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In: Student Journal of the Department of Anglophone Studies / Volume 1 (2018)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17185/duepublico/47604>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-20181123-141434-3>

Link: <https://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de:443/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=47604>

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Source: This essay was initially submitted as a term paper in the BA seminar “Religion in American Culture” and supervised by Dr Melissa Knox-Raab. Published in Student Journal of the Department of Anglophone Studies (Vol. 1, 2018)

Of Gay Sinners and Grizzly Saints

Fundamentalism in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”

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Nathaniel Hawthorne’s stories often depict Puritans as superstitious, intolerant, patriarchal and oppressive, which led to the belief he held a negative attitude towards them. However, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”² suggests that this resentment is not specifically directed towards Puritans. Hawthorne’s short story rather exposes the dangers of fundamentalism in general. This essay scrutinizes both the portrayal of the community of Merry Mount and the Puritans in the short story to explore the features of fundamentalism they depict. Finally, the restricting and impairing effects of both fundamentalist communities will be assessed using the example of Edgar and Edith, the young couple at the center of Hawthorne’s tale. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” outlines the dangers of religious and non-religious fundamentalism that are still relevant in the present.

Strict adherence to fundamentalist doctrines is not a new problem but has been rooted in religious sanctuaries for centuries. The term *Fundamentalism* was first used in the early twentieth century by American Protestants who took up the cause of protecting the fundamentals of Christianity from ongoing changes (see Brekke 4). Therefore, it is a contemporary term coined after Hawthorne’s era. However, fundamentalism is now understood and used in a broader sense. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as the strict adherence to certain dogmas, which allow no alteration through modern thoughts or customs (see *OED*). This submissiveness to static principle entails the loss of individuality (see Marsden 115). Nothing becomes more important than abiding by strict doctrines, renouncing autonomous behavior or thoughts. Frantically holding on to dogmas also leads to an oversimplification by dividing the world into good and bad (see Marsden 117). Next to the object of worship, any other ethical standard becomes secondary or deficient.

1 This essay was initially submitted as a term paper in the BA seminar “Religion in American Culture” and supervised by Dr Melissa Knox-Raab.

2 The short story was first published in *The Token* in 1836 and republished in his collection of works *Twice-Told Tales* in 1837.

Behavior is only measured by its conformity to the adored doctrine, causing resentment or hatred towards people not adhering to the dogma (see Marsden 3).

Yet, this rigid obedience to beliefs is anything but a recent behavior. All throughout history people have waged war, killed, or let themselves be killed for their (extreme) principles. This indicates that even though the etymology of the word only developed in the twentieth century, the phenomenon of fundamentalism was well known before. In his short story "The May-Pole of Merry Mount", Hawthorne contrasts two forms of fundamentalism, the stern sobriety of the Puritans and the forced mirth of the Merry Mounters, showing the inevitable dangers that are caused by adhering to extremely worldly and religious principles.

PURITAN FUNDAMENTALISM

It is Midsummer Eve and the Merry Mounters are cheerfully celebrating the wedding of Edgar and Edith, two of their residents. On this occasion, some are dressed up, for instance as animals, Indians, or fools and the whole community is dancing around a Maypole. The festivity is interrupted by the arrival of a group of Puritans, who are at enmity with the Merry Mounters as they feel provoked by their mirthful lifestyle. The Puritans' leader, John Endicott, cuts down the Maypole, orders other Puritans to lash some Merry Mounters and take them as prisoners to bestow further punishments upon them for their behavior once they have returned to their settlement. When Endicott approaches Edgar and Edith they both try to take the other one's punishment on themselves. Suspecting valuable qualities in the couple, Endicott orders the other Puritans to take them along more gently.

The Puritans in the story are described as "stern" (Hawthorne 59), "dismal" (60), and "grim" (61). The use of these adjectives creates an unappealing image of the community. Hawthorne portrays their daily routine in the following: "[They] said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the corn-field till evening made it prayer time again" (60). Their religious belief system seems to be the defining element of their lives. They start praying before sunrise, indicating that even their sleep cycle is determined by prayer times. This suggests that firm determination is needed to lead a Puritan life. In between prayers, their only activity is hard manual labor. Their whole life consists of restrictions and work.

When Endicott, the Puritan's stern leader, assesses Edgar's assets, he explicitly mentions towards the other Puritans that he seems "valiant to fight, and sober to toil and pious to pray" (66). Endicott's emphasis on these qualities suggests that they are the most important character traits and chores of a Puritan. The devout and sober sentiment is therefore encouraged within the community. A reason for this is that the Puritans consider themselves to be the Lord's "peculiar people" (63), alluding to the relationship between God and Israel. Like the Israelites, the Puritans also believe the Lord has chosen them to settle in a promised land, in this case New England (see Pribek 349). In order to be worthy of this destiny, they strictly adhere to the doctrine of a devout life. Their days are structured according to prayer time, which highlights their religion as the determining element of their behavior (see Hawthorne 60).

The narrator portrays the Puritans as a homogenous group lacking any sense of individuality. The group is depicted wearing "iron armor" (Hawthorne 61). This alludes to soldiers who fight united for a common cause. Individual characters are of no importance in such a group. Only two Puritans, John Endicott and Peter Palfrey, are mentioned by name. However, Peter Palfrey's actions are restricted to asking questions about further procedures like "what order shall be taken with the prisoners?" and "[h]ow many stripes for the priest?" (64). The reader does not learn anything personal about Palfrey, making him a flat character, a submissive Puritan archetype. Moreover, his constant questions stress his lack of independence.

The only character who stands out is John Endicott, "the Puritan of Puritans" (63). This suggests that Endicott combines all character traits essential to Puritans, making him a symbol of that community. Endicott furthermore displays the tendency to speak in passive sentences such as "branding and cropping of ears, shall be thought of hereafter" (64). Endicott does not act on his personal feelings but instead executes the Puritans' will. Moreover, Hawthorne describes him as "of one substance with his headpiece and breastplate" (63). As the Puritans were previously described as "men of iron" (61), he has become the community and its values. He is no longer an individual character, instead his actions and words represent all Puritans.

When arresting the Merry Mounters for transgressing the Puritans civic order, Endicott says that "Providence shall bring us to one of our own [...] settlements" (64). The acting entity is not the group itself, but a divine power installed over them. Individual decisions are no longer possible, as the Puritans are

controlled externally by their belief, their fundamental guide. As Edgar is inspected after speaking up for his bride, the question "shall not the youth hair be cut" (66) is raised. The word "shall" alludes to biblical language and commandments. The Puritans have to implement strict rules, which are divine to them. Part of these rules is the cooption of everyone. Even the smallest marker of individuality such as a different hairstyle cannot be tolerated. Moreover, the symbolism of cutting someone's hair can also be found in the bible when the figure of Samson loses all his strength after his hair was cut off (see Judg. 16, 19). By cutting Edgars hair, the Puritans take away his individuality and hence his ability and strength to live an autonomous life.

Another piece of evidence for the fundamentalist character of Hawthorne's Puritans is their oversimplification. When describing the Merry Mounters, the diction is restricted to "heathen" (Hawthorne 64), "sinners" (61) and "pagans" (64). The Puritans only evaluate people by their dogma of a devout life. As the Merry Mounters do not adhere to their doctrine, they are perceived as evil and unworthy. The Puritans even go as far as to label them the "bond slaves" of Satan (62). This makes them the ultimate enemies of God's people. Moreover, a victory over Merry Mount would therefore be equal to a victory over Satan himself (see Pribek 347). The equating with biblical evil continues when Endicott calls Blackstone the "priest of Baal" (Hawthorne 63) despite the fact that the story offers no indication of the Merry Mounters actually worshipping Baal.³

This oversimplification entails another feature often linked to fundamentalism, namely violence. George Marsden claims that "[f]undamentalists are [...] conservatives who are willing to take a stand and fight" (1). As their fundamental doctrine needs to be adhered to at any cost, anyone preventing them from doing so or not following the doctrine appears to attack the fundamentalists. In order to end the threat of this transgression, violence becomes an acceptable tool (see 1). In Hawthorne's short story, the Puritans use violence to preserve their religious dogma in several scenes. It is mentioned that "[t]heir weapons were always at hand to shoot the straggling Savage" (Hawthorne 60). The term "savage" alludes to a wild and uncivilized manner, indicating that these people do not share the Puritans' Christian beliefs and are therefore considered less valuable and nearly

3 In the Bible, Israel continuously turns away from God and to Baal (see Jer. 23,8, Judg. 2,11).

inhumane. It is also striking that the word is singular, suggesting a universal concept of an enemy.

Moreover, they are prepared to use methods such as “branding and cropping of ears” (64) on the Merry Mounters. Even though the Merry Mounters engaged merely in loud singing during prayer time and performed tricks (see 61), the Puritans considered these minor provocations “enormities” (61) and as justifications for torture. This further depicts the Puritan immoderateness regarding the use of violence. However, this violence is not limited to people outside their group. Hawthorne mentions that people who even thought of dancing were placed in stocks (see 61). As the merry activity of dancing is not suitable for a stern man or woman of God’s chosen community, thinking of dancing alone is a culpable transgression. Actual dancing is even punished with whipping (see 61). This emphasizes the strictness of the Puritans to ensure that their people live a devout life.

Hawthorne’s Puritans in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” bear significant resemblance to the historical Puritans. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a group of Protestants accused the Church of England of being too similar to the Catholic Church regarding liturgy, hierarchy, cathedrals, and other features (see Coffey and Lim 1-3). Wanting to continue their pursuit of worship and belief, some of them departed from England and settled in New England, where they wanted to create a perfectly pious and devout colony (see Bremer 127). These people, who were soon called Puritans as their self-imposed aim was to practice a purer form of Protestantism, considered themselves to be God’s chosen people (see Person 17). In a sermon during early settlement, John Winthrop reminded his people to “consider that we shall be a city upon a hill” (“A Model of Christian Charity”), highlighting their presumed superiority over other communities and their function as role-models for the rest of the world.

Like them, Hawthorne’s Puritans also consider themselves to be chosen by God. Another similarity is that the historical Puritans also adjusted their lives according to a fundamentalist belief system. Moreover, the incident described in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” is based on historical events when two maypoles in the liberal settlement of Merry Mount were cut down by a group of Puritans from Plymouth in 1627 and 1628 (see Doubleday 95). However, several historical facts are altered by Hawthorne. For instance, the Puritans did not conduct any further punishments against the people of Merry Mount (see McWilliams 9). By changing this fact to the settlers being whipped and being taken captive (see

Hawthorne 64), Hawthorne stresses the brutality of his fundamentalist Puritans towards those who do not share their beliefs.

THE MERRY MOUNTERS – A LIBERAL COMMUNITY?

Similar to the depiction of the Puritans in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," Hawthorne also differs from historical reports when describing the settlers of Merry Mount. Historically, the settlement was a fur-trading plantation which attracted new inhabitants due to its rapid economic success (see McWilliams 4). This implies that the settlement was a gathering of people in need of work. However, Hawthorne portrays the Merry Mounters as a hedonistic and unconcerned crowd, depicting them as the extreme opposite of the Puritans. The settlement of Merry Mount is described as a gathering of all kinds of people like minstrels, wandering players, mummers, and other characters, whose only aim in life is to spread joy in their roles as "mirth-makers" (Hawthorne 59).

Furthermore, describing the settler's diversity highlights their individuality. Merry Mount seems to be a welcoming and unrestricted community, which allows its members to peacefully live their lives. The colors of Merry Mount are depicted as "vivid hue" (54) and "liveliest green" (55). The use of these adjectives emphasizes the vitality of the settlement while the color green suggests several positive features such as health, prosperity, and naturalness. Hawthorne portrays their colony as bathing in a "broad smile of sunset" (56). It seems as though Merry Mount is beloved not only by its people but by nature itself. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that an actual bear is present between the dancers around the maypole (see 55). Not only is nature in favor of the settlement, but the bonds are so close that even wild animals ignore their instincts to participate in the festivities of the colony.

The peaceful atmosphere between humans and wild creatures alludes to the biblical prophecy of God's kingdom in which the wolf will lie next to the lamb and the child will play in front of the viper's hole (see Isa. 11,5-9). Merry Mount represents a paradisiac place. Flowers on the maypole look so beautiful that they "must have grown by magic" (Hawthorne 55). Supernatural powers must be involved in this all too perfect settlement. Repeatedly, terms such as "gay" (54), "jovial," and "mirth" (56) are used to describe the sentiment of the people of Merry

Mount. Evidently, the settlers lead a content and cheerful life. The language in these passages creates the image of a utopian community. It is hard to imagine anything could be bad in this paradise.

John McWilliams claims that Hawthorne was the first writer who portrayed Merry Mount as positive (see 17). However, close reading of the short story will reveal the darker sides of the settlement. Hawthorne compares the intrusion of the Puritans to the sensation “when waking thoughts start up amid the scattered fantasies of a dream” (62). Merry Mount is a living dream which will vanish as soon as one wakes up. This image indicates that there is a darker truth behind the settlers’ lives that deviates from the dreamlike façade Merry Mount tries to uphold. Chester Eisinger claims that “it is not to the fanaticism of [Endicott] that Hawthorne rallies any more than to the wild hedonism of the celebrants” (34). Contrary to McWilliams’ allegation, Hawthorne does not portray Merry Mount as positive but criticizes its lifestyle and calls out its pretense directly, when writing

old and young were gay at Merry Mount. The young deemed themselves happy. The elder spirits, if they knew that mirth was but the counterfeit of happiness, yet followed the false shadow willfully, because at least her garments glittered brightest. (59-60)

Young and old live a cheerful life in Merry Mount. However, Hawthorne’s narrator seems to suggest that mirth cannot be equated with happiness, as it is merely a “false shadow.” While some settlers perceive this merry lifestyle as truthful, by explicitly referring to the settlers’ young age, Hawthorne emphasizes their inexperience and naivety. Those who are able to see through the charade still hold on to it, even if only for fine clothing.

Hawthorne also describes Merry Mount’s harvest festivities, which take place “though their crop was of the smallest” (60). This indicates that the settlers live a mirthful life even though they have no reason to do so. Indeed, a deviation from this lifestyle is not allowed “for it was high treason to be sad at Merry Mount” (58). Hawthorne could be ironic here, however, the whispered conversation between Edith and Edgar about their gloomy sentiments on their wedding day reinforces the impression that sadness is considered offensive (see 58). The young couple is scared of anyone overhearing their conversation, as somber emotions are not allowed. Even though sadness is a human emotion, the residents have to hide such feelings to not defy the social norms of the settlement. The community hence also

oversimplifies life by classifying sadness as a prohibited behavior, only because sadness violates its doctrine of joy. If someone should become sad anyway, feeling this emotion is considered "high treason" (59) against Merry Mount itself. A strict adherence to the dogma of merriness is therefore fundamental to the community. As rigid obedience to a particular idea which allows no deviation is a clear marker of extremism, Merry Mount also displays clear features of fundamentalism.

Another aspect of fundamentalism among the people of Merry Mount is their lack of individuality. Instead of by their actual names, the settlers are continuously referred to as "masquers" (58) and "revellers [sic]" (61). Their only important character trait is their merry behavior within the group. The people of Merry Mount seem to get lost in their festivities and become nothing but participants in it. Furthermore, it is striking that the diversity of the people who joined Merry Mount is listed (see 59), but none of the characters are mentioned individually. By entering Merry Mount, the residents lose their individuality. Their only destiny now is to be part of the community of revelers. Similar to the Puritans, they never act alone but always together, for example when they start "a riotous uproar" (57) together or when they cry to the reverend in unison asking him to strike up a song (see 57). Not one person deviates from the joyful behavior as they all merge into one communal body that upholds the dogma of mirthful conduct and acts in unison. In addition to this, Hawthorne's narrator predicts a joyful life for all of New England "should their banner be triumphant" (54). Again, the focus is not on the people of Merry Mount. The personalization of their banner emphasizes that it is of higher importance and power than the settlers themselves.

Instead of focusing on their individual needs and feelings, the Merry Mounters occupy themselves with the adoration of the maypole, which is at the heart of the community. This is indicated by Hawthorne claiming that "sometimes they call it their religion" (60). Their eagerness to adorn the maypole is further stressed when the settlers decorate it with flowers and ribbons in the most vivid colors, which mirror the joy and festive behavior of the settlers (see 55). Instead of only having a maypole for one day of the year, which would be May Day, it remains in place all year long and is decorated in a merry style every season (see 60). This stresses the settlers' dedication to the maypole. The settlers' enthusiasm alludes to their causeless mirth. The maypole has no significance but to look pretty. However, the Merry Mounters make a great effort to maintain this vanity. This creates an

image of an irrational and preposterous community chasing their principle of a mirthful life without any other consideration.

The perception of Merry Mount is further affected by comparing its settlers to mythical creatures that escaped their ancient stories (see 55). For the celebration some settlers are dressed up as animals wearing “antlers of a stag” (55) or “the grim visage of a wolf” (55). The community appears to be detached from the responsibilities of everyday life. Moreover, associating the settlers with fictitious characters hints at the pretense of their own lives. The reader is led to observe the Merry Mounters distrustfully. Their suspicious image is also created by the choice of disguise as animals like wolves and bears (see 55). These animals are not innocent, but predators, which are mostly associated with danger and fear. The scenery does not seem inviting but creates an unpleasant feeling of threat. However, these animals are portrayed as peaceful, which is utterly out of character for them. This again alludes to the behavior of the people of Merry Mount. They live a peaceful and joyous life together, but, for Hawthorne, they have to neglect their own sentiments and character traits to be able to do so.

Hawthorne points out that a wanderer experiencing the scene would have considered the crowd to be the crew of Comus (see 56). This draws comparisons to John Milton’s masque “Comus” in which Comus lives in the woods and tricks travelers into drinking wine, which will turn them into beasts, lets them forget their past, and makes them creatures that only live for pleasures and sexual indulgences. This suggests that the people of Merry Mount might behave similarly. Frederick Crews claims that Hawthorne does not mention sexual excesses, as it was unusual in his time to mention such topics (see 20). However, the maypole is not only a historical reference but can also be read as a phallic symbol. Their year-long celebration of the maypole suggests that the people of Merry Mount also lead a sexually hedonistic life.

A further fact depicting Merry Mount as fundamentally joyous is that they conduct funerals with “merriment and festive music” (Hawthorne 61). As a funeral is often associated with expression of sadness and loss, the behavior of the Merry Mounters seems inappropriate. Therefore, Hawthorne depicts the Merry Mount as a fundamentalist group, whose central doctrine is to live a cheerful life. Following this dogma also entails losing one’s identity, since it denies emotions as sadness, leading to a similarly oversimplified division of actions and emotions into good and bad.

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO EXTREMES

The two central figures who suffer from both fundamentalist groups in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" are Edith and Edgar. From the beginning they stand out from the rest of the settlers of Merry Mount. Hawthorne creates this impression by describing them as "the two airiest forms, that had ever trodden on any more solid footing than a purple and a golden cloud" (56) amid a "ring of monsters" (56). While the monsters appear frightening, Edgar and Edith are a diversion from this scary atmosphere. In contrast to the beastly crowd, they seem likeable, inviting the reader to identify and sympathize with them. When describing the two, Hawthorne uses words such as "really" and "truly" (57). They do not follow the pretense of Merry Mount, but they are honest and upright. This sets them apart from everyone else.

Moreover, while the other settlers are roaring and crying, Edith and Edgar whisper to each other (see 58). Their communication stands out of the festivities, leaving the reader wondering why they belong to the community. However, a true division between the people of Merry Mount and the couple forms when they become sad and melancholic, imagining that "nothing of futurity will be brighter than the mere remembrance of what is now passing" (58). This violates Merry Mounts doctrine of a cheerful life. Their gloomy sentiments therefore offend the very fundament of their community. Edith continues to question the mirthfulness of Merry Mount, calling it "visionary" and "unreal" (58). She steps out of the fundamentalist world, as she reflects on their actions and challenges the dogma of merriness with an awareness unusual for the settlers.

The whole scene can be perceived as an allusion to the story of Adam and Eve. They were allowed to live in paradise until they ate from the tree of knowledge, which made them aware of their living conditions (see Gen. 3). Like Adam and Eve, Edgar and Edith lose their happy life and their bond to Merry Mount the moment they question their situation. As an immediate reaction "as if a spell had loosened them, down came a little shower of withering rose leaves from the maypole" (Hawthorne 58). The decaying roses allude to the loss of their mirthful life. As soon as they start to question their mirth, they see through the pretense and the dogma of merriness loses its power over them.

The couple finally distances itself from the customs of Merry Mount in the presence of the Puritans. Before, Edgar held a golden staff, a requisite of the festivity, in his right hand and Edith's hand in his left hand (see 56). His attention

was split between the cheerful celebrations and his bride. However, when confronted with real danger represented by the Puritans, he drops the staff and holds Edith in his arms (see 65). This is a decisive moment for the couple and a moment of liberation. Edgar would not have been able to protect Edith fully if he had still held on to the staff. Since the staff can be perceived as a representation of Merry Mount, Edgar lets go of the doctrine of cheerfulness in this moment. Only this action enables him to detect the seriousness of the situation and act accordingly. Edgar's willingness to drop the staff immediately suggests that his attachment to Merry Mount was already fragile before. His priority is the relationship with his wife, which forces him to clearly distance himself from the other Merry Mounters. Edgar and Edith hold on to each other, forming a union of their own and protecting each other from the Puritans as well as distancing themselves from the Merry Mounters. This emphasizes their distance to both parties involved.

At the sight of the couple, Endicott reacts in an unusually empathetic manner. Beforehand, he was described as an "immitigable zealot" (65). This raises expectations of him acting remorseless and stern against anyone not living a devout and godly life. However, when faced with Edgar's and Edith's willingness to step in for each other (see 65-66), Hawthorne claims that "the iron man was softened" (66). As Endicott's unexpected behavior is a clear deviation from the invented norm, it stands out in the story. Its unusualness is further stressed by the antithesis between "iron" and "softened." These terms normally contradict each other and suggest that Puritans, which were previously associated with iron, cannot act empathically. In this case the terms are combined, underlining the deviation Endicott shows in this situation from typical Puritan behavior.

Endicott's behavior might suggest that he is touched by their love for each other. However, a practical reason is more likely. Robert Gale argues that the reason for Endicott's sympathies towards the couple is that he admires them for their bravery (see 319-320). This assumption is strengthened later on as he describes Edgar as "valiant to fight" (Hawthorne 66). It seems that Edgar's bravery rather than his love has left an impression on Endicott. Crews claims that "the whole plot tends toward reconciliation. Thus, for example, Endicott shows a surprising sympathy with the May couple" (23). The term 'reconciliation' would indicate that a peaceful coexistence might be possible. However, Crews neglects the fact that Endicott still plans to transform Edgar and Edith into Puritans (see Hawthorne 66). As this is a

forced assimilation without respecting them or their customs, no reconciliation can be detected.

Crews suggests that "[t]he tale's conclusion, with the chastened Lord and Lady of the May heading [heavenward] with a just commixture of sobriety and affection, resolves [the] conflict [...] agreeably" (18). A sense of union of the two extremes in the couple might be indicated by the fact that no resistance is mentioned when Endicott decides to take them along. However, I think that their lack of resistance rather suggests their powerlessness in this situation as they are threatened by the Puritan violence and know that physical resistance is not an option. This is suggested by the fact that Edgar and Edith both try to persuade Endicott verbally to spare their spouse by Edgar asking to "let Edith go untouched" (Hawthorne 65) and Edith asking to "lay it all on [her]" (66). As they are denied this request, they give up arguing and "never wasted one regretful thought on the vanities of Merry Mount" (67). Not looking back to their former lives does not show their contentment with their lives among the Puritans, but merely their negative attitude towards the fundamentalist community of Merry Mount. They do not fit in and will not miss the mirthful pretense.

Yet their life among the Puritans will not be an improvement to their former life as both have to "support each other on the difficult path" (67). Both fundamentalist communities are equally restricting. In the same way that Edgar and Edith have been forced to adhere to the doctrine of Merry Mount before, they are forced to adhere to the belief system of the Puritans now. Edgar will have to cut his hair, work, pray, and fight, while Edith will need to take on the role of a good mother (see 66). They are neither asked for their opinion nor for their consent concerning these plans. Once again, the couple will have to give up their individuality in order to abide to the community's rules.

Richard Fogle claims that Edgar and Edith "are a symbol of humanity, forced to choose between the 'systematic gayety' of Merry Mount and the 'moral gloom' of the Puritans" (61). They are caught between two extremes. Neither one is suitable as both constrain people from being free. In Merry Mount, the couple is not allowed to feel sad (see Hawthorne 58). They feel the need to whisper to prevent being caught defying the doctrine of cheerfulness. However, Hawthorne labels their sentiments "real passion" (58). By denying Edgar and Edith permission to express their emotions, the Merry Mounters restrict them in their humanity. In contrast to this, the Puritans deny them any joy, as their only aims in life are hard work,

praying, and fighting (see 65). This also constrains the couple, as they are not allowed to shape their lives individually. The Puritans depict a homogenous community in which there is no room for individual human beings. Edgar and Edith are caught between two poles, because they feel both cheerful and gloomy emotions. As they have no chance of liberating themselves from these fundamentalist groups, a happy end for the couple is not possible.

In the fight between Merry Mount and the Puritans, no group is depicted as being more favorable. Hawthorne describes a clash between “grizzly saints” and “gay sinners” (62). As saints have a positive connotation while sinners a negative one, the contradictory language indicates that both groups have darker sides accompanying their positive features. Merry Mount is a community detached from the everyday world which is suggested by the description of Puritans’ arrival as “waking thoughts [...] amid the scattered fantasies of a dream” (62). Merry Mount was a fragile delusion from the beginning since it cannot withstand the Puritans attack. The settlers are petrified in the face of the “dread magician” (63), Endicott. Merry Mount does not fight back or intervene when the maypole is cut down. Their only reaction is a “groan for their idol” (64). This depicts the Merry Mounters as incapable of facing threatening situations. Contrary to this, the Puritans are superior in the battle, since their devout life resolves solely around prayer, fighting, and work (see 66). However, the description of their daily routine seems utterly joyless. In the end, both parties are incapable of understanding each other and thus fail to establish a balanced life, doomed to live the monochromaticity of fundamentalism.

CONCLUSION

“The May-Pole of Merry Mount” is based on historical events. Fundamentalist Puritans were responsible for cutting down maypoles in a settlement called Merry Mount. However, several facts are altered, suggesting that the short story is not a report on historical events but rather tries to convey a more abstract message by portraying how extreme principles, whether they are secular or religious, restricts human beings. Both communities in Hawthorne’s story show features of fundamentalism. They strictly adhere to their specific dogmas, depict a lack of individuality, and live according to their oversimplified classifications of the world.

The only two characters not adhering to the fundamentalist belief systems are Edgar and Edith. The story depicts the couple as complex, since they combine both cheerful and gloomy sentiments and reflect critically on their situation. However, they are equally restricted by both fundamentalist communities and are forced to adjust to the respective extreme position, because each community cannot accept features of the other. Therefore, Edgar and Edith cannot live a life that balances both extremes. As Hawthorne criticizes the two opposing communities equally and shows that each fundamentalist group restricts people, "The May Pole of Merry Mount" exposes the dangers of fundamentalism.

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