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# Puritanism:

## *The Persistence of a Myth*

### *Leslie A. Fiedler*



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Let me begin with a public confession in what I take to be the best Puritan tradition, although I am quite aware that the practice of soul searching for publication, profit, and in the hope of grace may well belong more to the myth, with which—like everyone—I am familiar, than to the *fact* of Puritanism, about which I know little or nothing reliably and at first hand. Indeed, the confession with which I propose to start is simply that I have read few primary Puritan texts at all, none very closely. I have, moreover, barely glanced at the most scholarly studies of the subject—some written by members of the distinguished audience I have nonetheless ventured to address, daring, as the Chinese would say, to peddle books before the door of Confucius. This essay represents, in any case, an uncustomary venture for me, who have hitherto tried (to a large degree successfully) to avoid the very term “Puritanism” out of an indurated neoromantic misology which has also led me to eschew discussions of such other eternally redefined because essentially undefinable abstractions as “transcendentalism,” “realism,” “existentialism,” “structuralism,” “deconstructionism,” etc., etc. . . .

Still, I cannot pretend to be totally unmoved by the fact that informed and responsible scholars have long been engaged in an attempt to say what historical “Puritanism” really was, and thus to deliver it from those stereotypical misrepresentations which still possess most of us, and on which I shall shamelessly base most of the discourse which follows. Let me continue then by presenting a text on which I shall expatiate—once more, I should like to believe, in proper Puritan style. That text is, I warn you, anecdotal and, perhaps, apocryphal rather than scriptural, or, as the rabbis, whom the Puritan divines so admired, preferred to say, haggadic rather than halakic.

It comes in fact from gossip: the report of an overheard conversation between Isaac Bashevis Singer and an attractive young woman with

whom he was having lunch. But it has haunted me for some years now and I have retold the story many times—feeling it a clue to something important, though I have not before had the occasion to analyze it. “Tell me,” Singer is reported to have said in a lull in the conversation, “have you ever had intercourse with a dog?” To this the young lady, with a show of nonchalance, retorted, “Frankly, I’ve never met a dog who attracted me sexually”; then he, in surrebuttal, observed, “That’s the answer of a Puritan!”

Clearly, the humor of this story depends not on a knowledge of the actual ideology of Puritanism but on a stereotype shared by an East European Jewish émigré (who apparently has read almost no American books) and—judging by their response—by everyone to whom I have ever told this story, including professional Americanists. Such universal currency emboldens me to believe that, regardless of its correspondence to historical “fact,” the definition of Puritanism assumed by Singer tells a kind of truth about Puritanism unavailable to scholarly research: the kind of truth told only by the *bella menzogna*, the beautiful lie, of Myth. I am further convinced that *all* versions of historical events and movements—including those based on the most scrupulous readings of surviving documents—are also myths; which is to say, explanatory fictions limited by the parochial perspectives and serving the special interests of those who make them.

**T**o me, indeed, the least useful and interesting myths of the past seem those created by scholars trapped in the metamyth of mythlessness, and who are therefore incapable of realizing that the notion of objective and disinterested scholarship is itself the myth of a particular caste (to which I once aspired to belong, but blessedly in vain), and of a particular moment in history (which we have all outlived, whether we know it or not).

What I find considerably more attractive and useful is a view which begins by acknowledging this fact, and which consequently moves us not to debunk what mindless repetition has turned into stereotypes, but to recover the archetypes which lie dormant at the heart of even the weariest cliché by raising it to the level of full consciousness. Unless we strive to do this, it seems to me, with the stereotype of Puritanism, we are likely to perpetrate mere anti-stereotypes, thus becoming the victims rather than the beneficiaries of the power which such grids of perception have to alter social reality. Such a fate has befallen many of us, I am tempted to believe, in present-day America, where the stereotype of Puritanism as an antierotic, antihedonistic, antilibertarian impulse endemic to our country and our culture has—in large part because its very existence has been denied by scholars—been reborn with especial virulence.

I am not referring just to the Moral Majority, which at least acknowledges its Calvinist antecedents but in whom the tendency to repress or sublimate passion and to create ever expanding possibilities of deviance by stigmatizing previously tolerated pleasures is stripped of the rich learning and utopian aspirations which once helped make it intellectually respectable. Much more dangerous is the neo-Puritanism of certain self-styled “liberals” and highbrow pharisees who self-righteously condemn the lumpen moralists of the evangelical Right for their attacks on recreational sex and pornography. Yet even as they

stereotypically reject stereotypical Puritanism they become themselves inadvertent Puritans: jogging in pursuit of salvational pain; dieting; and abjuring salt, sugar, caffeine, and red meat in a secularized quest for the grace and immortality in which they claim no longer to believe, and in contempt for their animal inheritance, which they otherwise purport to celebrate. Moreover, they reenact in unconscious caricature the attempt of seventeenth-century prelates to ban pagan mummery, minstrelsy, and the kind of theater which pleases the folk by scorning the popular entertainments of their own time—particularly TV sitcoms, cop shows, and soap operas. Not only do such demotic entertainments subvert the ethical values of the new, self-appointed Elect, by and large academics rather than clerics this time around; but they provide “instant gratification,” that is, affective satisfaction without true-blue Protestant hard work. Moreover, being iconic in essence, such latter-day popular arts challenge the primacy of print, so dear to the hearts of Gutenberg-oriented, iconophobic reformers from the first settlers of New England to the late-twentieth-century upholders of literary “standards.”

**I**ronically, however, the new Reformers urge their unredeemed congregations (the classroom has replaced the church as the place of instruction) to seek salvation and a refuge from the profane pleasures of the Tube in canonical books that are the sources of the very myth that underlies the most popular stereotypes of Puritanism. I am thinking, it should be evident at this point, of those key works of what we have come to call “the American Renaissance,” works which constitute the core of a canonical minority culture defined and interpreted by a new priesthood originally based in those Ivy League colleges founded for the exegesis of *their* holy books by the first Puritans. That myth of a peculiarly American past and a uniquely American destiny rooted in the Puritan experience and the guilts engendered by it is best embodied in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and is further elaborated in a group of his short stories, including “The Gentle Boy,” “The Maypole of Merrymount,” “Endicott and the Red Cross,” and “Young Goodman Brown.” But these are less read and less remembered; nor have they been reincarnated over and over in the post-Gutenberg media that are at present the chief source of our communal dreams.

To be sure, Hawthorne was not alone in his attempt, some three hundred years after the first WASP settlements in the New World, to create a myth of our past which would declare simultaneously our continuity with Puritanism and our deliverance from it. However, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the two other major American authors who undertook that difficult task, failed to create truly archetypal images—able to pass into the public domain and thus to continue to possess the deep psyches of us all, whether or not we know their work at first hand. Moreover, though both of the latter were equally respected and even more widely read than Hawthorne in their own time, even as he has become central to the canon of OK books chosen by the critical establishment, they have been moved to its periphery. Yet Mrs. Stowe, at least, in print and on stage and screen, has lived on in the popular imagination.

Not, however, for her portraits of New England life and its Puritan

roots, with which she was intimately familiar. The only book of hers which has proved mythically resonant enough to be remembered by any but scholars is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which she created a myth of the South and the Afro-American—about which, ironically, she knew little at first hand. Simon Legree, the villain of that book is, to be sure, a Vermonter and a son of the Puritans, but the popular audience tends to forget his origin. Like Longfellow's *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, her local-colorist genre studies from *The Mayflower* to *Old Town Folks* and *Pogonuc People* proved too nostalgically benign at best and too condescendingly cutesy at worst to satisfy, like Hawthorne's *New England Tales*, the psychic needs not just of the sentimentally Christian mid-nineteenth-century America in which they appeared but of the secular society of a century later. What Hawthorne's present and our own demanded was a myth of the past not merely guilt ridden but passionately ambivalent and therefore somehow at once luridly magnificent and unrelievedly gloomy.

This he was able to achieve fully only in *The Scarlet Letter*, written when a deep depression (cued by his failure to reach a wide audience, his firing from a government sinecure in the custom-house, and especially, perhaps, the death of his mother) released in him images adequate to his obsession with his "persecuting" Puritan ancestors. He was in retrospect appalled by the utter blackness, relieved only by what he later perceived as Satanic fires, of that nightmare novel; and he attempted to make amends in his next book, the somewhat sunnier (at least intermittently) *House of the Seven Gables*. But it is, of course, precisely for his sense of gloom that we have come to prize him. Indeed, even before he had published the *Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville had already applauded this quality in his earlier work; identifying it with residual Puritanism in a now famous review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*: "a touch of Puritan gloom . . . this great power of blackness . . . that Calvinist sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin."

In the process of praising Hawthorne, Melville, the critic, inevitably became a collaborator in the creation of a secondary spin-off myth portraying the authentic American author as a secularized Puritan heroically saying "No, in thunder" to the Pelagian heresies of inauthentic American artists like Ralph Waldo Emerson. In creating the myth of Puritanism, I am suggesting, works of mythopoeic criticism (as opposed to antimythic, positivist, historical scholarship) have played almost as large a part as fantastic fiction. In any case, what Melville began did not stop with him—becoming, in fact, critical orthodoxy in the anti-utopian forties and fifties of our own century.

F. O. Matthiessen, for instance, in his immensely influential *American Renaissance*, transformed Melville's mythological definition of Hawthorne's blackness and its roots into a touchstone for determining what in our literature is true gold: "In spite of what Eliot has called, 'all its Walter Scott-Mysteries of Udolpo upholstery,'" Matthiessen writes, referring specifically to *The Marble Faun*, though what he says applies quite as aptly to *The Scarlet Letter*, "Hawthorne . . . established a world of solid moral values . . . based on a conception of man as a being radically imperfect. . . . The contrast with the one-way optimism of Hawthorne's contemporaries could hardly be more striking. . . . In the hard light of Freudian psychology or recent political history,

it is scarcely useful to regard man as perfect, or even as naturally good. . . . In sharpest opposition to this . . . the Puritans' understanding of man's tragic fallibility, and their consequent preparation to face the worst, are salutary in their toughness."

**B**ut Hawthorne's uses of the doctrine of Innate Depravity are considerably more devious and equivocal than Melville suggested or Matthiessen believed. Though he gave the orthodoxy of his ancestors—not without irony—its Satanic due, he suggests also that in its name the Founding Fathers of America denied love and sinned against life itself. For him, finally, what makes the world of the Puritans unrelievedly black is the shadow cast by the True Believers in Original Sin, who shamelessly persecuted those weaker than themselves even as they thrive on the desperate courage and inverted pride which that gloomy doctrine mysteriously generates in the strong.

In Hawthorne, the beneficiaries of the belief in the fallen nature of us all are invariably portrayed as male, and most typically as leaders of an embattled Christian commonwealth in an alien and savage land. He presents such staunch patriarchs, however, not as heroes but as hero-villains quite like—and clearly derived from—the redoubtable but wicked antagonists of the Gothic Romance. Think of Endicott, for instance, in all three of the tales in which he plays a key role—or of the images of Hawthorne's own American forebears, briefly evoked in "The Custom House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*. In most instances (once more as in the Tale of Terror, which was not for Hawthorne mere "upholstery," as T. S. Eliot argued, but a chief model for his Myth of Puritanism), it is Woman, the archetypal Persecuted Maiden, who is portrayed as the victim-in-chief of the Bad Fathers of the community.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the model of the Gothic Romance has been oddly combined with that of the Domestic Sentimental Novel, the nightmare figure of the male persecutor has been split into that of the cuckolded husband (who is also a Black Magician) and the enforcers of the law, lay and religious. Similarly, the Persecuted Maiden is fractured into images of the faithless wife, the sainted heretic, and the condemned witch. Ann Hutchison is evoked in chapter one, Mistress Hibbins in chapter two; and both fade finally into the multivalent figura of Hester Prynne, who dominates the rest of the book. But how radically the Gothic archetypes have been altered in the process. Hester comes on the scene no innocent and vulnerable maiden at all. She is instead a stigmatized adulteress from the start, with a fatherless babe in her arms: an ironic travesty of the Papists' image of Divine Maternity, so corrupted by unruly passion that the world (Hawthorne tells us) was "only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant she had borne. . . ."

Correspondingly, her persecutors are no longer depraved aristocrats threatening defenseless virtue in the name of a defunct *droit du seigneur*, but the founders of the world's first mythological democratic community and the makers of the revolution which established it. They ask only that the already "fallen" woman acknowledge her passion as sin and shame her accomplice by a public confession. Hester resists, however, insisting almost to the end that her adulterous love "had a consecration of its own." She dreams, moreover, of a second American Revolution that would give to mothers and daughters an equal voice



with the patriarchal priesthood and its impotent sons.

Though Hawthorne is maddeningly—and typically—equivocal in his presentation of Hester's erotic, feminist politics (dismissing her utopian hopes for gender equality as viable neither in her present nor in his, and laying a cautious finger to his lips on the subject of passion as its own justification), he is less so in his treatment of her patriarchal enemies. In his portrayal of her relentless stigmatization at their hands—as in his account of the destruction of the hedonist artificial paradise of Merrymount—he fixed once and for all a negative and hostile myth of the Puritan Fathers as driven by “a lust for spiritual gratification in the ethical control of all life . . . a gloomy passion . . . to destroy or mutilate life at its very quick.” The quoted phrases are from D. H. Lawrence's essay on *The Scarlet Letter* in *Studies in Classic American Literature*: another key work of mythopoetic criticism, which bears the same relationship to Hawthorne's primary myth of Puritanism as Melville's early and Matthiessen's later critical response does to the secondary myth of Hawthorne as secular Puritan author.

Lawrence, however, unlike Melville or Matthiessen, rejects the notion of Innate Depravity even in secular form; and as befits a spokesman for the antinomian, libertarian mood of the immediate post-World War I era, he uses Hawthorne's myth not to reinforce a belief in man's radical imperfection but to sustain a gospel of sex as salvation. Also, disconcertingly but characteristically of his time and place, he conflates his hatred of the antierotic “dark, sinister, repellent . . . First Americans” with certain anti-Semitic clichés which he shared with other modernist writers among his contemporaries, like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. In any case, he identifies the Puritans with the Jews, not as the Puritans themselves had—not as a Chosen People, a New Israel escaping from bondage—but as exponents of a “dangerous, negative religious passion of repression.” “The Jews of old,” Lawrence explains, “became established in this lust, hence their endless purifications . . . hence also the rite of circumcision.”

In doing so, he grafts onto Hawthorne's portrayal of the Puritan as Gothic villain and archetypal enemy of Woman a more ancient and resonant myth of the castrating Old Man, the evil Patriarch with a Knife, into which the Old Testament image of Father Abraham had been long since degraded via Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens's Fagin. It is perhaps an inevitable twentieth-century metamorphosis of the myth of Puritanism, which Hawthorne classically formulated in the age of Victoria, and which even as the values of that time were being everywhere denied in the name of the pleasure principle, was hardening into a stereotype.

To be sure, there is no hint of anti-Semitism, or anti-Judaism, for that matter, in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the Evil Old Man as embodied in Chillingworth is identified not with the Patriarchs of the Old Testament but with the pagan magic of the Indian Medicine Men; and in any case, it is Hester who unmans Dimmesdale—which is to say, female sexuality rather than patriarchal power. Finally, moreover, Hawthorne nowhere deplors Dimmesdale's metaphorical “castration,” portraying it instead as the source of his eloquence and eventual salvation. It is only woman's future loss of full genitality “in the atmosphere of New England” which, albeit not without irony, he seems to regret,

remarking of Hester's daughters, that is, the women of his own time, that "every successive mother has transmitted to her children a fainter bloom . . . and a slighter physical frame."

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Hawthorne's oedipal hostility to the Founding Fathers of America made him a kind of feminist ante littera. Indeed, there is a sense of ill-concealed relish just below the surface of his portrayal of the persecution of Woman as the chief, perhaps unforgivable sin of the Puritans. It seems, finally, as if he lingers lovingly over the details of Hester's public humiliation, thus managing simultaneously to deplore, indulge, and exorcize his own profound misogyny. That resentment of women must be read cryptanalytically, as it were, out of his encoded fictional texts, but it is declared candidly enough in less public comments to his family and friends. In such obiter dicta, it becomes clear that he thought of himself as writing the kind of adversary fiction he did, not (as Melville and Matthiessen believed) to controvert utopians, transcendentalists, "all men who say yes." After all, such authors were by and large male, dissenting sons to whom he felt bound in a confraternity which transcended mere ideology. He thought his mission as an author was to deliver the reading audience of his day from best-selling women novelists, the purveyors of sentimental schlock like *The Lamplighter* and *Wide, Wide World*. Everyone who knows anything about Hawthorne at all knows his famous remark about the "damned mob of scribbling Women," against whom he saw himself competing in vain in the literary marketplace. And that casually uttered sentence sowed the seed of what soon matured into a full-blown critical myth about American Literature, still asserted in some quarters as dogma or even "fact," though it has long since turned into the weariest of clichés: the conviction that the history of our fiction, in the nineteenth century at least, is that of a war between female trash and male High Art.

But to understand the sense in which that tertiary myth derives from Hawthorne's vestigial Puritanism and how it appeals to our own (it is on this note that I propose to conclude) one must be aware of another even more ferocious comment on the subject written by Hawthorne in 1852. Surely he had Mrs. Stowe's just published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in mind when he wrote to their common publisher insisting that no woman should be allowed to write a novel, and that anyone attempting it should be "scarified with an oyster shell." That more is involved here than simple sexism or garden-variety snobbism is betrayed by the odd parallel between Hawthorne's suggested punishment for the feminizers of our culture and the sentence imposed on Hester for adultery. What seems to be at stake is the infringement of a taboo, a kind of sacrilege. But the archetypal imagery in which he clothes this conviction is fully comprehensible only in the light of an inherited Puritan dogma with Old Testament roots which insists that print is holy and should be preserved for males alone, since they alone can attain priesthood. It follows, then, that any female intrusion into the sanctuary of High Literature (the secular equivalent of the Law and the Prophets) demands a stigmatization of the offender as highly visible as Hester's Scarlet Letter, but more permanent, branded ineradicably into the living flesh.