

The Legacy of Puritanism in Hawthorne and Melville

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"God against Man. Man against God. Man against Nature. Nature against Man. Nature against God. God against Nature — very funny religion" (D.T. Suzuki qtd. in Campbell 66)

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a philosophical allegory on the ultimate futility of human endeavor in the face of the natural order. It offers a Transcendentalist critique of the Biblical idea of Man as God's appointed master of Creation. Inspired by the stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, which illuminates the shadows of religious zeal, Melville transformed a prosaic sea story into one of world literature's most profound inquiries into the nature of evil.

Hawthorne's book is a catalog of sins as seen from a Transcendentalist perspective. Unlike the Puritans, who regarded nature as hostile, the Transcendentalists viewed the New World as a Garden of Eden, offering humanity the chance to regenerate the spirit by living in accordance with the laws of nature. They believed that man should worship nature, and opposed the Biblical tenet that man was created by God to exercise dominion over nature. Hawthorne, going one step further, opposed the Biblical notion that man is a fallen creature who must exercise dominion over his own evil nature. The *Mosses* tales contain certain themes that still pervade American fiction; man's attempts to dominate nature, the human compulsion to self-destruct, and Puritan opposition to naturalism, as manifested in the Salem witch trials of the 17th century.

As Henry James pointed out in *Hawthorne*, Hawthorne was burdened all his life by the weight of his ancestral religion. Tormented by the role his Puritan ancestor, William Hawthorne, played as a judge in the Salem witch trials, Hawthorne satirized Puritan hypocrisy in *House of Seven Gables*, and deplored its anti-humanistic values in *The Scarlet Letter*. Judge Pyncheon in *Seven Gables*, Dimmesdale in *Scarlet Letter*, are modeled on Hawthorne's Puritan ancestor.

As Melville writes in *Hawthorne and his Mosses*:

But it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality — these are

the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth.

Melville was impressed, as his essay *Hawthorne and His Mosses* makes clear, with the story of *Young Goodman Brown*. As Hawthorne tells the story, Goodman Brown leaves his bride, Faith, for a journey through the forest at night, bound on an evil mission, the purpose of which is undisclosed. The reader is given to assume that he is bound for a meeting of witches, portrayed ironically as Devil worshippers. Along the way he meets an old man who bears a strong resemblance to himself and represents his dark side. The old man carries a snakelike staff, meant to represent the Devil.

Startled by the encounter, Brown abandons his mission and turns toward home. Bewitched by the old man, who offers him his staff, he falls asleep in the forest and dreams that his bride is initiated into a witches coven. Goodman attempts to save her by telling her to turn her eyes to God, but Orpheus-like, he only succeeds in saving himself. Driven mad by his evil dream, he suspects his good wife and all those about him are guilty of Devil worship. He believes himself to be the only pious person in Salem. Unable to trust anyone, his life becomes a living hell and he dies in a state of spiritual agony.

The story of *Young Goodman Brown* cannot be fully understood without reference to the Biblical Book of Genesis. As Joseph Campbell tells us, Genesis is the Creation myth of the Patriarchal Hebraic tribes which supplanted a Matriarchal culture in Sumeria and Judea. The snake was the symbol the Earth Goddess of the Matriarchal nature religion, which the Hebrews sought to demonize. Genesis is meant as an object lesson to those who would continue to worship the Goddess. In Genesis, Man was meant by God to dominate nature not to worship it. Woman is created from Adam's rib, and thus born of Man. The snake tempts Eve, and Eve tempts Adam, hence they are cast out of Eden, to live in perdition. Thus the Fall of Man must be read as a consequence of worshipping the Goddess. Christianity made the snake a symbol of the Devil. Also in the Christian religion, Saint Patrick was canonized for driving the snakes out of Ireland, by which is meant his conversion of the Wiccans, an ancient matriarchal religion based on the worship of nature. The Wiccan priestesses became known, in Christianity, as witches.

A literal reading of Genesis is the basis of the Anabaptist faith, of which Puritanism is one of the sects. The Puritans viewed the natural world as something to be dominated, not enjoyed. To them the enjoyment of nature was tantamount to nature worship. The only offense of the Salem witches was that of cavorting in the forest. Thus, they were suspected

nature worship, hence of worshipping the Devil.

D. H Lawrence In *Studies in Classis American Literature*, would have us believe something else is afoot in Hawthorne's work:

All the time there is this split in American art and art-consciousness. On the top it is as nice as pie, goody-goody and lovey-dovey. Like Hawthorne being such a blue-eyed darling, in life, and Longfellow and the rest such sucking-doves....

Serpents they were. Look at the inner meaning of their art and see what demons they were. (93)

Lawrence, who has an axe to grind, claims that Hawthorne's work epitomizes all that is wrong with America, which wears a mask of benevolence that disguises a will to destroy. Is that not precisely what Hawthorne sees in Puritanism?

Mosses is a period piece, with all the outraged innocence of a Druid at a revival meeting — not as Lawrence would have us believe, of a Bible thumper in a bawdy house — while *Moby Dick*, by comparison, is many times more worldly-wise. Hawthorne leaves little doubt, especially in *The Scarlet Letter*, as to where his religious sympathies lie. In *The Scarlet Letter* the forest is a place for innocent enjoyment, the one place people can free themselves from the judgment of the Puritan elders.

Hawthorne viewed the Puritans as insufferably proud and self-righteous, monomaniacal at rooting out the evil in others. those who merely sought a little joy in their lives and had to conceal their play in the forest from the prying eyes of the elders. who themselves were unaware that their real motivation lay in the fear of their own evil.

But Lawrence writes that Hawthorne, "with his little boy charm, he'll tell you what's what. But he'll cover it with smarm" (102) What smarm? Does Hester seduce Dimmesdale, as Lawrence claims? He falls of his own accord. Does she conspire with Chillingworth to destroy Dimmesdale? Hardly. She seeks to protect him and hopes that Chillingworth won't find him out. Is Hester the "the devil?" Wrong again. Perhaps it is just his misogyny talking. What Hawthorne's Hester represents is the humanist choice. As Hawthorne writes:

One day as her mother stooped over the cradle, the infants eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the gold embroidery about the letter, and, putting up her little hand, she grasped at it, smiling not doubtfully, but with a decided gleam that gave her face the look of a much older child. (88)

It is the image of Michealangelo's Creation fresco. The hand of God, the hand of the innocent (is there a difference?) reaching out to the Scarlet A. The guilty letter is thereby blessed. Hester is absolved by new life.

"A Adam, Adama," Lawrence writes, "The human spirit, fixed in a lie, adhering to a lie, giving itself perpetually the lie....All begins with A. Adulteress. Alpha, Abel, Adam. A. America." (98)

What do you mean to say, Lawrence?

Hester represents life. She goes forth and multiplies, just as nature wills us. What business is it of the Puritan elders who she chooses to multiply with? The Puritan elders represent death, for they are opposed to life. As Hawthorne writes:

The pine trees, aged, black, and solemn, and fling groans and other melancholy utterances on the breeze needed little transformation to figure as Puritan elders; the ugliest weeds of the garden were their children, whom Pearl smote down and uprooted, most unmercifully. (87)

Hester is Dimmesdale's salvation if only he will take it. He prefers his hypocrisy, damning himself to destruction.

Melville's Ahab, though he rants as much as Lear, is also modeled on the Puritan elders, in severity of aspect, humor, and dress. His desire to root out evil, as embodied in Moby Dick, recalls the Puritan witch hunts.

Like the supposed witches of Salem, Moby Dick is not evil. He is merely a creature intent on living in a world hostile to life itself. As Melville writes of Narcissus, he "is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life and this is the key to it all." (13) Is this not also true of his description of Moby Dick?

As Melville explains, in his chapter on the whiteness of the whale, the color is both sublime and terrible. It is the whiteness of Jove incarnate in the snowy white bull, the color of priestly vestments, the symbol of virginity and purity. In the natural world; however, it is the color of the polar bear, the shark of the tropics, and the deadly blizzard. Melville, clearly, intends to mock the Puritan's fear of nature, and the Biblical notion of Man as God's appointed master of Creation.

Indeed, Melville seems to have little regard for any form of Christianity. In the repartee of the pragmatist Captain Peleg and the Bible thumping Bildad, one notes how easily Peleg wins the argument. As Peleg says of Queequeg: "pious harpooners never make good voyagers, it takes the shark out of 'em." (91)

One also notes how readily Ishmael compromises his own Presbyterianism to worship Queequeg's idol, and how in effect he denies his creed in gaining Queequeg's acceptance on the Pequod. As Ishmael says to Bildad, Queequeg is a member of:

"the great and everlasting first congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets noways touching the grand belief, in that we all join hands." (90)

Moreover he does so with impunity for he will be the only survivor of the inevitable wreck. Melville's sympathies must, therefore, be viewed as akin to Hawthorne's, opposed to the concept of original sin and the moral posturing of Puritanism.

Ishmael, like Hester Prynne, represents the humanist choice. He views Moby Dick

philosophically, as something benign, not an enemy. He approaches life with an open mind, not a rigid ideology, and certainly not with a bigoted creed. That is why he survives. Ishmael and Hester live on as orphans. He, from the crew of the Pequod, doomed to extinction. She, from Puritan society and the concept of the One True God.

Ahab eventually recognizes that his triumph over the whale is also his greatest failure. Having allowed his superstition to get the better of his reason, he learns too late that this force of nature is morally indifferent to him. As Starbuck has already informed him, "Moby Dick seeks thee not." (516)

In attempting to kill the white whale, Ahab is gunning for life itself. Thus, he too, is doomed to perish in exile:

"Death-glorious ship ! Must ye then perish and without me ? Am I cut off from the last fond pride of the meanest shipwrecked captains? Oh lonely death on lonely life ! Oh how I feel that my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief." (519)

The evil, he finally realizes, lies within himself, for seeking revenge against life, "To the last I grapple with thee, from hell's heart I stab at thee, for hate's sake I spit my last breath into thee." (519)

Thus he is doomed. As goes Ahab, so goes Goodman Brown, Judge Pyncheon, Arthur Dimmesdale, and all the Puritan elders. They are doomed to a living and eternal hell, a hell of their own creation, for viewing the simple enjoyment of life as the work of demonic possession.

Neither Hawthorne nor Melville had much tolerance for the conventional religious belief of their time, with its Puritan legacy of stern moralizing and arrogant judgementalism. As Hawthorne and Melville demonstrate, those who would eradicate the "evil" in others slay only the good within themselves.

The Puritans all died out. Their church survives by a different name as the Unitarian Universalist Society, but there isn't much resemblance between the two creeds. Yet the Puritans' moralistic ghost continues to haunt the religious right, which is also dooming itself to extinction through resistance to the simple facts of life.

Melville would have understood what D.T. Suzuki said. Christianity, by declaring Man the Master of Nature, turns Man against Nature, and thus against himself as a creature of Nature.

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