

Nathaniel Hawthorne “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”

- I. Learning Objectives
- II. About the Author
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- IV. Thinking about the Text
- V. Thinking with the Text

I. Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Contrast and compare two guiding ideas of the American republic: the pursuit of happiness (see the Declaration of Independence) and the spirit of reverence (see the Mayflower Compact) as personified in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The May-Pole of Merry Mount;”
- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it;
- Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text;
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development
- Summarize the key supporting details and ideas;
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text;
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; and
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Common Core State Standards, History/Social Studies

RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.6, RH.9-10.8, RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, RH.11-12.4

Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts

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RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.9, RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3,
RL.11-12.4, RL.11-12.5

II. About the Author

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64), novelist and short story writer, was born into an old, established New England family in Salem, Massachusetts. His great-great-grandfather, John Hathorne, was one of the judges who presided over the Salem Witch Trials; it is said that young Hawthorne added the “w” to his birth surname, “Hathorne,” to distance himself from this infamous ancestor. Few American authors have written more searchingly and profoundly about the American character. Enduring moral and religious questions, as they emerged in the life of the Puritans and their New England descendants, are the focus of many of Hawthorne’s writings, including his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*. His marvelously crafted stories also take us deeply into the American soul, with its dark motives, conflicting aspirations, and moral struggles. “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” one such story, appeared in his first published collection of stories, *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). Said by the author to be a “sort of allegory,” it depicts an early version of the culture wars, between a party of otherworldly piety or “gloom” (the Puritans) and a party of pleasure or “jollity” (the Merry-Mounters). The cultural struggles between the two outlooks on life appear to be deeply embedded in the American grain.

III. Summary

The story is set in Massachusetts around 1630, at the time of the first English colonies in the New World. It depicts an incident in the feud between the Puritans at Salem, under their governor, John Endicott, and a rival settlement called Merry Mount, founded by Thomas Morton. These two settlements represent different stances toward the world. Hawthorne says that “jollity and gloom were contending for an empire,” and that “the future complexion of [New] England was involved in this important quarrel” (1, 7). The story opens with the people of Merry Mount celebrating round their revered May-Pole. Their wild festivities culminate with the marriage of a youth and a maiden, Edgar and Edith, the lord and lady of the May-Pole. After introducing us to this young couple, Hawthorne, in the middle section of the story, interrupts the story of the wedding to describe the origins of the hedonistic philosophy of Merry Mount, as well as the main features of the Puritans. The third and final section of the story depicts a Puritan raid upon the Merry Mount gathering, just after the marriage had taken place. Endicott and his

followers chop down the May-Pole and have its votaries whipped and placed in the stocks. They arrest the high priest of Merry Mount and kill the dancing bear. Most interesting, though, is what happens to the newlywed couple. Endicott, a man of iron, is unaccountably softened by their obvious love and care for one another, and he spares them the punishments that the others receive. Instead, he orders that they be dressed in more modest clothing, Edgar has his hair cut in the “true pumpkin-shell fashion,” and Endicott takes them into the Puritan fold. In the final paragraph, Endicott, the severest Puritan of them all, salvages a wreath of roses taken from the May-Pole itself and places it over the heads of Edith and Edgar.

IV. Thinking about the Text

A. The Merry-Mounters

1. Describe the scene of the festival around the May-Pole, including their leader, who is likened to Comus (the Greek god of revelry and merrymaking, son and cupbearer to the god Dionysus, or Bacchus, to the Romans, usually depicted as a winged youth or as a child-satyr) (2–4). How is the leader like Comus? What do the festivities tell you about the people of Merry Mount?
2. What is the May-Pole (5–6)? What does it signify? What does it mean that the Merry-Mounters worship it?
3. How do the Merry-Mounters live day by day? Why do they live as they do? Why have they embraced “a wild philosophy of pleasure” (5)? Can you defend their view of life?
4. What is the meaning of the presence of wild animals—and of human beings costumed as half-human/half-animal—at their festival (2)? What is the implicit view of the place of humankind in the natural world?
5. What does this community produce? Do you think this community will last long given the Merry-Mounters’ free-spirited ways? Why or why not?
6. Do you think Hawthorne’s description of Merry Mount is realistic and thus serious? Or, do you think the story is a satire?

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IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Hawthorne's story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Yuval Levin, editor of National Affairs.

Amy Kass: We recognize the sort of people that the Merry-Mounters are: they are the people who live to eat, drink, and be merry. But the Merry-Mounters take this to an extreme. They are like that all year long. In the story, they are described as a wild throng, or as a "Crew of Comus," an ancient god of revelry related to Bacchus or the Greek Dionysus.

Leon Kass: I would modify this formulation of "eat, drink, and be merry" to "eat drink, dance, and be merry, for *tomorrow you will die*." This rush into the life of pleasure, the celebration the present moment, and the overcoming of all of the boundaries and distinctions, which in the end perhaps do not really mean anything anyhow, is, I think, a kind of false joy covering over what is underlying a deeper despair.

Yuval Levin: The story tells us, "Oh, people of the Golden Age, the chief of your husbandry, was to raise flowers!" What does this mean? Flowers as opposed to food?

Amy Kass: Flowers can only go so far. But can the community sustain over the years, without a settlement? Without settled ways? With this kind of monthly, if not daily, revelry?

Leon Kass: To be interested in the flower and not in the seed and not in the fruit is another way of saying that one really just wants the bloom of things and nothing fruitful. The fruitfulness of flowering is not on their minds. They want the beauty of the present moment. The problem, from the point of view of the community, is not only that they do not plant and toil, but that they give no thought whatsoever to the future.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at
www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.*

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B. The Puritans

1. Looking at page 6, what are the Puritans like? What motivates them?
2. What do they revere? What is their view of the place of humankind in the natural world?
3. Why do the Puritans attack Merry Mount (7)? Can you defend what they think and do?
4. Why the practice of public shaming (the stocks) of wrongdoers (8)? What is the relationship between shame and societal norms? What is the role of shame in a community? Could a community last without shame?
5. Do you think the Puritan community, as depicted, can last? Why or why not? What does it produce?
6. Is Hawthorne's picture of the Puritans satirical or serious? What do we know of the historical Puritans in America? Do they fit Hawthorne's description?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Historically, the Puritans were a Protestant English sect. They believed that the Reformation in England had not gone far enough, that the Church of England was still too much like the Roman Catholic Church in its hierarchies and in its pomp and circumstance. While we now use the term “puritan” to mean anti-pleasure and straight-laced, if one wants to be fair to them, one would say that they aspire to a kind of purity and holiness in all of the affairs of daily life. Everything they did was for the glory of God. And in the Mayflower Compact, which they signed coming to America, bringing glory to God is indicated as their goal in covenanting with one another—it is not to come and exercise their unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

If you want to put the best construction on the Puritans, you say: “They believe that this is a God-given land on which they are to erect a holy community; and the Merry-Mounters are Pagans—worse than Pagans, they are spirits of the devil who are defiling the land and should be removed.”

Yuval Levin: Are those the Puritans we meet here? Or are those the Puritans as they would like to understand themselves?

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Leon Kass: Or is the description in the story the way the Merry-Mounters see the Puritans? “Unfortunately we’re not the only people here. There are these killjoys, there is this party of gloom. And all they want to do is pray in the morning, work all day, and pray in the evening.”

Yuval Levin: Is it unfair to describe the Puritans as “pray in the morning, pray in the evening, and work all day”? Wouldn’t they have taken that as a compliment?

Leon Kass: I think they would have taken that as a compliment. It is not directly said in the story, but the Puritans are really animated by a kind of piety. They have come here to pray and they have come here to work.

Amy Kass: But they bring with them a kind of piety that is so severe that it seems almost too formidable.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

C. The Young Couple: Edith and Edgar

1. What is the premonition that Edith and Edgar have just before they are to be married? What is “Edith’s mystery” (4)?
2. What is their reaction—to each other, and to Endicott—when threatened with punishment (10)?
3. Are they typical Merry-Mounters, or do they represent something different? If so, what is it?

IN CONVERSATION

Yuval Levin: Everyone who observes this marriage—from Hawthorne, to the bride and groom, to the Puritans—seems to observe it with a kind of sorrow, with a sense that the joy that is here cannot possibly last, and they seem to take that to be the most powerful lesson of what they’re observing.

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Diana Schaub: It isn't simply the Puritans that destroy the community, but it is also the love between Edith and Edgar. Hawthorne writes that, "From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth's doom of care, and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount."

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

4. Do you think Edith and Edgar's current joy in one another, as described at their wedding, will fade with time?
5. What is it about them that moves and softens Endicott, the Puritan of Puritans? What is the meaning of the fact that he throws over their heads a wreath taken from the May-Pole? What is meant when this is called "a deed of prophecy" (10)?

IN CONVERSATION

Diana Schaub: The Puritan impulse is to rely on the stocks, which circle the head and is a mechanism of shame. But at the end, it is Endicott himself who throws the wreath over the couple, together. So the wreath is now something that unites the two of them. To the extent that shame still exists it will be a kind of internalized shame, rather than externalized shame—which is a kind of violation of privacy.

Leon Kass: I like this, but I think that the Puritan emphasis on shame deserves at least a cheer and a half, if not two. Yes, they are severe. Nobody would really like to live under their rule.

But the question is: can you sustain private, robust family life if the external culture is utterly shameless? If you do not have some kind of communal norms that lead people to be ashamed of behaving in certain kinds of Merry-Mountish ways? We can turn this conversation to today and ask if there is some connection between the precarious state of marriage and family in the United States—especially, by the way, in nonreligious communities—and the disappearance of

public shame all together?

It is too easy, I think, to dismiss as puritanical and oppressive the teaching that suggests that how you comport yourself in public, how you hold your body, how you dress, how you speak, affects public life and *even* affects this little domestic nursery of humanity. We as a society are inclined today to think that guilt is bad and shame is worse, but no moral community can do without either.

Diana Schaub: I see Hawthorne, though, as very much a critic of the way in which the Puritans handled shame. There is something very violative about the stocks because it prevents the natural response of hiding your shame.

In other words, it not only shames you, but it forces you to present that shamed face publicly by not allowing you to hide yourself. For Hawthorne, this violates something about a kind of public/private distinction, and the problem with the Puritans is they do not admit that distinction between public and private. Hawthorne is not against shame or certain uses of shame, but shame has to be used in the right way. The Puritans seem to have erred in that, and not just by excess or by going too far, but in some really fundamental way.

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6. Why, when they leave Merry Mount, do they leave without regret (10–11)? Are they now going to become Puritans like the rest? Or are they bringing something new to Puritanville? If so, what?

D. The Story as “a Sort of Allegory”

1. What does Hawthorne mean when he says that “the facts . . . have wrought themselves . . . into a sort of allegory” (1)? (*Note: An allegory is a literary device in which characters or events represent or symbolize ideas and concepts.*) An allegory of what?
2. We are told that the parties of gloom (the Puritans) and jollity (the Merry-Mounters) were contending for an empire (1).

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- a. As presented in the story, would you rather live among the Puritans or among the Merry-Mounters? Why?
- b. Does either party win a clear victory over the other? Or can neither side win unless it incorporates something from the other—or from some third alternative (perhaps represented here by the love of Edith and Edgar)? What should the Puritans learn from the Merry-Mounters? And vice versa? What should both groups learn from Edith and Edgar?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Hawthorne indicates that this is a contest between the two parties for who shall have empire in New England. And, by the end of the story, we know the answer: Merry Mount is finished, and the Puritans have won.

Diana Schaub: No, I have not read that, because what Edith and Edgar bear with them into the Puritan community will transform that community. The wreath that they bring with them and the passion that leads to their union is a transfiguration of the Puritan community so that, in a way, the Puritan community cannot continue either if it is not refreshed from some kernel of truth that Merry Mount represents.

Leon Kass: When Endicott says that he is softened by the sight of this couple, he is softened by how they both need and help one another and especially by their willingness to take the punishment owed to the other—even if it meant death to the self. He is very taken by this. Then he says that there is something in the youth that would make him fit to fight and able to toil and even to be pious. And she—Edith—can become a mother in our Israel and raise children who have been better bred than she. You think that what they are bringing to the community is somewhat more than what Endicott sees in their possibility?

Diana Schaub: Well, it seems that in this moment he sees it. In other words, the Puritans try to live as a community of souls, or a community of spirits. But that also is unsustainable: You cannot live just at the level of the body as the Merry-Mounters do, and you cannot live just at the level of the soul as the Puritans do. So the couple shows that we are compound beings, that the high and the low are

not disjunct from one another—and the priest of the Puritans has to glimpse that and make a place for it within this Puritan order.

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V. Thinking with the Text

From its earliest beginnings, America has held together two ideas and practices that are often thought to be—and sometimes are in fact—in tension with each other: the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion. In his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville attributes both of these spirits to the Puritans, whom he takes to provide the point of departure for the American way of life. Every human community reverences or looks up to something. But not every community encourages the exercise of the rights to life, liberty, and the private pursuit of happiness. Conversely, not all pursuits of private happiness are compatible with a sustainable and decent community, especially where there is a lack of reverence that would support private self-restraint and public morals. The story invites us to consider some of the larger questions about the relation, especially in America, among religion, morality, freedom, and human flourishing. It also invites questions about the place of marriage and family among people who are devoted to the pursuit of individual happiness, on the one hand, and to the glory of Heaven, on the other.

A. Religion and Freedom (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence.)

1. Is there anything distinctly American about the confrontation between the two kinds of communities and views Hawthorne describes? Does the contest continue today? If so, how would you describe its present form?
2. Which provides better support for a society of free, self-governing individuals: a biblical religion like that of the Puritans or nature worship like that of the Merry-Mounters?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: What Hawthorne shows is that these two possibilities—jollity and gloom—go to the core of our native grain. This problem in the story is not one that we have gotten rid of, either fictionally or historically. Think of Woodstock versus the rise of evangelical religions; or think of the hippies versus the establishment. In the caricature that we get, these tensions abound, and they are still with us. Hawthorne is providing us with a way of living with both of these things, and he does so by embracing the alternative of marriage based on freedom and love within a religious community. But I think that what is really important is to see that we—each of us—have to negotiate those tensions.

Diana Schaub: We realize that the utopianism is present among the Puritans as much it is among the Merry-Mounters. And in that sense, Hawthorne is a critic of this utopian strand within America that just tries to start things over and begin everything anew.

Yuval Levin: Both the Puritans and the Merry-Mounters escape to the forest for reasons that are not as different as they think they are. And in that sense, both groups need the family to be reminded of what it is they think they can change, but cannot.

Leon Kass: They learn that human nature has to be taken as it is and refined and not simply deformed in the name of some ideology or creed, and that life in its concreteness with some of its fundamental passions has to be honored if one is going to have a community that is not going to maim the human beings who live among them.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

B. Marriage and Community

1. Is there something uniquely American about the marriage of Edgar and Edith?
2. What does the story suggest is the proper relationship between marriage/family and community—especially between marriage/family and a community like

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- ours, which is based not on ancient traditions and families but on shared ideals and principles? What is the relationship between the importance of marriage/family and the American celebration of the individual?
3. If the Merry-Mounters celebrate the body without regard to the soul and the Puritans celebrate the (disembodied) soul without regard to earthly life, is there something in marriage and family that can correct each of these partial and utopian visions?
 4. Does a marriage like that of Edgar and Edith still offer a possible answer to current problems in American society? What are those problems, and that answer, in modern America?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Edgar and Edith bring love and marriage together by having a marriage that is based on love. While that is not peculiarly American, they bring to the Puritan community this notion that a marriage can be based on love and that there can be joy within marriage.

Leon Kass: Another way to put this would be that it is a marriage based on choice, which is an idea that appeals very much to Americans. It is also true that the Puritans came to America as families. They did not send the men first to set out and find riches and only then send for the rest of their family, but they came to America as whole, unbroken families. The whole conception of life for the Puritans is not the life of the rugged individual with his rights, seeking his own happiness, but the conception is that family forms the basis of any community.

This is a lesson that liberalism needs. The conceit of the Declaration [of Independence] is that the self-evident truths, which I have always regarded as self-evidently true, rest upon a conception of the human being that is self-evidently false.

That is to say, that we are in the world as isolated individuals rather than as nested in families of origin and families of perpetuation. But we are not radical isolates. And a community that encourages us to think of ourselves only in terms of our rights—and in terms of our own happiness, our own liberty, or our own life—

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does not have the wherewithal to produce even the necessities of self-defense, never mind the richness of community life or the education of children or the rearing of people of fine character that make for a decent life and not just a mirthful one.

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C. Love and Happiness

1. Is there a difference between jollity (or mirth) and genuine happiness (or joy)? If so, what is the difference? Is real happiness compatible with sadness, loss, and suffering? Why or why not?
2. What is the difference between true love and mere sexual enjoyment? Does true love require accepting sadness, loss, and suffering? Why or why not?
3. Is true love necessary for rich personal happiness? For a fulfilled life?

Writing Prompts:

- Is true love necessary for rich personal happiness? For a fulfilled life? After reading “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” write an essay that answers the question by defining true love. Support your discussion with evidence from the text. (Informational or Explanatory/Definition)
- What does the story suggest is the proper relationship between marriage/family and community—especially between marriage/family and a community like ours, which is based not on ancient traditions and families but on shared ideals and principles? After reading “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” write an essay that compares the story’s treatment of marriage/family and community with the place of marriage/family in contemporary America, and that argues for one over the other. Be sure to support your position with evidence from the text. (Argumentation/Comparison)
- Is there a difference between jollity (or mirth) and genuine happiness (or joy)? If so, what is the difference? Is real happiness compatible with sadness, loss, and suffering? Why or why not? After reading “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,”

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write an essay that addresses the question and support your position with evidence from the text. (Argumentation/Analysis)



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