

‘Puritanism and Providentialism inexorably shape the course of the American mind.’ How pervasive is the impact of religion on American literary history?

Puritan ideology and providential meaning, which is reflected in the aim to begin anew through entering a new continent, creating a new history and living a new dream, becomes central to the spirit of America. On the one hand the existing relation between religion and literature has a forming effect on the “American frame of mind, form of sensibility or mode of experience” (Gunn 1979: 127) on the other hand it challenges and even undermines the pure existence of the American mind. Thus, scholars see “Puritanism, along with the frontier spirit, romanticism, and realism” as an important influence on American writing (Reising 1986: 49).

Over the decades this American frame of mind calls up varieties and modifies the understanding of faith and God. Puritans understanding of a perfect community with traditional values, which is reflected in *the Scarlet Letter* is altered through Huck’s satirical behaviour and literal religious understanding in an unjust society and almost fades away in Gatsby’s materialistic anonymity. Therefore the reader of American literature has to trace a trail where religious understanding alternates and guides beyond the frontier of mind into a “drama of American history and identity” (Reising 1986: 50).

Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* is an impressive example for omnipresent religion in literature. *The Scarlet Letter* defines puritan awareness of sin followed by punishment and isolation as the frame and centre of society in 17th Century Boston. This puritan community, which can be seen as confined through its struggle for salvation, forms the surrounding in which Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth live three different consciousnesses of sin. Hester, although accepting her punishment, does not feel that she has sinned

against God or the community. Dimmesdale, on the contrary, regards their committed sin as ubiquitous and its consequences as inevitable. Chillingworth centres his life on vengeance and requires godly power over the adulterers and thus does not realise sinning as such. Hence, *the Scarlet Letter* represents three different positions to the allegory of sin and challenges therefore the clear inherited puritan structure where punishment must follow sin. Although, the novel discusses this essential puritan issue, it still shows a “tolerance and understanding of life” that is opposed to “the harsh discipline of that particular culture and religion” (Lombardo 1993: 173). This questioning of puritan ideals can also be seen in the punishment, the letter A, itself. The letter is reducing Hester from an individual to the personification of sin and unworthiness. Since the meaning of the letter changes from adultery to able, it acts against the punishment and values it stands for. Nevertheless, it is Hester who identifies with the letter and accepts the enforced punishment since it also liberates her and the community “from the mutual necessity for compassion and sympathy” (Joyce 1990: 33).

Although, the study of sin and its effects is a major theme in *the Scarlet Letter* the “social and religious relationship, which give sin its force” (Reising 1986: 70) has to be analysed too. The Boston community regards Arthur as the personification of all puritan ideals, values and traditions. Yet, under this surface, Arthur’s soul is suffering isolation in an obsessive cycle of guilt, remorse and psychological self-punishment. His gradual, moral and physical decline increases, with the awareness of his personal responsibility towards the community and God. Arthur is “prevented from confessing his sin as much by the community’s view of him” (Reising 1986: 70) as by his own incapacity. Only when he finally overcomes his weakness and returns confessing to the community the remission of his sin seems possible.

On the one hand *the Scarlet Letter* exemplifies the life in an “iron-bound society” and “commanding inescapable” puritan world (Ruland and Bradbury 1992: 145). On the other hand Hawthorne is also criticising these obstinate puritan values in his novel. This understanding is reflected in Hawthorne’s use of colours as symbols in his work. The atmosphere and setting of the novel, puritan Boston, is constantly described as “sad-colored” and “gray” (Hawthorne 1998: 47). The only colours in the novel seem to be the letter A, Pearl’s clothes and the rosebush near the prison; thus on or near the very symbols of sin. Furthermore, Hawthorne describes Puritans as “hard-featured” and “pitiless” persons (Hawthorne 1998: 51), which also symbolizes social criticism.

However, Hawthorne pictures a Boston society, which is convinced to live fixed God-given allegories of life. The community upholds their puritan values by all means to ensure their understanding of “God’s plan for the redemption of His creation” (Ruland and Bradbury 1992: 15). Although in Hester’s case this results in dehumanization and isolation, the community does not feel the lack of pity and the eventuality of misjudgement. As a consequence the puritan interpretations of God’s plan might easily result in the “gap between divine intentions and human fulfilment” (Ruland and Bradbury 1992: 13).

Over the course of American literary history this gap changes and even widens through critical characters in distinguishing novels such as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain’s attempt to deal with religion and faith is distinctive to Hawthorne’s. The setting is not 17th century Boston but late nineteenth-century Southwest, whose society must be described as racist, religious and egalitarian (Bercovitch 2004: 335). Mark Twain deals with major religious topics such as sin, biblical interpretations and problems of an unjust society in a satirical, and thus entirely different way as Hawthorne.

This can be seen in Huck's understanding of truth as variable, which is opposed to the Puritan's understanding of truth as unalterable. In Chapter 16, Huck lies to rescue Jim from recurrent slavery and feels exactly the same as if he would have spoken the truth. He concludes that in future he will lie or tell the truth "whichever come handiest at the time" (Twain 1999: 85). Whereas Puritans see the establishment of truth and their ideas on morality as essential in their life, Twain challenges every given truth, moral and traditional understanding. This provocative view is also shown in Jim's interpretation of the biblical story of Solomon's wisdom. Jim offers a fresh insightful standpoint, which refers to the problems of racial hierarchy. At this point of history slaves are only seen as property, without any legal rights and almost no distinction is made between the values of their human life and animals. Since his understanding is rooted in an alternative system of moral attitudes, values and thoughts, it questions the given social order and also the puritan biblical understanding.

Although, Huck and Jim are specific character types that oppose ideals and conventional religious understanding they still reflect on religious issues and try to make sense of the allegories. As a result, Twain has created characters that do not deal with religious interpretations but satirically develop religious misinterpretations. Huck can be seen as "a master of literal statement" (Bercovitch 2004: 351) and as a consequence he takes away the allegory on which religion relies so much. Right in the beginning Huck's literal understanding of "the bad place" where he wishes to be because he "couldn't see no advantage in going where she [Miss Watson] was going" challenges the basic religious attitude of heaven and hell. Huck's Sunday school description of heaven where hanging "around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever" (Twain 1999: 4) is nothing to aspire, confronts Puritan's basic understanding of predestination.

Furthermore, this literal understanding of religious allegories creates the satirical humour but does also indicate a loss of true faith in late 19th Century society. Yet, the 2nd major character of the novel, Jim, is deeply religious although he believes in another form of faith. Prophecy and a providential understanding keep his life bearable and going. Within Jim's character religion alternates to good and bad luck whereas in the character of Huck a religious understanding does not exist at all. Jim is in a very insecure position as runaway slave and looks therefore very fearfully in the future. Huck, however, does not look in the future at all as long as he has some food and bootie at his disposal. The idea, that for Huck the physical world seems more important than the spiritual, might refer to the future 20th century religion of materialism. However, as no religious understanding is presented as accurate, the reader feels, that Twain identifies superstition, religious literalism and the idea of materialism as similar dangerous to humanity.

Materialism that replaces religion might be a rather marginal issue in *Huckleberry Finn* but is, nevertheless, an important aspect of the American society in the 20th Century. Fitzgerald, deals with this issue in *the Great Gatsby*, a "tale of the American Dream gone wrong" (Ruland and Bradbury 1992: 248). Religion and faith in a traditional Puritan point of view do not exist anymore in this modern age of machines. Fitzgerald's America is presented as the setting of a new life with a new religious atheism. The new Gods of this urban society are consumer goods of mass production and new inventions such as automobiles and radios. The American God of advertisement Dr. T.J. Eckleburg symbolises this new fascination of materialism and commercialisms. In so far, a dead modern God, narrowed down to an advertisement, which denies every religious connection to a Puritan past can be found in *the Great Gatsby*. Society is not a community of truth and values anymore as it is in *the Scarlet letter*. Everywhere at all levels society prevails

sterility, failure of love and emptiness. Yet, Fitzgerald does not present the human creation of new Gods as an achievement but does rather picture them as dangerous. The cars in the novel are ironically described with black wheels, which might foreshadow Myrtle's death and telephones are only interrupting conversations and delivering bad news. Furthermore, these mechanical perfections create a sense of human inferiority and "before the end, one began to pray to it" (Veblen 1998: 42).

Nevertheless, Gatsby, who is the only character that holds on to the romantic vision of an ideal American identity, embodies at least some of the issues of providentialism and Puritanism. He can be seen as a self-made man who represents the true idealism of the American dream. Self-control and good luck go together with Gatsby's ability to recreate an insubstantial Gatsby from an ordinary James Gatz. This ability and courage to shape and improve, to even create a whole new past, can be seen as attitudes referring to the Puritan "belief in individual responsibility" (Takaki 1990: 292). In reading *the Great Gatsby*, the American dream cannot simply be narrowed down to a way of materialistic achievement. Rather it has to be recognised that it is also about the psychological and moral responsibilities while living the dream of wealth. The puritan mentality, which implies never to waste money or time, try to improve yourself and the community are also tasks for Gatsby and can be acknowledged as a secular religion of America. As a consequence, Gatsby must be seen as a character with principles and efforts for improvement and not only as moderate and created by a materialistic American vision of life.

Yet, Fitzgerald's moral valley of ashes seems to be the sad place of destination, after Hester's path in isolation and Huck's rejection of tradition. In *the Great Gatsby* the reader has to deal with aimless characters and a sterile new

understanding of moral themes. America in a puritan perspective loses itself, and a corrupt world of rootless, alienated and fragmented characters, surrounded by mechanical Gods, remains. Furthermore, the final pages of *the Great Gatsby* reveal the understanding of an American identity and manifest that the ideal of the American dream is inexistent as Gatsby vanishes like the obscene word someone has written on his steps (Fitzgerald 2000: 171).

The final look on the American dream and identity in a modern world of sterility contrasts the childish nature world of Huck and opposes puritan pastoral America. Hawthorne, Twain and Fitzgerald deal with the themes of religion in different ways. In *the Scarlet Letter* religious impact can be seen as absolute pervasive since sin, punishment and salvation are major themes in this novel. Hawthorne's discussion of these themes allows a deeper insight into Puritanism and the idea of predestination but also criticises their strict way to live. 30 years later, religion is still a significant issue for Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet, Twain questions satirically the puritan literal understanding of the bible and let truth appear as variable. Huck and Jim play with biblical allegories and consequently transform religious understanding into superstition and materialism. Moving on into the Golden Age of the 1920's, religious aspects seem to fade away and are substituted by new Gods in a new age. In *the Great Gatsby*, materialism has replaced a traditional religious understanding and contributes from now on to the development of an American identity. However, religious impact has to be seen as pervasive in American literary history. Although its significance over the years has altered, it is constantly present and has therefore shaped the course of the American mind.

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