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HAWTHORNE IN EDEN

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Hawthorne in Eden

Synopsis:

In several of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales, Puritan New England becomes a metaphor for Eden. In developing this metaphor, Hawthorne expresses his desire for Utopia and laments its loss, even as he expunges his guilt for his Puritan ancestry. Several examples of Hawthorne's writings will be used to support this position.

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Decades of criticism have detailed Nathaniel Hawthorne's attempted expurgation of his residual guilt from his ancestors' role in the Salem witch trials. Frederick Crews even entitled his book of Hawthorne criticism *The Sins of the Fathers* to emphasize the frequency with which Hawthorne connects his writings to his ancestral roots in Puritan New England. Indeed, not only is Hawthorne attempting to expunge his guilt for his ancestors' past sins, he is also addressing "original sin" when he equates early New England with the Garden of Eden, as also suggested by Johanyak, Hardt, and others, and depicts Eden as the original Utopia. For Hawthorne, Puritan New England becomes a metaphor for Eden. The corruption of Eden—and hence the loss of Utopia—is the subject of many of his tales and novels as Hawthorne laments the demise of Eden. The tales "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," "The Maypole of Merry Mount," and "The Gray Champion" aptly illustrate this position and support the Eden metaphor.

In "Young Goodman Brown," when the protagonist, Brown, journeys from Salem village into the nearby forest, he is not entering the wilderness of Eden for the first time from an outside world, as Hardt would argue he is (252); rather, he is merely moving deeper into Eden. The world in which he has already been existing, Salem village, has been his Eden. Like a young Adam in Eden, in Salem, Brown has found happiness and contentment with his Eve, his wife Faith. Brown also maintains the innocence of the biblical Eden while he resides in Salem. Religious figures are revered; self-respect is upheld; belief in the goodness of elders, church figures, and family is upheld. But as he ventures further into the actual wilderness of his own Eden, Brown begins to face temptations, as did Adam and Eve in their Eden.

Enticed by Satan to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (not the Tree of Life, as the biblical story is often mistakenly told) in Eden, Eve is lured by the tantalizing promise of Satan that acquiring knowledge by eating of the forbidden fruit will make her knowledge (and Adam's, if he chooses to partake of the fruit, as well) on a par with God. This apparent desire for knowledge on the part of Eve actually manifests itself in a veiled desire for the power and authority of God, for with knowledge, Eve (and potentially Adam) will acquire power—power to judge, power to save or destroy, power to conquer. Likewise, the temptation offered Goodman Brown (and his veiled Faith) is not the enticement to receive eternal life, or even abundant blessings. Instead, he, too, is offered the knowledge of “hidden sin.” Acceptance of this knowledge will give Brown power over his fellow citizens of Salem as he begins to judge their actions, and, in a reversal of his earlier thoughts, begins to “deem [himself] holier than” they (par. 63). These judgment calls will distance Brown from his community, thereby corrupting the sanctity and innocence of Eden.

The wilderness metaphor continues as Brown's temptations parallel not only those in the garden of Eden, but also the temptations of Christ in the wilderness with its potential to be a new Eden. In the biblical account, Christ, alone in the wilderness, faces the first temptation from Satan in the form of physical nourishment. This temptation to succumb to Satan's enticement is especially challenging for Christ because he has been fasting for forty days. Brown's first temptation to follow the devil is likewise challenging since his first temptation in the wilderness is the appearance of Goody Cloyse, his catechism teacher. Because she has been Brown's spiritual advisor, he is definitely thrown off balance when he sees her in the heathen wilderness, far from the sanctity of Salem village. His faith is further shaken when Cloyse consorts with the

devil. Christ's second temptation in the wilderness becomes even more intense as Satan tries to persuade him to demonstrate his power over physical harm by calling on the angels to attend him. This temptation is a significant challenge for Christ since He knows he already has power over harm. Similarly, Brown's temptation increases in intensity with his second temptation when his pastor and deacon appear in the wilderness, also for the sinister purpose of consorting with the devil. Initially shaken by seeing his spiritual advisor with the devil, Brown is even more tempted to abandon his faith by seeing that the spiritual leaders of Salem have seemingly abandoned theirs. In the third and greatest temptation at this point in His earthly life, Christ is tempted by Satan to receive all the kingdoms in the world if he will just bow down and worship Satan. Brown's third and greatest temptation becomes even more personal when he thinks his wife, Faith, also his allegorical religious faith, has already succumbed to the wiles of Satan. Faith's seeming capitulation to evil is the ultimate challenge to Brown's already shaky religious faith. Unfortunately, unlike Christ, who successfully resists his three temptations and thus perpetuates the hope for a new Eden, Brown has already traveled so far down the path of temptation that he cannot escape with his innocence. Instead, his flirtation with evil causes the perversion and ruin of his Puritan Eden and his idyllic existence in it; he is cast out of his Eden because of his knowledge of sin as surely as Adam and Eve are cast out of theirs.

In "The Maypole of Merry Mount," Hawthorne chooses Merry Mount, an actual settlement by non-Puritans, as his setting. Mirth and jollity seem to reign in this Eden, founded according to Hawthorne's account, two hundred years prior to this story, by English settlers who "imagined a wild philosophy of pleasure, and came hither [to New England] to act out their latest day-dream" (par. 12). In contrast to other settlers who came seeking wealth or religious

freedom in their own vision for a new Eden, the settlers of Merry Mount came only for pleasure. For them, a new Eden meant a land of unbridled revelry and merry-making. Indeed, “it [becomes] high treason to be sad at Merry Mount” (par. 10). Very little “work” is required in the paradisaical Merry Mount, as evidenced by the fact that “[a]t harvest time, . . . their crop [is] of the smallest” when compared to other those of other settlers (par. 13); rather, for these “people of the Golden Age, [their] chief . . . husbandry [is] to raise flowers!” (par. 2). Fittingly, the main symbol of their frivolous lifestyle is the maypole, bedecked throughout the year with seasonal flowers, just as the actual garden of Eden would have been. Of course, since Eden would not be complete without Adam and Eve, Merry Mount has its own Adam and Eve in the characters of Edgar and Edith, also being celebrated as the Lord and Lady of May.

Hawthorne’s depiction of Merry Mount seems to symbolize his hope that, removed from the rigidity of Puritanism, Utopia could actually survive in early New England. Edgar and Edith, the Adam and Eve in the story, further epitomize the desire for Utopia. Unfortunately, the clash between non-belief and Puritanism creates the “inevitable blight of early hope” (par. 37); in other words, the corruption of Eden. Foreshadowing the demise of Merry Mount’s Eden, Edith is the first to voice her concerns that the lifestyle they enjoy in Merry Mount is merely a vision and the “mirth unreal” (par. 10), not unlike Young Goodman Brown’s view of Puritan Salem, his Eden, after his journey into the forest. The maypole, symbol of joy for the citizens of Merry Mount, foreshadows the ruin of Eden in that it represents an inversion of the cross, demonstrating that Eden, even a seemingly *new* Eden, will be lost. Yet another foreshadowing that the idyllic life in Merry Mount will be lost appears when the Puritans watching the revelry from a distance already view it as evil instead of paradise when they compare its

participants to devils and brutes, much like Young Goodman Brown does while watching participants in satanic worship in what was once his Eden.

The inevitable clash between the frivolity and mirth of the Merry Mount folks and the solemnity and somberness of the Puritans ultimately ends in the downfall of Merry Mount, thus crushing hopes for a new Eden. As Wagenknecht puts it, “Though they think they are living in the Golden Age, they are really only playing at it” (28). When Puritan leader Endicott chops down the beloved maypole, Merry Mount becomes the “benighted wilderness” (par. 37). Even the leaves and rosebuds fall from the maypole, as Hawthorne uses the flower imagery to symbolize the fall of Eden. Neither the stern rigidity of the Puritan religion nor the irresponsible frivolity of Merry Mount could sustain an earthly attempt to re-create a new Eden since God had not ordained it. As Hawthorne himself explained, “From the moment that [Edith and Edgar] truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth’s doom of care and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount” (par. 11). Yet in a bit of a hopeful ending, “the young lovers, expelled from their Eden, face the future in much the same spirit as Adam and Eve themselves” (Wagenknecht 27) as they “suppor[t] each other along the difficult path” (par. 41) of life and “fall upward into grace” (Williams qtd. in Wagenknecht 27).

In another example, Hawthorne uses the New England town of Milford to depict Eden in “The Minister’s Black Veil.” This New England town seems to have all the ingredients necessary for Paradise on earth. Sundays are set aside for worship, with the Sexton faithfully ringing the church bell, calling the community to prayer and communion. Attractive young girls

and “spruce bachelors” (par. 1) attend the services, while children joyfully accompany their parents to the Milford meeting-house. Even the elderly attending the services are venerated by the minister and the other parishioners. The minister, Reverend Hooper, is known as a “good preacher” (par. 12) who dresses with “clerical neatness” (par. 6) and presides at weddings with a pleasant demeanor. His orderly life includes Sunday lunch at Squire Sanders’ home. Life in Milford passes calmly, routinely, and contentedly for its citizens, creating a Puritan Eden, complete with its own Adam and Eve in the form of Rev. Hooper and his fiancé, Elizabeth.

Unfortunately, as with other attempts to create Eden on earth, the Utopian existence the citizens of Milford seem to enjoy and thrive in does not last. In a reversal of the biblical Eden, it is not the metaphorical Eve of the story who causes the loss of paradise. Instead, when Reverend Hooper, the metaphorical Adam, begins wearing a black veil to conceal his face, a darkness descends on the New England town. The blackness of the veil casts its shadow over every aspect of the once idyllic town of Milford. Hooper’s congregation responds with shock and horror, and rumors in regard to his sanity run rampant. People of every age shrink from his veiled presence. Even Elizabeth, Hooper’s intended, cannot convince him to reveal the secret of the veil and instead, ends up retreating from her affianced in revulsion. Hooper does become known throughout New England for his “awful power over souls that were in agony for sin” (par. 45). He even preaches the election sermon for one of the governors and lives a “long life, irreproachable in outward act” (par. 46). However, despite Reverend Hooper’s outward semblance of living a good life, his veil becomes the downfall of Eden.

The reason Hooper chooses to adorn his face with the black, dismal piece of fabric is never revealed by Hawthorne. When Elizabeth intimates that the veil is perhaps to hide secret

sin or even “innocent sorrow” (par. 33), Hooper merely responds with vague “what if it is” responses, effectively destroying the fellowship between himself and his Eve. The veil also creates an aura of gloom that “enable[s] him to sympathize with all dark affections” (par. 45), ending any pretense of Eden in Milford, just as Young Goodman Brown’s “sympathy of [his] human hear[t] for sin” (par. 63) enabled him to perceive evil in everyone and ultimately ended his paradise in Salem. Likewise, although the minister’s rationale for wearing the veil is never revealed, just as his face is never again revealed, the intimation of hidden sin has the same effect as actual sin, causing a loss of Eden.

In “The Gray Champion,” Hawthorne presents a variation on his corruption of Eden theme. In this tale, the Puritan founders of New England sought to create a Utopia in a new land, confident of “Heaven’s blessing on a righteous cause” (par. 3) if they were threatened by anything in their new Eden. Sixty years later, though never wholly free from their tether to Mother England and thus, never truly achieving Utopia, the colonists of Boston nonetheless enjoy a somewhat idyllic existence “with far more freedom than . . .the native subjects of Great Britain” (par.1). However, that life is threatened by the rapidly tightening noose of British control, led by Sir Edmund Andros, King James II’s able and vicious administrator in New England. After rumors reach the New England shore that King James may soon be replaced by William, Prince of Orange, whose ascension to the throne of England “would be the triumph of civil and religious rights and the salvation of New England” (par. 2), Andros assembles his troops and co-horts on the streets of Boston for a show of force against the colonists who also assemble in a potential showdown between good and evil.

As the British contingent, synonymous with Satan in this Hawthorne tale, steadily advances towards the Puritan settlers, old Governor Bradstreet, symbol of goodness even though he is now nearly ninety years old, comes forth on the streets of Boston to encourage the settlers to “pray for the welfare of New England” (par. 9) as the settlers prepare to fight for their version of Eden. Soon after, the British leaders and soldiers come close to the settlers. Riding in their midst is the Episcopal clergyman, chief symbol of the religious persecution that had caused the early Puritans to retreat to the wilderness of New England in hopes of creating their own religious Utopia. In desperation at the sight of the solidified forces of church and state, one of the men in the assembled crowd of settlers cries out in an impassioned voice for a champion to be raised up to defend them, reminiscent of the ancient Israelites crying to the Lord for help (Judges 4:3). Suddenly, the figure of an ancient man dressed in the garb of the earliest Puritans emerges as if miraculously from the throng of settlers. Though he is unrecognized by any of the current settlers, they feel certain he is “some old champion of the righteous cause” (par. 22) who will secure the “deliverance of New England” (par. 22). Indeed, their hopes are fulfilled as the “gray champion” stands up to the governor and his minions until they back down and ultimately become prisoners of the settlers.

The salvation of the early New England settlers was championed by an apparition, the spirit of freedom according to the narrator, but also a metaphor for Christ, whose appearance was heralded by a voice crying in the wilderness, just as Christ was heralded by the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” in the person of John the Baptist (Mark 1:3, KJV). In the inverse of the corruption and loss of Eden Hawthorne demonstrates in “Young Goodman Brown,” “The

Minister's Black Veil," and "The Maypole of Merry Mount," the wilderness of New England in "The Gray Champion" becomes more like Eden. The inhabitants are *not* cast out, and they have hope for a better future under more lenient British rule.

Whether or not Hawthorne was successful in expunging his residual guilt from his forefathers' part in the dissolution of Puritan Salem is uncertain. What *is* certain is that he was successful in his depiction of early New England as a metaphor for Eden, as well as in his lament for the corruption of that Eden and the subsequent loss of paradise. In "Young Goodman Brown," Puritan Salem, the metaphor for Eden, is lost without hope for redemption when one man's flirtation ultimately leads to his knowledge of sin, much as Eve's desire for knowledge caused the loss of the original Eden. In "The Maypole of Merry Mount," the Utopian existence in Merry Mount, the metaphoric Eden, begins to erode simply due to the censorial observations and thoughts of the neighboring Puritans, just as Goodman Brown's *thoughts* of evil corrupt his Eden. Any hope of Eden is completely lost when the Puritan leader chops down the maypole, symbolically causing the fall of Eden. Nonetheless, this story has a bit of a hopeful ending as the young protagonists, the metaphorical Adam and Eve, now expelled from their Eden, go "heavenward" (par. 41). In "The Minister's Black Veil," the New England town of Milford is the metaphorical Eden, but like the metaphorical Edens in the two previous stories, this Eden is lost when the mere *suggestion* of hidden sin, created in this case by a piece of fabric, successfully destroys the illusion of Eden without hope of reclamation, just as in "Young Goodman Brown." In "The Gray Champion," the last of the four stories discussed in this paper, Hawthorne presents an inversion of this typical loss of Eden story when salvation comes to the New England wilderness through a metaphorical Christ. Perhaps Hawthorne allowed these

Settlers of the Boston wilderness more of Utopia because they were seeking religious freedom and not knowledge that may bring with it power that so easily corrupts. Regardless, Hawthorne's Edens are vivid pictures of New England and the challenges the early settlers faced not only to their physical survival, but to their spiritual well-being as well.

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