puritan. He exits as a man devoid of all the positive hallmarks of Puritanism and riddled with all the negative attributes that were ascribed to Puritanism. Goodman Brown becomes detached from the Puritan community and is convinced of the sinfulness of all the townspeople. He sees them in the forest and believes that every person is touched by the darkness that originated with Adam and Eve. Colacurcio correctly identifies Goodman Brown’s fear of the townspeople as a result of his conviction that he has not sinned (in the forest, at least). However, that fear of the sins of others makes Goodman Brown a Puritan in the worst and most inauthentic way. His conviction that others have sinned separates him from the community. By excluding himself from the community of sinners in the forest, Goodman Brown effectively ostracizes himself from the community members in the daylight. Obsessed with the sins of others and independent of the joys of the community, the real tragedy of the short story is not that Goodman Brown is a Puritan; it is that Goodman Brown becomes a bad Puritan.

Both “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister’s Black Veil” delve into the depths of the Puritan psyche. At the core of those depths lies something more than a scathing critique of the evils of Puritanism. The endings of the two short stories mourn the loss of the true essence of

³⁶ Michael J. Colacurcio, *The Province of Piety* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 302.

Puritanism, while also suggesting that the rising values of Unitarianism may not be a suitable response.

“The Minister’s Black Veil”

In “The Minister’s Black Veil,” readers are introduced to Parson Hooper after his transformation from a mild mannered reverend to a harbinger of doom. The story opens with the congregation waiting for Parson Hooper to enter the church and deliver his Sabbath day sermon. To their horror, when he does approach the pulpit, a black veil obscures his face. Hooper delivers a sermon that is quite out of character: it makes the congregants tremble with fear, as if each person’s darkest sins and secrets were exposed for all to see. The congregation spends the rest of their day trying to discern the exact reason their reverend has donned the veil. Though they are unable to come to a satisfactory answer, they begin to spread rumors about the veil. Their once loved reverend becomes separated from the community and from the joys of life. He never once removes the veil or allows another person to see beneath it. Like Goodman Brown, Parson Hooper dies in gloom. He is buried deep in the earth, and his body decomposes and disappears while his black veil remains untouched.

There have been a number of interpretations that sought to penetrate the mystery of Hooper’s black veil. However, Robert E. Morsberger and Elaine Barry (among others) have helpfully suggested that the reader’s attention be turned away from the veil. Though the veil itself is important, to continually argue in circles about its specific meaning is to fall into the same pattern of absurdity as Hooper’s congregants. Instead, our attention should be turned to the effects of Hooper’s veil on Hawthorne’s theological discourse. When Hooper enters the church, the narrator describes the veil: “On a nearer view, it seemed to consist of two folds of crape, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but probably did not intercept his sight,

further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things.”³⁷ Like Goodman Brown, Parson Hooper sees the world through a darker lens. Burdened physically by some unnamed sin, Hooper stands apart from the light. However, unlike Goodman Brown, the fault does not lie entirely with Hooper.

Barry has demonstrated the importance of community in Hooper’s tale. She claims,

Hawthorne intended the moral scrutiny of his story to be directed as much towards the attitudes of the other characters as toward Mr. Hooper’s is suggested by the very structure of the tale. In the opening tableau the camera pans, as it were, a cross-section of the congregation...before it focuses on the entry of Mr. Hooper....The narrative is carefully modulated between dramatic incidents involving Mr. Hooper’s veil and accounts of the reactions of the congregation to it.³⁸

Barry’s analysis points to a shared responsibility for sin within the community. She reads Hooper’s actions as largely blameless, while the actions of the congregations are to blame for Hooper’s lifelong isolation. It is true that the narrator describes Hooper as gentle, even saddened, at the way the congregation continues to avoid him while he bears the veil. The narrator tells the reader, “It was remarkable that...not one ventured to put the plain question to Mr. Hooper, wherefore he did this thing. Hitherto, whenever there appeared to be the slightest call for such interference, he had never lacked advisers, nor shown himself averse to be guided by their judgment....There was a feeling of dread...which caused each to shift the responsibility upon another.”³⁹ Before the veil, congregants had no fears about questioning their gentle reverend. After its appearance, however, nobody was willing to accept responsibility. The very fact that “responsibility” is mentioned at all implies that Hooper and his congregation have an interdependent relationship.

When one person does attempt to lift the veil (literally and figuratively) from Hooper’s gloomy visage, she is rebuffed instantly and mercilessly. Elizabeth, Hooper’s fiancée, tries to call her

³⁷ Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown*, 145.

³⁸ Elaine Barry, “Beyond the Veil: A Reading of Hawthorne’s ‘The Minister’s Black Veil,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 (1980): 16.

³⁹ Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown*, 150.

future husband out of his dark reveries. He responds, “I am bound to wear it ever, both in light and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes, and as with strangers, so with my familiar friends....This dismal shade must separate me from the world: even you, Elizabeth, can never come behind it!”⁴⁰ With this rebuttal, Elizabeth and Hooper’s relationship falls apart, and she does not speak to him again until he is on his deathbed. Barry’s claim that Hooper is blameless doesn’t hold water, given the language of responsibility that Hawthorne employs. Both Hooper and his congregation are responsible for his utterly dismal alienation. The residents of Milford refuse to put the question to Hooper, and when someone does venture to try, Hooper refuses to share his burden with the community. Hooper’s isolation, though at least partially self-inflicted, resonates more strongly with the reader than Goodman Brown’s morally questionable separation. While Goodman Brown’s gloomy concern was for the weight of sin that weighed on everyone except himself, Hooper’s dismal musings are all encompassing. Hooper’s last words show a less arrogant awareness of original sin than Goodman Brown. He exclaims, “Why do you tremble at me alone? Tremble also at each other! Then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!”⁴¹

“The Minister’s Black Veil” was written after “Young Goodman Brown,” and reveals Hawthorne’s increasing attention to the problems associated with Puritanism and Unitarianism. Goodman Brown’s tale has more to do with the shortcomings and pitfalls of Puritanism; in his arrogance he becomes the caricature of Puritanism depicted by the Unitarians. Yet, Goodman Brown’s arrogance stems from what he thinks is a more profound knowledge of the world than the other townspeople. This belief in his own knowledge, coupled with his cold and individualistic separation from the community, seems to critique Unitarian values as strongly as it does Puritan

⁴⁰ Ibid, 152.

⁴¹ Ibid, 157.

ideals. This tension is drawn out more visibly in “The Minister’s Black Veil.” Again, a character is burdened with knowledge of sin and the divine that sets him apart from the rest of the community. In the case of Parson Hooper, the community is more fully indicted in the estrangement, but neither party is entirely at fault. Each story is critical of the idea that knowledge alone can be the way to salvation. The knowledge of sin and the burden that accompanies that knowledge cannot become an individualistic enterprise. It is a weight that needs to be borne by the community as a whole so that no single person is crushed by it. In this way, Hawthorne blurs the line between Puritan and Unitarian ideals, critiquing each in equal measure.⁴² Goodman Brown and Parson Hooper are two cases in which the values of Puritanism and Unitarianism fail to integrate successfully. In “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” Hawthorne provides a set of characters that are able to hold seemingly oppositional values together in harmony.

“The Maypole of Merry Mount”

Of the three short stories I examine in this paper, “The Maypole of Merry Mount” appears the most dichotomous. The scene opens on a “pagan” celebration, which is centered around the maypole. An air of carefree, wild jollity permeates the pagans’ surroundings: they are celebrating a wedding. The Lord and Lady of May, Edgar and Edith, are bound together by a pure love; the reader knows its purity because it is put to the test just moments after the marriage takes place. Disturbed by the joyful shrieks coming from the forest, the Puritans decide to put an end to the festivities. As the sun sets, the Puritans rush in to deliver holy justice. They cut down the maypole and discuss the lashes they will give to each of the pagans, starting with Edgar and Edith. When each spouse offers to suffer enough lashes for the other, the leader of the Puritans is softened by their love. Edgar and Edith go to live with the Puritans, and lead happy lives until their deaths.

Though the action of the story is sparse in comparison with some of Hawthorne’s other

⁴² Though the critique of Puritanism is the most visible and easy to identify.

short stories, “The Maypole of Merry Mount” is filled with direct commentary on the Puritan history that is absent in Hawthorne’s other stories. There is no disputing that the narrator holds a highly unfavorable opinion for the Puritans. The narrator describes them: “Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, most dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight....Their weapons were always at hand....Their festivals were fast-days, and their chief pastime was the singing of psalms. Woe to the youth or maiden who did but dream of a dance!”⁴³ Yet, despite the narrator’s biased commentary, the ending of the story remains an objective representation of the Puritans’ actions. The change in Edgar and Edith is described as a positive one, and the couple even foreshadows the change prior to the Puritans’ appearance. The purposeful division between the pagans and Puritans, between light and dark, between joy and judgment, is too well structured. To read the story according to this rigid structure denies the subtext revealed in the characters of Edgar and Edith. The Lord and Lady of May resist categorization, and in that resistance they also muddle the boundaries between the categories.

After they have been married by the pagan priest, Edith conveys a sense of hesitancy to her new husband: “I struggle as with a dream, and fancy that these shapes of our jovial friends are visionary, and their mirth unreal, and that we are no true Lord and Lady of the May. What is the mystery in my heart?”⁴⁴ Edgar agrees with his wife, each sensing an intangible feeling of wrongness. It is unsurprising, then, that the couple chooses to go with the Puritans of their own volition. They do so, however, with a somber acknowledgement that neither choice offered by the dichotomy is wholly satisfactory. The last lines of Edgar and Edith’s tale suggest that they occupy a grey area. The narrator says, “They went heavenward, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was

⁴³ Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown*, 138.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 136.

their lot to tread, and never wasted one regretful thought on the vanities of Merry Mount.”⁴⁵ The text defines Puritanism as a difficult path, but not an unbearable one. In fact, the closing lines imply that the Puritans were a hard people, but that hardness was preferable to the vain frivolity of the pagans. Had they stayed amongst the revelers, Edgar and Edith would not have ventured heavenward.

Colacurcio takes note of Edgar and Edith’s resistance to categorization as well. He writes, “Edith and Edgar represent a . . . moral ‘third’ . . . In fact, Edith and Edgar have their very own symbol, itself a distinct third . . . The Revellers have their maypole, Endicott his iron . . . and the lovers their ‘flowery garland.’”⁴⁶ While “The Maypole of Merry Mount” uses pagans and Puritans as oppositional forces, the very fact that the main characters inhabit a third category indicates Hawthorne’s willingness to blur the lines. Edgar and Edith do not move from paganism to Puritanism neatly. They retain vestiges of their pagan days, including the love they were celebrating when the Puritans arrived. However, they also take on attributes of the Puritans, abandoning the vain pleasures of the pagans in order to move heavenward. In addition to the change in Edgar and Edith, the leader of the Puritans is also changed by the encounter. Edgar and Edith render the leader, Endicott, the “Puritan of the Puritans,” compassionate. The narrator briefly portrays the change in Endicott: “Yet the deepening twilight could not altogether conceal that the iron man was softened; he smiled at the fair spectacle of early love.”⁴⁷ Edgar and Edith, occupants of the middle ground, suggest that the choice between pagan and Puritan is not simple. In fact, it is less of a choice, and more of a shift between experiences. Each phase has its own merits, and the best Edgar and Edith can do is to maintain their memories of the first phase while journeying through the second.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 144.

⁴⁶ Colacurcio, *The Province of Piety*, 257.

⁴⁷ Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown*, 143.

The Fall and Acquisition of Knowledge

All three of the short stories connect the narrative of the Fall to acquiring knowledge. Of course, this is a common lesson to draw from the story of the Fall. In “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister’s Black Veil,” the acquisition of knowledge is likened to the experience of original sin. Margarita Georgiva details the theological ramifications of the acquisition of knowledge: “The original sin of the first human beings was knowledge....Evil formed the darker, burdensome, hidden part of humanity’s complex identity which was to be revealed only through man’s direct relationship with God.”⁴⁸ Goodman Brown acquires the hidden knowledge of the townspeople’s sins; this knowledge throws him into the doubt that characterizes his rest of his life. Knowing causes Goodman Brown to *fall* into uncertainty; the knowledge that he consciously chooses to attain is the very knowledge that leaves him on the outskirts of the community for his entire life. Goodman Brown abdicates himself of personal responsibility—he doesn’t think he has sinned—but will not take part in communal responsibility either. In this case, knowledge results in a withdrawal into the self. Knowledge makes Goodman Brown a poor imitation of a Puritan.

Parson Hooper struggles with the burden of secret knowledge as well. The day he dons the veil, his sermon is about secret knowledge, and it terrifies the congregation. The narrator tells readers: “The subject had reference to secret sin, and those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal them from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them....Each member of the congregation...felt as if the preacher had crept upon them...and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought.”⁴⁹ Though I have said that the veil’s significance is slight in comparison to the community’s response, in this instance their significance unites. Hooper’s veil implies that he has some secret knowledge; the narrator also

⁴⁸ Margarita Georgiva, “The Burden of Secret Sin,” in *Critical Insights: Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Jack Lynch (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2010), 56.

⁴⁹ Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown*, 146.

alludes to this. Hooper's acquisition of knowledge—though it happens before the short story begins—has a similar effect to Goodman Brown's. Hooper, too, becomes separated from the community. It is easier to sympathize with Hooper, however, since he recognizes his own sinfulness when Goodman Brown cannot. Just as Goodman Brown falls from the acquisition of knowledge, so too does Parson Hooper. Each live out their days in lonely solitude.

The similarities between Goodman Brown and Hooper contrast sharply to Edgar and Edith in “The Maypole of Merry Mount.” While all four characters acquire knowledge and subsequently fall—just as Adam and Eve eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—Edgar and Edith's end is distinct from Goodman Brown and Hooper's. The scene of the pagan revelry suggests that Edgar and Edith are in a kind of Eden. When the Puritans encroach on the festivities, Edgar and Edith have already begun to suspect that their celebrations at Merry Mount are merely “visionary.” Unlike Goodman Brown and Hooper, though, Edgar and Edith are not preoccupied with the acquisition of knowledge or its ties to sin. Their knowledge, foreshadowed by Edith's uncertainty, comes in the form of doctrinally-minded Puritans. Edgar and Edith's shift from innocence to experience (or acquiring knowledge) leads them from ignorance to maturation. “The Maypole of Merry Mount” uses the narrative of the Fall to rewrite it.

Intertextual Comparisons

Edgar and Edith succeed where Goodman Brown and Hooper fail: they integrate into a new community rather than alienating themselves. When the Puritans march in, the Lord and Lady of May stand on the edge of a precipice. As they are thrust out of the pagan community, the couple keeps each other close and learns to lead a new life. Their new life is guided by new values, but they don't abandon their memories of Merry Mount. The text tells readers: “They returned to it [Merry Mount] no more. But, as their flowery garland was wreathed of the brightest roses that had grown

there, so, in the tie that united them, were intertwined all the purest and best of their early joys.”⁵⁰

Edgar and Edith’s ability to reenter the community enables them to live full lives, even if the environment is more somber than Merry Mount. Conversely, Goodman Brown and Hooper’s lives are filled with gloom because they—for similar reasons—are unable to rejoin the community after they are separated from it.

All of the characters experience something akin to the first falling of Adam and Eve. Goodman Brown faces the reality of sin in the forest, Hooper confronts it from behind his veil, and Edgar and Edith are torn from a state of innocence in a place that bears striking resemblance to the Garden of Eden. Even as Hawthorne’s short stories advocate for the strong communal bonds of Puritan communities, the stories remain critical of original sin. Goodman Brown and Hooper are tormented by original sin; it taints their lives so much that they are alienated from the community and from the possibility of love. Edgar and Edith, however, are not tormented by original sin because Hawthorne uses the couple to reframe our understanding of original sin. The Lord and Lady of May move from a state of naiveté at Merry Mount to a state of deeper knowledge and solemnity among the Puritans. Their sins don’t follow their children and their grandchildren, producing Goodman Browns and Parson Hoopers evermore. Instead, Edgar and Edith ascend because of the knowledge and compassion that the Puritans provide. The third category is a conglomeration of values, old and new.

Hawthorne’s creation of a third category demonstrates a refusal to embrace dichotomy; this refusal to categorize is the cause of the infamous “ambiguity” that colors his writing. Goodman Brown and Hooper illustrate everything that is wrong with Puritanism, but they also show what is

⁵⁰ Ibid, 143-144.

wrong with Unitarianism.⁵¹ The Puritans' concern with original sin drives human beings to gloom in "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil." When Goodman Brown and Hooper grapple with their gloom, they do so in a distinctly Unitarian fashion. Each character becomes highly individualistic, focusing all his energy on the inner self. Hooper physically separates himself from the congregation, cutting himself off to confront his failures behind a veil. Goodman Brown does much of the same, although he does so without a veil.

The third category suggests that the human experience cannot be contained in doctrine. Original sin, reified in the Puritan doctrine, is incapable of grasping the experience in the way that the narrative of the fall does. Only narrative can hope to give voice to the intangible experience of sin, the shift from innocence to experience. Hawthorne employs the theme of the Fall because he, too, is exploring the intangible through his short stories. Goodman Brown and Hooper go through the experiences that are brought about by both Puritanism and Unitarianism; they feel what it is to be connected to a world of sinners, but they also feel what it is to be personally responsible for their actions. Goodman Brown is tied to darkness like his family before him, and Hooper wears a veil that he chooses to wear because of his own actions. Goodman Brown and Hooper feel the dark loneliness that comes from individualism (self-imposed or otherwise); Edgar and Edith feel much of the same, even among the pagan revelers. Only Edgar and Edith come to know the peace that comes with communal bonds. What, then, is Hawthorne positing about the human experience in relation to sin and doctrine?

By utilizing narrative, Hawthorne effectively demonstrates the transcendence of the third category. Infamous as it is, Hawthorne's ambiguity is the ultimate form of genius. It is perhaps the only way to navigate Puritanism and Unitarianism, or any other doctrine. Ricoeur succinctly

⁵¹ In case the oppositional values aren't fresh in your mind—Puritans believed in original sin (and total depravity), but had very tightly knit communities. Unitarians refuted the doctrine of original sin and emphasized a more individualist approach to religion.

describes the relationship between ambiguity and myth: “Thus an anthropology of ambiguity issues from the myth; henceforth the greatness and the guilt of man are inextricably mingled, so that it is impossible to say: here is the primordial man.”⁵² Narrative expresses the interconnectedness of the human experience, and therefore transcends the divisive doctrine that categorizes experience. This is why Melville claimed that only the human heart could test Hawthorne; doctrine, whether it is Puritan, Unitarian, or something else entirely, is the intellectual processing of narrative. Doctrine cannot reach the truth of experience. It cannot grasp the stain of sin; it cannot replicate the loneliness of individualism—only the heart can do that. Only the heart can experience light and darkness in equal measure. In “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” Hawthorne reminds us that Puritanism is more than a blackness ten times black. Unitarianism is more than summer sunlight. And, in order for us to earnestly examine either, we must respond with and our hearts.

Further Research

There is still work to be done on Hawthorne’s work. My analysis of “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “The Maypole of Merry Mount” could be extended to Hawthorne’s other short stories, or even to his novels. During the writing process, I had to drop one of the tensions between Puritanism and Unitarianism to make space for more in depth analysis. This abandoned tension between shame and guilt could be yet another way to examine how narrative subverts cultural categorizations. Furthermore, the relationship between original sin, personal responsibility, freedom, and bondage all feature in the work of St. Augustine. Not only was Hawthorne aware of Puritanism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism, but he was also aware of Catholicism—informed by Augustine—after spending time in Rome. In the future, it would be fruitful to explore Augustinian theology in relation to Hawthorne’s work. Additionally, there is

⁵² Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 247.

enormous significance on location in the three short stories I have discussed here (as well as Hawthorne's other works).⁵³ While Transcendentalism held that God could be found in nature, many of the characters in the short stories have negative experiences in the forest. Goodman Brown doesn't find God in the forest; instead he meets the devil there. The juxtaposition of the forest (a Puritan symbol of a religious journey, but also a symbol of Transcendental ecstasy) and the "civilized" town would be another avenue for exploring Hawthorne's literature.

⁵³ Credit for this idea goes to Dr. Stewart, who has been a significant help to me during draft critiques. I also owe an abundance of thanks to my advisor, Dr. Mahn, for working on this project for nearly an entire year; even though he vanished into the wifi-less mountains for five weeks he was still the best advisor I could have hoped to work with. Thank you to my second reader, Dr. Crowe, for offering insightful comments on multiple drafts and teaching me how to write effective literary criticism (and teaching me how to write in general when I was but a young, doe-eyed first year). Lastly, thanks are in order for the entirety of the Religion and English departments for supporting me in all my endeavors in and out of the classroom.

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