

**Ruhr Universität Bochum
Englisches Seminar**

Puritan Religion
in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown

Term paper for the course
Literature I, 2
SS 2004
Dr. phil. Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz

submitted by
Björn Wilmsmann

Puritan religion and doctrine had a huge impact on early New England in general, as well as on the authors from this area, one of whom was Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose stories frequently revolve around Puritan life in 16th and 17th century New England.

I am going to delineate how this impact accounts for Puritan religion as a recurrent motif in Hawthorne's short story Young Goodman Brown. In order to achieve this, I shall, first of all, outline, what the origins of Puritanism were and what Puritan convictions actually were about. Then, I shall deal with what consequences the Puritan convictions had for society and the individual and in how far Hawthorne's own life was, although he lived approximately two hundred years later than the first Puritans, still influenced by these convictions, and moreover shall I exemplify these aforementioned aspects by relating them to concrete text passages from the short story at hand.

The earliest forms of Puritanism were based on the works of William Tyndale (1495 to 1536) and John Hooper (d. 1555), who considered the pace of reformation in England too slow. The main development of Puritanism took place between 1558, when Queen Elizabeth I. ascended to the throne, and 1658 when Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell deceased. During this period of time, directed by philosophers like Cartwright (1535 to 1603) and Perkins (1558 to 1602), the main goal of the Puritans was the reformation of the Anglican Church in order to render religious worship as simple as it possibly could be in form as well as in ceremony.

Although they at first succeeded in their attempt, tides turned against the Puritans, which made them leave England, seeking an opportunity of creating their model of what society was supposed to look like elsewhere, after having failed to attain this aim in England.

Therefore the first Puritans landed in Plymouth in New England in 1620, but they were followed by even larger groups up until about 1630. These groups settled in Massachusetts, as well as in Salem and Boston. Over the next few decades Puritans settled in North- and South Carolina, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia and Georgia, that is to say basically everywhere in New England. Since they were so large in number they even outnumbered the Catholic population in some states and for this reason, as well as due to their strong convictions, their influence in early American religious life and society was prevalent, which is why the Puritans at least to a certain point succeeded in building the model society they had contrived.

Puritan convictions were, besides the belief in the sovereignty and omnipotence of God, based on the assumption that man had broken the so-called Covenant of Work, according to which admission to Heaven would have been granted to everyone, as Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge and God consequently had offered a new covenant to Abraham, called the Covenant of Grace, which meant that admission to Heaven was no longer certain anymore, but only a mere possibility God would judge about. Consequently, corresponding to Puritan beliefs, man was reckoned to be depraved by birth just because of being descended from Adam and having somehow inherited his first sin, and hence required constant self-examination in order to realize that mankind was inherently sinful and on account of that actually not worthy of God's grace.

Moreover, a principle called the Halfway Covenant, which was originally drafted by Richard Mather and finally approved in 1662, was essential for Puritan society in the middle of the 17th century, forasmuch as it stipulated that every second-generation member of the congregation, that is to say the progeny of the Pilgrims having landed in New England at about 30 to 40 years earlier, be admitted to the community by baptism, yet not be allowed to partake in the Lord's Supper, unless they had gone through what was called a true conversion experience, a metaphysical experience that was considered the ultimate sign of faith in and election by God. The importance of dreams and visions as possible conversion experiences is rendered obvious pretty early in the beginning of *Young Goodman Brown* as Brown contemplates about dreams his wife seems to have had in the night before is journey to the pagan gathering: „She talks of dreams, too. Methought as she spoke there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done tonight.“. Besides the importance of visions, this passage also portrays the ubiquitous ambience of misgivings towards even the most familiar people I shall deal with later in more detail.

The perils originating from the urgent need for every Puritan to have some kind of conversion experience are described quite conspicuously, too, since Goodman Brown apparently doubts his sanity in the end: „Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?“

Apart from these principles and convictions, though Puritans believed in predetermination, that is to say the aforesaid quality of electedness by God, they spent their whole life attempting to comprehend their respective destiny, be it Heaven or Hell, to put it straight, working hard and leading what they considered to

be a moral life in order to express their hope for admittance to Heaven. A vivid example of Puritan moralism is Goodman's behaviour towards his wife when returning to village, which merely shows reverence, but not affection at all: „But Goodman Brown looked sternly in her face and passed on without a greeting.“, although his wife appears to be exceedingly joyous and hilarious when beholding him, which according to Puritan convictions could already be considered a sin. Aside from that, even the names of the protagonist and the people close to him already epitomize typical Puritan clichés, „Young Goodman Brown“, as well as „Goody Cloyse“ standing for the requirement of moral integrity and the name of his wife „Faith“ signifying the ardent intent to worship God, even though man was deemed to be inherently sinful.

Furthermore, education was crucial to Puritan society, as Puritans not only strived to control the congregation's culture and laws, but also attempted to teach their ideology of man not only being suspect, but also guilty of depravity by birth, to their children as early as possible. A blatant example for this is an excerpt of the catechism taught to young children, namely the one by John Cotton with the rather overt name of *Spiritual Milk for American Babes Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments for their Soul's Nourishment*, which also seems to have been the primary source of education for the protagonist in *Young Goodman Brown*, when he refers to Goody Cloyse as the one who had taught him his catechism in youth:

- Q: What hath God done for you?
A: God hath made me, He keepeth me, and he can save me.
Q: Who is God?
A: God is a Spirit of himself, and for himself.
Q: How many Gods be there?
A: There is but one God in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
Q: How did God make you?
A: In my first parents holy and righteous.
Q: Are you then born holy and righteous?
A: No, my first father sinned, and I in him.
Q: Are you then born a sinner?
A: I was conceived in sin, and born in iniquity.
Q: What is your birth sin?
A: Adam's sin imputed to me, and corrupt nature dwelling in me.
Q: What is your corrupt nature?
A: My corrupt nature is empty of Grace, bent unto sin, and only unto sin, and that continually.

Q: What is sin?
A: Sin is a transgression of the law.

[...]

This kind of education was an essential part of the Puritan mental framework, since Puritan beliefs deemed man in the need of instruction in order to recognize his own depravity. The atmosphere of self-doubt and uncertainty about people's righteousness induced by lore of this kind was responsible for the origination of a general distrust in human kindness, which is expounded by Robert C. Grayson in greater detail in *Curdled Milk for Babes: The Role of the Catechism in Young Goodman Brown*, for example when stating that:

John Cotton's Catechism Milk for Babes, by its emphasis on total depravity, soured the milk of human kindness. Consequently persons instructed in the catechism from their youth could consider a person of good works and character to be a witch merely on the basis of spectral evidence in spite of the witch's quite orthodox relation to the community's approved doctrinal authority.

Albeit this rigid catechism underwent certain changes from its origins in the 17th to the 19th century, when Nathaniel Hawthorne lived, his family's desire to have him have a proper Puritan education can be reckoned as germane to Hawthorne's impetus of writing stories like *Young Goodman Brown* especially dealing with this unpleasant aspect of Puritan life and society, which becomes perspicuous when perceiving Goodman Brown's bewilderment about even his father and Goody Cloyse, the person in charge of his education in early youth, seemingly being in league with the devil. His doubt in all, even the most trustworthy, people is illustrated by the remark „That old woman taught me my catechism“ fostered by the follow-up „and there was a world of meaning in this simple comment.“ There are more such references to this constant atmosphere of doubt, for instance, as Goodman Brown wonders, if his wife already doubts him after such a short matrimony not having lasted any longer but three months: „What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married?“

Finally Goodman's world picture is completely torn to pieces, when all of sudden he realizes that even his wife, whom he considered to be utterly virtuous („Well, she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I'll cling to her skirts

and follow her to heaven.“), partakes in the pagan congregation: „The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon. 'My Faith is gone!' cried he, after one stupefied moment. 'There is no good on earth; and sin ist but a name. Come, devil: for to thee this world is given.'“ The mentioning of his wife's name here must not only be understood in the literal meaning, but also as Goodman's despair about the loss of his religious faith, therefore his wife might not only be understood as a stereotypical incarnation of Puritan convictions, but even as an allegory for faith in a figurative, that is religious, sense.

After having returned to the village this impression of despair is invigorated as Goodman Brown apparently coincidentally meets the members of the congregation he supposes to have seen in the pagan meeting the night afore, because he is deterred from them on account their now dubious air: „He shrank from the venerable saint as if to avoid anathema.[...] Goodman Brown snatched away the child as from the grasp of the fiend himself.“ Again this depicts the attitude of general mistrust in everyone conveyed by Puritan education, which finally results in Goodman Brown perceiving sin an evil everywhere („On Sabbath day, 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“, „[...] dreading lest the roof should thunder down upon the gray blasphemer and his hearers“).

This kind of mental framework Goodman Brown ends up with can be esteemed a reference to the Salem Witch Trials in 1692, during which husbands even accused their own wives of being witches and consequently burned many of them at the stake, because due to Puritan doctrine they did not even confide in those anymore who actually were closest to them. Furthermore, the putative perception of the minister's and the deacon's voices on their way the pagan gathering, might be an allusion to the principle of hearsay upon which these trials were based: „It vexed him more, because he could have sworn, were such a thing possible, that he recognized the voices of the minister and Deacon Gookin.“. Therefore one might even imagine the protagonist of Young Goodman Brown to later on have become one of the relentless prosecutors in the Salem Witch Trials himself on account of the bitterness displayed here.

Thus, by the points made and aspects highlighted above, it can be asserted that Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown is pervaded with steadily recurrent aspects of Puritan religion, the most crucial one being a permanent doubtfulness no member of

the community was exempt of, and the consequences of this doubtfulness for both the community and the individual Puritan, on account of which it can be pointed out that, although, or maybe even because of, being of Puritan upbringing, Hawthorne used this story as a vehicle of expressing his disdain towards his ancestors' bigotry and pretentious self-righteousness, which he obviously supposed to have been instilling a constant fear of temptation and a consciousness of guilt in human beings, where most of the time, there actually was nothing to fear or to feel guilty about.

This outline of the Puritan world picture in *Young Goodman Brown* and its apparent consequences for the main character might even forebode and envision the later development of Puritanism and the crimes perpetrated on its behalf.

So, finally, the conclusion drawn by Nathaniel Hawthorne, given the experiences with Puritanism during his own youth and the knowledge he had about the history of his ancestry, might be subsumed as follows: A society built upon doubt, fear and mistrust in even utterly credible people cannot create anything close to true faith.

Literature used

- Campbell, Donna M., Puritanism in New England
(<http://guweb2.gonzaga.edu/faculty/campbell/enl310/purdef.htm>, 08/06/2004).
- Cotton, John, Spiritual Milk for American Babes Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments for their Soul's Nourishment
(http://www.sdgbbooks.com/free_cotton.html, 04/06/2004).
- Grayson, Robert C., „Curdled milk for babes: the role of the Catechism in 'Young Goodman Brown'“ in: Nathaniel Hawthorne Review 16:1 (Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, 1990) 1, pp. 3-6.