

## The Puritan Society in N. Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"

In the introductory sketch to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel the "The Scarlet Letter", the reader is informed that one of the author's ancestors persecuted the Quakers harshly. The latter's son was a high judge in the Salem witch trials, put into literary form in Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" (Judge Hathorne appears there). We learn that Hawthorne feels ashamed for their deeds, and that he sees his ancestors and the Puritan society as a whole with critical eyes. Consequently, both open and subtle criticism of the Puritans' practices is applied throughout the novel.

Hawthorne's comments have to be regarded in the context of the settlers' history and religion. They believe that man is a creature steeped in sin, ever since Adam and Eve's fall from innocence. To them, committing the original sin strapped human beings of their own free will, so that God now decides about their lives. Everything that happens is seen as God's will, and providence plays an important role.

Through the sacrifice and righteousness of Christ, however, there is a chance for people to be saved. One cannot definitely know who will be saved, although pious and faithful people are of course more likely to. The experience of conversion, in which the soul is touched by the Holy Spirit, so that the believer's heart is turned from sinfulness to holiness, is another indication that one is of the elect. Faithfulness and piety, rather than good deeds are what saves people. If someone has sinned, public confession is believed to take some of the burden of this sin off him.

The initial reason for the Puritans to leave their homes was the treatment they had to suffer from in their native England. They were brutally persecuted and were not allowed to practise their religion, because they said that the beliefs taught by the Anglican church were against the Bible. When they arrived in the New World, they were confronted with numerous threats from the outside. Their trying to take land away from the Indians caused many fights and attacks. Moreover, they had to deal with the total wilderness surrounding them. Under these frontier conditions, they needed harmony and peace inside the community in order to survive.

As a result, Hawthorne's founding fathers immediately saw the necessity to set up a prison, right next to the graveyard in order to keep their settlement together and stable. This shows that "the city upon a hill" and "God's visible kingdom on earth" could not be put into practice without punishing and persecuting others. The prison's door is made from heavy, antique oak and is secured with iron spikes. The age of the wood symbolises another reason why the Puritan ideas could not be realised without violating human nature, namely that they came to a New World, but built their settlement on an antique, even anachronistic basis. Their pessimistic belief that the human species is doomed and has no free will also contributed to the failure of their Utopia. The heavy look of the door also shows that people do not accept their punishment, and Hawthorne suggests that in its strictness, the Puritan code of law is against human nature. These rules and regulations are mostly directly taken from the bible, going so far that religion and law can be called almost identical. This is the reason why people look at deeds we would not even consider crimes as if they were capital sins, showing the same gravity during the public punishment. Their modes of punishment are "outrages against human nature", as culprits are publicly humiliated on the pillory, not being able to hide their faces. Hawthorne criticises this method of punishment in particular and the Puritan society in general with irony by calling the pillory "as effectual an agent in the promotion of good citizenship as the guillotine in France". As has been pointed out in the introduction, this mode of confessing and suffering publicly was seen as a way to help the culprit.

These cruelties show the discrepancy between the way the Puritans behave and the original idea of Christianity. Most of them, for example the "morally coarse" women who cry at Hester, are not capable of forgiving, mercy or neighbourly love. They claim to be pure Christians, but what they actually practise is a perversion of what Christianity really is. Together with their difficult situation and their religion, the suffering they had to endure in England partially explains their behaviour. They were brutally persecuted themselves because they were thought to endanger the present order, now they persecute others for exactly the same reason. The Quakers, who believe that God can speak through every man and woman and that everyone can be enlightened by God, are harassed because their beliefs question the hierarchy of the Puritan church.

Those who are at the top of this hierarchy, most of them learned scholars and men of great intellect, are highly respected by the citizens and are seen as "mortals in fellowship with angels." The respect they earn even goes so far that they can directly grasp political power. Hawthorne shows that concerning some of these clergymen, this respectability and piety is only a veneer. They do not practise what they preach, Wilson for example surrounds himself in luxuries which are entirely forbidden to the normal citizens. Furthermore, the reader learns that Hester's scarlet letter gives a "sympathetic throb" when she passes by one of the ministers, showing that he has sinned also.

Besides the clergy and the soldiers, the statesmen are the third group of the tripod that forms the fundament of Puritan society. Although not as learned as the ministers, they also are respected by the citizen. Like the clergymen, some of them also enjoy the pleasures forbidden to the general public, see for example Governor Bellingham's house. They are leaders because of their experience, their hereditary reverence and firm character, not because they are intelligent or give new ideas and impulses to the community. As they can be easily replaced, they try their best to do what they think will help and protect the community, showing some of the better sides of the Puritan society. They are influenced by their traditions, portraits are hanging everywhere, as if critically regarding their descendants' actions. Therefore, they do not change their mind easily. Together with the conviction that faith counts more than good deeds, this accounts for the fact that they need a very long time to start accepting Hester.

The multitude of "simple" people does not feel suppressed by these leading classes as in most other countries at that time. On the contrary, they support them and the law. "General sentiment gives law its vitality", Hawthorne puts it critically. They are proud to be members of a community "where iniquity is dragged out to the sunshine". In spite of the cruelties they are capable of, Hawthorne in some cases attests them a "large and warm heart" and even "tearful sympathy".

Generally, the common people are characterised by their gloominess, but on the New England Holiday before the election, they seem to come to life. It is on that day and during the procession that their English origins show. Hawthorne detects a "dim reflection of former splendour", a reflection that wore off entirely in the course of time; the next generations were not at all capable of celebrating freely. Interestingly, the single day of the year on which Hawthorne depicts the Puritan crowd in high spirits is also the day on which the contrast between the Old World they originate from and the New World they have come to and to a certain extent created becomes most obvious. The New World is full of purity and piety, strong emotions and feelings have to be suppressed. Only when the settlers' roots are discernible from their actions, the discrepancy between past and present can be conveyed to the reader.

The election day is also the only time of the year when "uncivilised" people like Indians and sailors add a little colour and "depth of hue" to the scene.

Surprisingly, the rather wild and rough sailors are not frowned at, although they do not act according to Puritan laws. Those who chose to are even able to become integrated in the Puritan society, Hawthorne informs the reader, because a certain amount of respect is paid to them due to the hard battle with nature they fight every day.

Nature is generally seen by the Puritans to be something that has to be fought, as it presents the complete opposite to Puritan nurture. Only in the forest can Hester and Dimmesdale be "themselves", and Pearl, a symbol of nature, is the subject of many rumours. The townspeople consider her to be the devil's offspring. It is revealing that when Pearl grows older and inherits property from Chillingworth, Hawthorne says that she could easily marry into a reputable Puritan family.

All in all, it can be said that Hawthorne draws a differentiated picture of Puritan society. Although harsh criticism of their practises prevails, he tries to see at least some good will and other favourable features of his ancestors. Nevertheless, he hardly manages to.