# Nathaniel Hawthorne: Way Of Life

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born to a prominent New England family, on July 4th, 1804, in the town of Salem, Massachusetts (Nathaniel). One of Hawthorne's grandfathers had participated as an officer in “King Philip's War” and another of his grandfathers was a judge during the “Salem Witch Trials” (Paternal). Hawthorne met many interesting people during his own lifetime such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (Nathaniel). Through his stories, Nathaniel Hawthorne became a popular figure in his own right, and is often credited as one of America’s greatest storytellers. Many of his stories are well known in the United States and across the world. His novel The Scarlet Letter is “world famous (Nathaniel).” His short stories have also received a plethora of attention, especially in the USA. Young Goodman Brown and The Minister's Black Veil are examples of such stories. This begs the question: Why are Hawthorne's stories so popular? I believe the answer lies in an analysis of the historical, cultural, and mythical background of some of his stories. I will be specifically focusing on Young Goodman Brown and The Minister’s Black Veil. Each of these stories share three things in common: A Colonial New England Setting, a Puritan cultural atmosphere and a strong connection to Biblical myth. Hawthorne uses this combination of history and myth to craft stories that feel truly “American.” I believe that it is these characteristics that have magnetized Hawthorne's short stories and made them into the American classics we see them as today.

The history of where and why the Puritans migrated is an important aspect of understanding the circumstances under which Hawthorne wrote his stories. David Fischer in his history of colonial America, entitled Albion's seed: Four folkways in America, describes the Puritans as the first of four groups to colonize North America and plant the seed that would become the American people. He identifies an area of England known as “East Anglia” as the home-region of the Puritian people (Fischer 19). Although Puritanism was present in nearly every English county, East Anglia constituted the bulk of adherence. As such, many of those who would become New England's elite hailed from this region (30). John Winthrop, the founder of the Massachusetts Bay colony, being one of them. He was the first man to lead a strong colonization effort towards New England, since the establishment of the Plymouth Bay Colony in 1620. In 1630, he guided 11 ships carrying 1000 passengers to New England, and founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony (31). This period, dated 1620-1640, is known as the “Great Migration (33).” Fisher explains the impetus behind the migration as such, “The great migration developed in this spirit-above all as a religious movement of English Christians who meant to build a new Zion in America (30).” Puritans wanted a piece of the planet that they could call their own, and nobody else’s. In England, they were forced to share space with people who were not part of their denomination, such as Anglicans, Quakers, Baptists, and Catholics. New England was created as a space for Puritans, and Puritans only. For example, Quakers were often horrendously punished for settling in Puritan lands. Hawthorne’s great grandfather, Major William Hawthorne, was known as “a bitter persecutor” of Quakers, who ordered the whippings of Quaker men and women (Paternal). The Puritans' sense of exclusive ownership over New England often put them at odds with their neighbors. For example, King Phillips war, pitted Puritans against various surrounding tribes. The Puritans ended up coming out on top, however, using methods Hawthorne expresses distaste for in his stories. For example, in Young Goodman Brown, the devil character says to the protagonist: “I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem. And it was I that brought

your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war (Young 2)." Hawthorne was disturbed by the acts his Puritan ancestors had committed against their neighbors. This is communicated in the protagonists' disbelief about what the devil has told him, "If it be as thou sayest," replied Goodman Brown, "I marvel they never spoke of these matters. Or, verily, I marvel not, seeing that the least rumor of the sort would have driven them from New-England. We are a people of prayer, and good works, to boot, and abide no such wickedness (2)." The history of Hawthorne's Puritan ancestors left a mark (or scar) on him that substantially influenced the plots of his stories. Another way they influenced him was their strong convictions towards the Christian religion, as they saw it.

Puritian leaders often called New England the "Bible Commonwealth (Fischer 21)." From the start, Puritans look upon their new project in America as a Christian experiment. For example, Christian culture was deeply embedded in the way they named their children. Fischer states that "In seventeenth-century Boston, 90 percent of all first names were taken from the Bible (Fischer 30)." The Biblical stories were the myths upon which Puritan society built itself. This fact is demonstrated in Hawthorne's works. For example, in the Minister's black veil, Mr. Hooper's character is based on Moses from the story of Exodus. Hooper is a moral leader, a highly respected figure in his community, and yet, his people are afraid of him. Hawthorne describes the peoples reaction as such, "Yet perhaps the pale-faced congregation was almost as fearful a sight to the minister, as his black veil to them (Minister's 3)." In parallel, Moses is also a highly respected moral leader who strikes fear in his followers. For example, in Exodus 34:30-33 it says, "Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come nigh him… And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a vail on his face." Just like Hooper, Moses puts on a "vail", which has the effect of alienating him from his community. In the paper entitled Nathaniel Hawthorne and his biblical contexts, the author summarizes the parallels between Hooper and Moses, "While Moses' face is veiled from the glow of direct communion with God, Hooper's wearing of the veil is mysteriously motivated although it works toward the same ends. Hooper's veiled face resembles that of Moses in that it improves his legislative abilities but condemns him to seclusion apart from his community (Walsh 73)." Hawthorne's use of Biblical myth in the Minister's Black veil not only makes for an interesting story, but it also says something interesting about the Puritans themselves: They were a "Bible" people, who saw themselves as Christians first. Finally, I will discuss what has been accomplished in this paper.

Nathaniel Hawthorne has written some of the most memorable stories in American history. I give all the credit to him for that, however, I think he would not have been able to write those great stories without America's peculiar history and the Bible's peculiar characters giving him the necessary tools. Ironically, Young Goodman Brown is a polemic against American history. The protagonist learns to distrust his neighbors because of what the Devil told him about his ancestors' evil past. I believe the reason this story continues to be popular into the modern day, is because of its stark contrast with the idea of American exceptionalism. In Hawthorne's story, the Puritans burn down villages, torture young women, and blaspheme God. In contrast to American optimism, Hawthorne is quite cynical. In The Minister's Black veil we see the struggles of a Moses like character, who is caught between his faith in God and alienation from the community. Here we also see Hawthorne's cynicism on full display. The protagonist puts his full faith in God, and his community despises him for it. It is almost as if saying Hawthorne is saying to us that Puritanism is self-destructive.

## Works Cited


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