Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short stories “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) and “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”(1835) deal with major conflicts on several levels.

Both stories dramatize conflicts between characters, the protagonists' inner conflicts, and more general conflicts between good and evil. I will begin with an obvious, personal conflict between Young Goodman Brown and his wife Faith and then move on to the story dominating inner conflict of Young Goodman Brown. Chapter 2 deals with the conflict of good and evil in the world and the effect of Young Goodman Browns nightly journey in the woods on his further life. The conflicts of “The Maypole of Merry Mount” will be analysed in general (Puritans against the settlers) and more specifically (internal conflict of the Merry Mount colony). To make the conflicts of “Young Goodman Brown” and “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” more clear not only the conflicts themselves will be analysed but a description of the way they are expressed be given as well. The term paper will be rounded up by a conclusion which explains the allegorical traits of the two stories.

2. Young Goodman Brown

“Young Goodman Brown” was first published in 1835 and since then has become one of Hawthorne’s most popular stories. Characteristic of the conflicts is their complexity. At the beginning of the story the main conflict seems to be a marital row between husband and wife but it
increases to an all-embracing conflict of good and evil in the world. All this is expressed by the aid of one single character: Young Goodman Brown, who experiences everything during only one night but the influences are strong enough to change his whole life.

2.1 Conflict 1: Young Goodman Brown – Faith

The conflict between Young Goodman Brown and Faith seems to be a quite normal conflict between a husband and his wife. Faith doesn’t want Young Goodman Brown to leave her during the night because she is fearing danger. Young Goodman Brown doesn’t listen to her and leaves. Until this point the reader doesn’t know about Faith’s important role in the story and the conflict seems to be rather superficial.

But when Young Goodman Brown meets the devil in the forest he always refers to his love to Faith who is - according to him - “a blessed angel on earth” (Hawthorne 1835a:1111). Thinking of her, he is sure to be able to resist the seduction of the devil even when he shows him the moral depravity of the inhabitants of the town. Only when Young Goodman Brown hears Faith’s voice on a cloud passing by he begins to give up hope that there is anything pure and good in the world. At this point Faith is the reason why Young Goodman Brown takes the devil’s staff and follows him.

Faith is one of the minor part figures with which Hawthorne expresses the dualism of superficial and inner conflicts of the action. Faith plays not only a role in the conflict of Young Goodman Brown staying outside at night but also in his decision of following the devil, representing the evil, or not.

The pink ribbons of Faith’s cap are one of the symbols of the story and “an explicit link between two conceptions of Faith” (Levy 1986:123). Right at the beginning her pink ribbons are mentioned when she is characterised as “young…,pretty…(and) aptly named” (Hawthorne 1835a:1111). Up to here Faith indicates everything “good” that Young Goodman Brown loves. She is a symbol for the values he treasures. But when the cloud is passing by and Young Goodman Brown is still undecided whether to follow the devil and maybe become part of the Sabbath society which he rejects the most, Faith’s pink ribbons come flying down from the cloud. Here Young Goodman Brown finds the proof that even his wife Faith has become a victim of the devil, a fact that changes his whole world view to the negative.

When Young Goodman Brown says “My Faith is gone” (Hawthorne 1835a:1116) it means on the one hand that he has lost his wife to the devil but on the other hand it also indicates that he has lost his belief in God and his Christian view of the world.

2.2 Conflict 2: The inner conflict of Young Goodman Brown

According to Charles Martorana “The central theme of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ is the conflict in Goodman Brown between joining the ranks of the devil and remaining ‘good’” (Martorana 1998:1). This inner conflict of Young Goodman Brown will be described and analysed in detail following the plot of the story where Young Goodman Brown changes his opinion permanently.

The conflict with Faith at the beginning of the story also marks the beginning of the inner conflict of Young Goodman Brown. It begins when he leaves Faith and starts his journey into the wood to meet the devil. Although it seems pretty clear to the reader that Young Goodman Brown does not leave only for a walk he doesn’t say that he is going to meet the devil but says: “What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!” (Hawthorne 1835a:1112). And as soon as he meets the devil he feels an instant unwell inside him and decides to return because he has “scruples, touching the matter” (Hawthorne 1835a:1112). But when the man tells Young Goodman Brown that he knows his family well Young Goodman Brown agrees to follow him deeper into the woods. Thinking of Faith he changes his opinion once more and wants to go back when the devil shows him his old teacher
Goody Cloyse. Hidden behind a tree Young Goodman Brown has to learn that his old teacher is a witch and a member of the society of the devil. He is shocked and exclaims: “That old woman taught me my catechism!” (Hawthorne 1835a:1112). Here Hawthorne indicates the first deep change in Young Goodman Brown’s mind. Had he only been undecided before whether to follow the devil into the forest or better return, he is now very confused and even starts to lose his faith in the world. That is indicated by the following sentence: “there was a world of meaning in this simple comment” (Hawthorne 1835a:1114). But once more Young Goodman Brown can resist the devil’s conviction and refuses to follow him any longer. He trusts in his belief in God and his love to Faith and says as a conclusion: “With Heaven above and Faith below, I will stand firm against the devil!”(Hawthorne 1835a:1115)

At the very moment when Young Goodman Brown seems to have resisted the devil’s seduction and is left alone, he sees the cloud with Faith passing by and becomes “maddened with despair” (Hawthorne 1835a:1116) when he realizes that his belief was not founded on a certain reason. At this point Young Goodman Brown gives up his belief of something good in the world, takes the devil’s staff and follows him to the Black-Sabbath meeting. There he meets Faith and seeing her he remembers his reluctance to become part of the devil’s society. He shouts at his wife to “Look up to Heaven, and resist the Wicked One!” but “Whether Faith obeyed or not he knew not” (both Hawthorne 1835a:1119).

The next morning he isn’t even sure whether he has dreamed his journey into the forest or not. This seems to go together with the unsteady atmosphere between dream and reality that Hawthorne creates for his story so that Young Goodman Brown is left in uncertainty. But the events have such a deep influence on his mind that he can’t trust anyone anymore and becomes a depressive and isolated man.

The inner conflict of Young Goodman Brown results from a mixture of unawareness, uncertainty, undecidedness and seduction. Young Goodman Brown can’t decide whether he wants to go into the forest to discover the dark Black-Sabbath society and their way of living, which he might miss in his Puritan life, or if he should stay safe beside his beloved wife Faith in the harmony of the village.

Even the reader is left in doubt what really happened during the night. Has there been a mysterious meeting of Young Goodman Brown with a man (and could it really have been the devil?) or has he just fallen asleep?

2.3 Conflict 3: Good and evil in the world of “Young Goodman Brown” and the meaning of the story for Puritanism

The contrast between the forest and the village is a good link to the next topic – good and evil in Young Goodman Brown’s world. Charles Martorana expresses this idea when he writes that Young Goodman Brown has to decide “if his true passion lies in the woods, the land of evil, or if it lies in the innocence […] he enjoyed in the village” (Martorana 1998). Hawthorne shows this conflict by the aid of the two contrasting figures of the devil on the one hand, who obviously represents evil, and God (and also Faith) on the other hand, representing good. The contrast is illustrated by different means. For example Hawthorne creates a gloomy evening atmosphere in the forest but Young Goodman Brown returns to the village in the morning. Faith’s innocence contrasts with the other character’s moral depravity. The devil himself shows stereotypical symbols such as the snakelike staff he has got with him. Young Goodman Brown stands between good and evil and has to decide whether he wants to leave the security and well known harmony of his village to turn “his back on Salem village in order to venture into dark nature and his darker self” (Shuffelton 1979:319).

Hawthorne doesn’t clarify whether good or evil wins in the story. At first evil seems to gain control of Young Goodman Brown when he takes the devil’s staff and follows him to the Black Sabbath meeting but then he wants to reveal his belief and return to God. But when he comes back to the innocent village he cannot trust the people he sees and has always to think about the evil in the
world even of Salem village. The reader might tend to say that what Young Goodman Brown experienced in the forest with the devil was just a dream but he also says it doesn’t matter because “it was a dream of evil omen” (Hawthorne 1835a:1119) and the influence on Young Goodman Brown might have been the same if it were real. Charles Martorana concludes: “In the end, we can never be sure if good or evil won the fight […] but Hawthorne makes it abundantly clear that Brown was scarred for life by his experience” (Martorana 1998). According to the text this means that “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream” (Hawthorne 1835a:1119)

Young Goodman Brown understands that even the strongly religious Puritan inhabitants of Salem village are not completely “good” at all but have their mistakes and dark sides as well. Concerning the meaning of the story for the Puritan belief Michael E. McCabe states that

Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ allows the writer to examine and perhaps provide commentary on not only the Salem of his own time but also the Salem of his ancestors […] [and that] Hawthorne sets ‘Young Goodman Brown’ into a context of Puritan rigidity and self-doubt to allow his contemporary readers to see the consequences of such a system of belief. (McCabe 1998)

The story of Young Goodman Brown does not explicitly indicate clearly whether Puritan belief is “good or evil” because Hawthorne describes Young Goodman Brown’s experiences more as a dream than reality but in the end he shows the mistrust of Young Goodman Brown evoked by his dream. That shows that Young Goodman Brown’s trust in his Puritan belief and ideals is shattered and he has to think about the norms of the society he lives in.

The reader might also think about what made Young Goodman Brown go into the woods. One might think that he wants to break out of his society and see what there can be outside the Puritan community. He therefore is shocked that there is no “pure” Puritan community at all. McCabe comes to the conclusion that

The statement that Hawthorne creates for ‘Young Goodman Brown’ is that in a distrustful and depraved society personal evidence such as a dream or vision grows into allegations and belief […] Whether or not the meeting in the woods existed as reality or a dream doesn’t matter. The Puritanism required their followers to doubt themselves and their community so much that a reality in which one could achieve Grace did not exist. It taught that one could not trust anyone. (McCabe 1998)

With this statement one could tend to think that the “good” ideals of the Puritan society evoke the evil in their world. Puritanism seems therefore to destroy itself. In a last sentence McCabe says that “Puritanism can only be seen as an unending cycle of misery in which man is the most depraved and most worthy – exactly what the good Puritan should see themselves as” (McCabe 1998).

3. The May-Pole of Merry Mount

Like “Young Goodman Brown” “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” deals with the conflict of Puritans and Christians. But this time the conflict does not happen in somebody’s mind, where it can be doubted, but in reality when a group of Puritans attacks the Merry Mount colony, destroys the settlement’s symbol – the May-Pole – and makes the settlers prisoners. This conflict is the most important and obvious one of the story. At first we will look at the contrasting description of the two groups which lead into the conflict and their symbols. After that we will come to the Puritan attack.

But there is also another conflict: The internal discrepancies and contradictions inside the Merry Mount colony which are mentioned directly by the Lord and Lady of the May, Edgar and Edith, and by some implicit hints of the narrator. Both conflicts will be looked at in detail in the following
chapters. In contrast to “Young Goodman Brown” this time the discussion will start with the more general one and then lead to the more specific one.

### 3.1 The conflict between Puritans and the settlers of Merry Mount

The attack of the Puritans takes place on Midsummer Eve (20th of June), the date of Edith and Edgar’s marriage. Before the ceremony starts everybody is dancing and making party like on every other day of the year. The narrator introduces the reader into a world of a “continual carnival” (Hawthorne 1835b:1122) where everything is beautiful, colourful and everybody is feeling joyful and happy. An explanation for the behaviour and the never ending party of the Merry Mount colonists is given on page 1123: “The men of whom we speak, after losing their fresh heart’s gaiety, imagined a wild philosophy of pleasure, and came hither to act out their latest day-dream” (Hawthorne 1835b).

Right at the beginning the narrator describes the symbol of the Merry Mount colony: The May-Pole. It is decorated differently in every season of the year and “from its top streamed a silken banner, colored like the rainbow” (Hawthorne 1835b:1120). The may-pole is the centre of all actions and festivals. The narrator says that “what chiefly characterized the colonists of Merry Mount, was their veneration for their may-pole” (Hawthorne 1835b:1123). It is of such importance for the colonists that they even call it “their religion, or their altar” (Hawthorne 1835b:1123). But as it is the colourful symbol of joy and happiness of the Merry Mount colony it changes into the symbol of the colony’s downfall.

On the other hand there is a settlement of Puritans whose leader is Endicott, a sever looking man, “the Puritan of the Puritans” (Hawthorne 1835b:1125). The Puritans are contrasted to the colony of Merry Mount explicitly by the sentence “Their festivals were fast-days, and their chief pastime the singing of psalms” (Hawthorne 1835b:1124). With these characterisations of the two different groups Hawthorne gives the reader the idea that these settlements could never exist together. His choice of words is very clear because he uses identical words like festivals or the aspect of singing for the descriptions of the two groups but makes it imply different attitudes, such as extreme joyfulness or seriousness, so that an approaching conflict is foreshadowed quite clearly.

Before the conflict breaks out into the attack at the end of the story and the may-pole is destroyed, the narrator contrasts the two groups permanently in the text. The main differences which lead into the conflict are gathered in the chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merry Mount colony</th>
<th>Puritans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gay colony (1120)</td>
<td>grim (1124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people of the Golden Age (1120)</td>
<td>wrought of iron (1124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the expression of wild revelry on their faces (1121)</td>
<td>the sternest cares of life, personified by the dark Puritans (1126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eternal fit of laughter (1121)</td>
<td>gifted with life and thought (1124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mirth (1121)</td>
<td>severe (1127)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the crew of Comus (1121)</td>
<td>evil spirits (1124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silken colonists (1121)</td>
<td>grisly saints (1123)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After making the contrast so clear the narrator gives one last statement before the attack to introduce the reader to what might happen and what it would mean to the Merry Mount colony:

Should the grisly saints establish their jurisdiction over the gay sinners, then would their spirits darken all the clime, and make it a land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm, forever. But should the banner staff of Merry Mount be
fortunate, sunshine would break upon the hills, and flowers would beautify the forest, and late posterity do homage to the Maypole! (Hawthorne 1835b:1124)

Then the atmosphere changes, evening rises and the Puritan attack begins. The Merry Mount colonists are made prisoners by the Puritans and whipped for their “crimes”. Endicott destroys the May-Pole which has to be seen as a symbolic act of destroying the mirth of Merry Mount. Only Edith and Edgar are spared of punishment because Endicott realizes their real love for each other and that they are only interested in the other one’s survival and not in the events of destroying Merry Mount. Endicott decides to take Edgar and Edith with them to turn them into “good” Puritans.

The conflict of the story can be identified quite clearly in the contrast of the joyful and sinful life of the Merry Mount colonists and the grim Puritans, living to pray. In the end the Puritans seem to win but the way Hawthorne describes their actions they look like the “bestial pagans” (Hawthorne 1835b:1125) they try to destroy at Merry Mount. The conflict mentioned in this story is based on a historical background but the elements mentioned above show the exaggeration with which Hawthorne shows the conflict. Bruce Magee says:

He [Hawthorne] has taken a somewhat historical incident, although he changes it considerably in order to bring it to line with the symbols that he wants to portray […] The great conflict of the day resulted in one bloody nose. It was somewhat less there than is here (Magee 2003)

3.2 The conflict inside the Merry Mount colony

The second conflict is the internal conflict inside the Merry Mount colony that the never ending joy and mirth are not real but only artificial happiness. This conflict is not expressed directly but only through different hints from the narrator or some characters. The only two characters which talk about it overtly are Edith and Edgar. The outer appearance of the Lord and Lady of the May is described like the looks of all the other Merry Mount colonists. They are beautiful and dressed very colourfully. But regarding the mental aspect, they are the only two people who are able to criticise the artificial mirth of Merry Mount. This ability is based on the true love they feel and which outshines the unreal joy of the colony.

Edith is the first one who dares to raise the subject although “it was a high treason to be sad at Merry Mount” (Hawthorne 1835b:1122). Here it is indicated that showing signs of unhappiness or criticising the system of permanent mirth might even be punished. That is a first prove for the oppressive power of the system they live in. But Edith tells her husband about her impression that their “jovial friends are visionary, and their mirth unreal” (Hawthorne 1835b:1122).

The narrator explains that “from the moment 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” (Hawthorne 1835b:1122). It means that people feeling true emotions are able to distinguish the falseness of the Merry Mount happiness from true feelings. It is the narrator again who questions “the quality of their [the colonist’s] mirth” (Hawthorne 1835b:1123) once more. He even says that “the elder spirits, if they knew that mirth was but the counterfeit of happiness, yet followed the false shadow wilfully” (Hawthorne 1835b:1123).

Also Endicott realises that Edith and Edgar are the only two people who have recognized that the Merry Mount way of establishing joy might not be the right one.
That is why he sees a chance for them to become Puritans and doesn’t punish them. The colony of Merry Mount is therefore full of discrepancies. Joy and happiness are prescribed by a system which doesn’t allow sadness or criticism. The joy is false and the smiles are nothing but masques. The reader might ask in how far the people of the colony are able to feel real mirth under such pressure to be happy all the time and in how far the Marry Mount colony system is “better” than the Puritan way of life.

3.3 “grisly saints” or “gay sinners”? – Hawthorne’s intention

As already indicated in 3.2, the last conflict discussed here is the conflict which Hawthorne’s representation of the two different groups evokes in the reader’s mind. We have the eternal mirth of the Merry Mount colonists against the dark and severe Puritans who destroy the Merry Mount colony just because they cannot accept the joyful living. But Hawthorne doesn’t identify the Merry Mount colonists as purely good and the grim Puritans as clearly evil but tends to approach both groups and says they are both good and evil. The festivals and celebrations of the Merry Mount colonists are restricted in their effect of eternal happiness because Hawthorne shows that their mirth is not true. It is an artificial joy that has to be hold up in any case. Being sad is crime in this community.

On the other hand Hawthorne uses the Puritans contrasting them to the colonists and shows the Puritan’s life of prayer and belief. There is no mirth in their way of living at all. They are described as aggressive and cruel when they attack and destroy the Merry Mount colony and whip the colonists. But in the end the Puritans seem to be quite human because they do not punish Edith and Edgar and show some kind of respect to their true love. About Endicott, “the severest Puritan of all” (Hawthorne 1835:1127) the text says “that the iron man was softened; he smiled, at the fair spectacle of early love” (Hawthorne 1835b:1127).

So the Merry Mount colony which is at first described as a place of mirth and happiness all year long shows negative aspects because the joy is unreal and established by a system of pressure. Also the colony is seen as a place of “devils and ruined souls” (Hawthorne 1835b:1121) by the Puritans who think the colonists have lost their belief and live in sin and shame. Therefore, Hawthorne calls the colonists “gay sinners” (1835b:1124). But Hawthorne also changes the image of the Puritans. Here he turns the picture from negative to positive and, as a compromise, calls the Puritans the “grisly saints” (1835b:1124) in the end. That means Hawthorne denies both groups with positive as well as negative aspects. Jennifer Thurik concludes: “Each group dislikes the other, yet they are similar creatures” (2002)

Hawthorne’s narrator makes it abundantly clear that in his opinion the attack of the puritans is a bad event and that he cannot see anything too positive in the Puritan’s minds because he says:

we have played so long, and must darken our tale too suddenly [….] Even that dim light is now withdrawn, relinquishing the whole domain of Merry Mount to the evening gloom, which had rushed so instantaneously from the black surrounding woods (Hawthorne 1835b:1124)

But in the end it is up to the reader to decide whether the “gay” or the “sinners”, whether the “grisly” or the “saints” predominate. Hawthorne only offers the conclusion that “the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gaiety” (1835b:1127) but doesn’t resolve the reader’s conflict completely.

The conflict of good and evil in the Puritan world is the point which links the two stories and functions as a thematic outline. But although the topic and the background of Puritanism and their view of the world is the same in both stories, the conflict of good and evil is shown very differently.

In “Young Goodman Brown” Hawthorne uses one single person to symbolise the ideal Puritan. Young Goodman Brown is the “good” figure of the text who even seems to resist the devil’s seductions. He is a Puritan like he should be: He lives a normal life in the harmony of his village with the “good” woman he loves. But then Hawthorne starts to set doubt into Young Goodman Brown’s soul and the reader’s mind. In the end the conflict seems to unravel and Young Goodman Brown seems to resist the devil but the very end of the texts reveals the statement as discussed above. Therefore Hawthorne criticises the system of Puritan living in his short story and declares it guilty of the moral instability of Young Goodman Brown who stands for “everyman”.

In “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” Hawthorne goes one step further by not only criticising the Puritan way of living but also the other way round. He condemns both extremes and shows that neither the Puritans nor the Merry Mount colonists live an ideal way of life. He accuses both system of terror and oppression and finds an ideal way expressed through Edith and Edgar who are able to see through the falseness of the system they live in and feel real emotions and love for each other.

In both stories Hawthorne expresses the conflicts through symbols like for example the may-pole. Colours are one main element with which he illustrates contrasts. One of them is the light/darkness or day/evening/night contrast. But there are other ones like the atmosphere: In both stories Hawthorne creates a rather unreal atmosphere. In “Young Goodman Brown” even the character himself isn’t sure whether he dreamed his journey into the woods or not. And in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” the narrator also talks about “the scattered fantasies of a dream” (Hawthorne 1835b:1125). According to the unsteady atmosphere, we find the aspect of “magic” in both stories. In “Young Goodman Brown” it is the devil who brings along with him those magical moments including witches and his snakelike staff. In “May-Pole of Merry Mount” the magical aspects are indicated by the narrator who describes the atmosphere of Merry Mount as full of “Fauns and Nymphs” and “Gothic monsters” (Hawthorne 1835b:1121) and where flowers “must have grown by magic” (Hawthorne 1835b:1120). Also Endicott, the sever Puritan seems to believe in magic because he is not able to explain the phenomenon of the trained dancing bear through witchcraft (“I suspect witchcraft in the beast” Hawthorne 1835b:1126).

Both stories are therefore equivalent in their use of symbols and the style of atmosphere. “Young Goodman Brown” shows the consequences of the Puritan system for the individual, “the May-Pole of Merry Mounts” underlines the falseness of the claim to absolute correctness of any oppressing system.

5. Conclusion

The discussion in this term paper of the conflicts in “Young Goodman Brown” and “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” has shown that they are of the same type. They are conflicts of “light versus dark, good versus evil, God’s people versus the people of the devil” (Magee 2003). By the aid of these conflicts the narrator criticises every oppressing system and not the Puritan way of life. To create this effect on the reader he uses some stylistic devices like symbolism and exaggeration in his stories. He also uses
the historical background to make his stories more credible. But most important is the understanding of the texts as allegories. Hawthorne doesn’t express his criticism and dislikes directly but hidden between the lines. The reader has to unpack the images Hawthorne creates to understand the meaning of the stories. Hawthorne’s intention might only be discovered by a reader who thinks about the different, allegorical, sometimes metaphorical ways in which Hawthorne hides the deeper meanings of the stories.

Although the conflicts themselves are not equally the same, the manner of representation and the effect on the reader are quite equivalent. Hawthorne expresses through these conflicts his dislike of the Puritan system of constant distrust and its consequences.

Literaturverzeichnis


