

Christina Morgan
English 298
Kerry Larson
2/20/13

Melville vs. James: The Battle

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Puritan heritage clearly serves as inspiration for many of his short stories. "Roger Malvin's Burial," "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," and "The Birthmark", among others, all directly relate the Puritan obsession with sin and guilt to the reader. Naturally, therefore, the discussion arose as to how Hawthorne uses puritanism in his stories. Is he confronting his legacy and purging himself of the shameful aspects of puritanism by attacking them? Or is he playing with puritanism as a method of enhancing his romantic works? Many of his stories, "Ethan Brand" specifically, lend themselves towards the second interpretation. Hawthorne does convey a sense of shame at many aspects of his heritage, yet instead of directly attacking them, he employs them in creating a story. In "Ethan Brand," Hawthorne manipulates puritanism much like a puppet; His mocking over-exaggeration of Puritan values and his usage of them in developing both characters and plot, as well as his dramatic conclusion, substantiate Henry James' claim that Hawthorne "played with Puritan principles and made toys of them".

Hawthorne scatters critiques of puritanism throughout "Ethan Brand" which serve as the basis for his mockery of it. In the presence of Ethan Brand, Bartram's "own sins [rise] up within him, and [make] his memory riotous with a throng of evil shapes that [assert] their kindred with the Master Sin, whatever it might be, which it [is] within the scope of man's corrupted nature to conceive and cherish" (234). Unlike his Puritan ancestors, Hawthorne accepts that sin is human

nature and cannot be eradicated. He denounces the Puritan conception that perfection is possible, and uses this conception as central to his mockery of puritanism. The story of Ethan Brand is inlaid with overstated hellish symbols and Puritan dogmas, condemning the absurdity and farcicality that is Puritanism. Hawthorne describes Bartram's lime-kiln as "the private entrance to the infernal regions, which the shepherds of the Delectable Mountains were accustomed to show to Pilgrims"(231-232) – hell. He takes an ordinary practical object and creates a hellish image, much as the Puritans take a minor imperfection and exaggerate it to an evil sin necessary of purging. He goes on to say, "There are many such lime-kilns in that part of the country" (232). The evil of hell permeates every part of the country, just as, according to the Puritan belief, sin overwhelms humanity and, they believe, must be eradicated. But Hawthorne never alludes to eliminating these kilns of hell. In fact, they are central to the livelihood of humanity in this country, just as sin is inherent to humanity. He is attacking the Puritan obsession with evil and sin with obvious excessiveness and mocking Puritan extremism.

Take the Unpardonable Sin itself. This unforgivable transgression is a gain in science at the expense of religion. Ethan Brand becomes "a fiend...from the moment that his moral nature [ceases] to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect" (241). Of all the evil and treacherous acts humans commit – murder, burglary, infidelity, treason – Hawthorne chooses to make the Unpardonable Sin a transition from religious morality to scientific thought – "the sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claim" (235). Hawthorne lampoons puritanism's dogmatic fanaticism by creating a great Unpardonable Sin that is simply intellectual advancement.

Puritanism is so fully infatuated with the purging of sin, that intellect and individualism are deemed “unpardonable” because they threatens the strict following of dogma.

Hawthorne continues his mocking of Puritan beliefs with Ethan Brand’s romantic quest for this Unpardonable Sin. He ridicules the Puritan obsession with sin by creating a character so intent on uncovering hidden sin he goes on a journey “all over the earth” to find it (237). But, Hawthorne adds a twist: the Unpardonable Sin is within Ethan Brand himself. Hawthorne’s description of the old dog chasing his tail is comparable to Ethan’s search for the Unpardonable Sin, as well as the Puritans pursuit of perfection: “Never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained; never heard such a tremendous outbreak of growling, snarling, barking, and snapping, - as if one end of the ridiculous brute’s body were at deadly and most unforgivable enmity with the other” (239). Ethan Brand embarks on a longwinded and eager quest for something inanimate – something he could never physically find. Puritans, too, can never attain the perfection they so eagerly pursue. Hawthorne alludes to the idea that while Puritans are so determined to find and abolish sin, perfection is unattainable. Sin is within every person – a natural irremovable part of humanity – and so he jestingly teases Puritans as dogs chasing their own tails.

Physical and moral decay in the community of “Ethan Brand” further solidify Hawthorne’s recognition of sin’s existence and his belief in the possibility of survival in its presence. As if saying “I told you so” to the Puritans, Hawthorne creates a community very much encompassed by sin, yet still functional. The stage-agent is “a dry joker...less on account of any intrinsic humor than from a certain flavor of brandy-toddy and tobacco-smoke, which impregnated all his ideas and expression, as well as his person” (236). Previously “Lawyer”

Giles had “come to be but a fragment of a human being” (236). Drinking “flip, and sling, and toddy, and cocktails...morning, noon, and night, had caused him to slide from intellectual to various kinds and degrees of bodily labor” by which several of his limbs were separated from his body (236). The village doctor is described as now “rude,” “brutal,” “wild,” possessed with an “evil spirit,” “savage as a wild beast,” and “alight with hell-fire” (236-237). Hawthorne acknowledges the existence of sin and depravity, but he does not demonize it as Puritans do. He uses it to develop the personalities and histories of his characters. None of these three men or any in the community is admonished for their moral decay. In fact, Hawthorne highlights the characteristics that recommend these men. Giles was a man that “the world could not trample on, and had no right to scorn...since he had still kept up the courage and spirit of a man, asked nothing in charity, and with his one hand fought a stern battle against want and hostile circumstances” (236). So while the community is not pure – the people sin, the men are dirty, professionals decay into common laborers – Hawthorne jestingly defies the Puritan act of cleansing humans of sin, by showing a community in which sin exists, yet people still live and succeed.

The conclusion of “Ethan Brand” serves as the punch line of the joke Hawthorne makes of puritanism. Bartram goes to his kiln and finds that on the lime’s surface “in the midst of the circle, –snow-white too, and thoroughly converted into lime, –lay a human skeleton, in the attitude of a person who, after long toil, lies done to long repose. Within the ribs – strange to say – was the shape of a human heart” (243). Ethan Brand, the man that finds science and surrenders religion, turns to stone in the hell kiln. And his “relics [crumble] into fragments” (243).

Hawthorne creates a moment of drama within the reader as he describes Ethan Brand’s fortune.

But “Ethan Brand” does not have just a theatrical climax; it is a somewhat humorous one as well, like that of an epic joke. How fittingly absurd that the man who found the Unpardonable Sin should lose his humanity in Hawthorne’s symbol of hell. It is so ridiculously implausible, and yet characteristic of puritanism, that a man should turn to lime and shatter in compensation for his sins. And so, Hawthorne uses this conclusion as his final, magnificent jest at puritanism.

While the content of “Ethan Brand” is rooted in puritanism, the tone of the story tells us much more about the author than does the subject matter. It is obvious that Hawthorne disapproves of the severity of his heritage and its strict views on sin and guilt, and so he does confront his heritage as Melville argued. However, he does not do so directly, and “Ethan Brand” is read as much more of a romantic, rather than tragic, story. The basis of the story is Ethan Brand’s great quest and Hawthorne plays with reality versus the supernatural throughout the story: He compares a normal lime kiln to hell, and turns a man to stone at the conclusion of his story. In “Ethan Brand”, Hawthorne uses his heritage as a sort of muse for his writing. He targets the issues he has with puritanism and turns them into the butt of his joke. Playing with the different aspects of Puritan dogma, Hawthorne creates a wildly fantastical story. The conclusion of the story is not seen as the tragic end to a hero, but a fantastic and humorous emphasis on the flaws of puritanism.