HAWTHORNE'S VIEWS ON ART AND THE ARTIST AS EXPRESSED IN HIS SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

In addition to his obvious and often emphasized technical relationship, nowhere is Nathaniel Hawthorne more like the modern Symbolists than in his views on art and the artist. This paper will focus on some of these views as expressed in his short stories.

Even more than Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne is the forerunner of symbolism, that art that, according to Arthur Symons defines as "*That spiritualizing of the word, that perfecting of form in its capacity for allusion and suggestion, that confidence in the eternal correspondences between the visible and the invisible universe.*" ("Stephane Mallarme": 50). It is that aesthetic movement that encourages writers to express their ideas, feelings and values by means of symbols and suggestions rather than by direct statements. Nineteenth-century American symbolist writers such as A. E. Poe and N. Hawthorne proclaimed that imagination was the true interpreter of reality. Hawthorne's means of achieving this concept of art is to employ reality in the way George Moore recommneds: "*Not the thing itself, but the idea of the thing evokes the idea … You want the idea drawn out of the obscuring matter; this can best be done by the symbol. The symbol or the thing itself, that is the great artistic question.*" (Ibid: 299) Hawthorne's intense concern with the role and the nature of the artist recalls Henry James's similar preoccupation and is, according to Thelma J. Shinn, a precursor of the growing concept of art as a life-role, which is evident in the Symbolists from Baudelaire through Wallace Stevens.

Hawthorne differs from the later Symbolists, however, in his definition of the artist. In the individualistic and existential atmosphere of modern literature, the artist is more free to define himself and his art separate from his already fragmented society. This allows him to assume a god-like attitude, as in the poetry of Wallace Stevens where the poet is the maker, the creator in an almost religious sense. This is the case of Hawthorne as well. His power to synthesize past, present, and future gives to the artist's vision an eternal validity and to the artist an omniscience which is normally attributed only to the mind of God. Hence, it is logical to assume in the artist, as Mary E. Dichmann states in "Hawthorne's Prophetic Pictures" (*American Literature*: 192), the ability to use his knowledge in a Godlike fashion – in other words, to create, and to comprehend the past, the present, and the future in his creation. But Hawthorne was operating, Dichmann goes on, in an atmosphere much less congenial to such a high view of the artist. His more stable society denigrated the "*useless*" creations of the idealistic artist, and his Puritan heritage made him often painfully aware that he was not God and was forced to work with the imperfections of earthly materials. At best he could be, as James K. Folsom convincingly argues, a "*prophet*" who "*merely interprets what he, a more sensitive observer, has been*

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revealed in the characters of his subjects." (*Man's Accidents and God's Purposes*: 43). At worst, his art may be evil magic, as Rudolph VanAbele says:

First, artistic activity is often associated in Hawthorne with supernatural goings-on of various sorts, mesmerism, witchcraft and the like, as if art were a species of witchcraft; this might be all very well except that witchcraft is in turn often linked with sexuality conceived as a form of depravity, and with a kind of anti-democratic impulse-in the sense that the possession of occult power over others is, in Hawthorne's most notorious phrase, a violation of "the sanctity of the human heart." Artistic activity is therefore brought by this association under grave suspicion as to both its motivations and effects. (*The Death of the Artist*: 5)

These views of art and artist receive their fullest expression in his prefaces, tales, and sketches. They illustrate Hawthorne's complex and often ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes toward his art, his means of achieving it, and his role as an artist.

Hawthorne achieves his art by utilizing history, creating mood through symbol and illusion, perfecting the form, and thinking, as Hyatt H. Waggoner points out, "*in terms of image and situation, character and action*." (*Hawthorne: A Critical Study*: 73) Set in his middle world, these ingredients produce his art: "*the idea of the thing evokes the idea*." A particularly thorough presentation of the process appears in "Main-Street."

"Main-Street" more than any other tale reveals his creative process. In the comments of the showman-narrator are represented the intentions and opinions of the artist; in the criticisms by the two men from the audience are represented two reactions to the art; and in the entire presentation of the story within a story, Hawthorne's own views may be said to take form. The showman uses the past in presenting the history of Main-Street. In the beginning of the story he announces to be "*an exceedingly effective method of illustrating the march of time*" (Vol. II: 49). The story presented by the showman is a "*processional*". In the processional in "Main-Street" artistic unity is achieved through concentration on the location of Main-Street and on the life span of John Massey.

The form of "Main-Street" as a story within a story (indicative of Hawthorne's interest and experimentation with form in order to find the best means of achieving his art) is reminiscent of "Fancy's Show Box." Fancy, "*who had assumed the garb and aspect of an itinerant showman*" (Vol. IX: 221), is the counterpart of the "Main-Street" showman. Mr. Smith, her audience, is satisfied with his surface moral excellence. Unlike the harsh critic of "Main-Street" however, Mr. Smith is allowed to do more than merely to "*see things precisely as they are*". (Vol. II: 52) The showman has acknowledged that "*Human art has its limits, and we must now and then ask a little aid from the spectator's imagination*." (Vol. II: 52) Since Mr. Smith is being confronted by his own fancy (by the artist in himself as the perceptive consciousness), Fancy finds support from Memory (the audience's own recollection of the past which Fancy presents symbolically), and from Conscience comes the result of the confrontation of artist and audience. The conclusion might best explain why the form of processional was attractive to Hawthorne in "Main-Street": "*Man must not disclaim his brotherhood, even with the guiltiest, since, though his hand be clean, his heart has surely been polluted by the flitting phantoms of iniquity.*" (Vol. IX: 226)

Interestingly, as we move back in time from "Main-Street" (first published in 1849) to "Fancy's Show Box" (first published in 1837), the inner story moves from the revelation of a communal past to that of a personal past, and from communal responsibility for ancestral guilt to personal responsibility for guilty thoughts. Another step backward (to 1835) brings us to a third story within a story, "Alice's Doane's

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Appeal". The inner story may well be one of Hawthorne's earliest tales, as Thelma J. Shinn states, combining the interests of the two other stories and presenting ancestral guilt on a level of personal responsibility. The frame story has the narrator speaking to an audience of two young women. As the showman revealed the past of Main-Street, this narrator reveals the past of Gallows Hill. He concentrates on the personal past of Alice and Leonard Doane, including the taint of witchcraft, the outward evil of murder, and the inward evil of a suspected incestuous love. The processional is echoed by "*a procession of the accused and the guilty proceeding toward Gallows Hills*," and Mr. Smith's recognition of the brotherhood of man is here presented by the murderer's realization of his kinship with the victim:

…my soul had been conscious of the germ of all the fierce and deep passions, and of all the many varieties of wickedness, which accident had brought to their full maturity in him. Nor will I deny, that in the accursed one, I could see the withered blossom of every virtue, which by a happier culture, had been made to bring forth fruit in me. (Vol. II: 271-272)

Most significant in terms of the artist is the kinship finally recognized by his audience when "*sweeter victory still, I had reached the seldom trodden places of their hearts, and found the wellspring of their tears*." (Vol. II: 280) With the help of his "*eloquence*" and "*fancy*", the artist can communicate the essence of the past to his audience and reveal an underlying truth of the human condition – not of the actual or ideal worlds, but of the middle world of his art and human life: "*And here in dark, funereal stone, should rise another monument, sadly commemorative of the errors of an earlier race, and not to be cast down, while the human heart has no infirmity that may result in crime*." (Vol. II: 280) Telling a story within a story enables Hawthorne to present his means and an example of their utilization simultaneously. Even further, it shows the relationship between the artist and the audience and between both of these and the art itself.

"Main-Street" also illustrates the processional. Hawthorne's concern with form is evidenced here and in his efforts to define the genre of *Romance* in which he classes his writing. The form of the sketch is important to Hawthorne especially when he wants to define the nature of his art and its relationships to the worlds of nature and of the ideal. His greatest sketch is "The Custom-House", which introduces *The Scarlet Letter*. It utilizes the past as its own material (both the immediate past of Hawthorne's employment in the custom house and the historical-hypothetical past he supposedly discovers in old documents), allows Hawthorne to discuss his art, and provides a historical context for *The Scarlet Letter*. But it does not stop there: in its presentation of the symbol of the scarlet letter, as Charles Feidelson points out, his sketch "*throws light on a theme in The Scarlet Letter*": "*Every character, in effect, re-enacts the 'Custom-House' scene in which Hawthorne himself contemplated the letter, so that the entire 'romance' becomes a kind of exposition of the nature of symbolic perception. Hawthorne's subject is not only the meaning of adultery but also meaning in general; not only what the focal symbol means but also how it gains significance.*" (*Symbolism and American Literature*: 10)

Hawthorne also defined his relationship to the actual world in this sketch. That relationship, as in "Foot-Prints on the Sea-Shore", is distant at best. Hawthorne turns from the actual to create in isolation; his inspiration is from the contact with the ideal world through nature. In the actual world of the custom house, "*Nature,-except it were human nature,-the nature that is developed in earth and sky, was, in one sense, hidden from me; and all the imaginative delight, wherewith it had been spiritualized, passed away out of my mind.*" (Vol. I: I6)

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He reasserts the province of his art as a middle world, "*a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.*" (Vol. I.: 36) The actual world he admits would be fine for another artist, but not for him.

Thus, in this combination of the forms of preface and sketch, Hawthorne explicitly states his aesthetic intentions, which he elaborates on and criticizes in other prefaces. He does not embody his symbols on the actual reality that Joyce uses in Mr. Bloom. His aim is different from Joyce's. He must be considered, as he asserts in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, as a writer of romances, not of novels. In "The Custom-House" he comments that perhaps

The wiser effort would have been, to diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of to-day, and thus to make it a bright transparency; to spiritualize the burden that began to weigh so heavily; to seek, resolutely, the true and indestructible value that lay hidden in the petty and wearisome incidents, and ordinary characters, with which I was now conversant. (Vol. I: 37)

This would be the role of a novelist; it was not Hawthorne's role. The romance he defines in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*:

… while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart-[it] *has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.* (Vol. II: 1)

The common people, even those with pretensions to culture perceive only the surface reality. Here comes the role of the artist as prophet, as interpreter, and as creator. "The Prophetic Pictures" reveals Hawthorne's view of the artist. The painter paints "*not merely a man's features, but his mind and heart.*" Owen Warland, a young watchmaker is about to achieve his lifelong vision-the endowment of a machine with spiritual beauty and life. The embodiment of Warland's pursuit is in the form of a delicate mechanical butterfly. But the road to creative fulfillment is not an easy one. Hovenden, a retired watchmaker and Owen's former master, is constantly making fun of his former apprentice. Hovenden's daughter, Annie, at first seems sympathetic to Owen, but, much to his disillusionment, she too fails to see the meaning of his quest. Finally, after many cycles of success and failure the "*artist of the beautiful*" achieves his goal through the invention of a wonderful mechanical butterfly imbued with life force. Although the butterfly is accidentally crushed by a child, Owen calmly realizes that the true value of his work lies in the accomplishment of his goal. In Hawthorne's words, "*when the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality.*" The story is a perfect example of form fitting content. The ancient language, the timeless atmosphere and setting all are in harmony with the theme. Indeed, you feel as if Hawthorne's celebration of the creative spirit becomes our own. Warland can be understood as, perhaps, Hawthorne's most successful artist/intellectual. He neither sinks back into spiritual stagnation as does Drowne nor does he live in constant battle with the world as does Ethan Brand, or even poor Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*. Here Hawthorne presents the ultimate triumph of the artist. Owen has achieved the pure spiritual vision of the ideal and has recreated it as much as possible in earthly materials. But his own reward is in the perfect vision and in the artistic achievement; the product that he offers his audience is the earthly

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manifestation which they can appreciate, accept, reject or destroy, depending upon their own level of perception.

As Owen Warland embodies Hawthorne's views on the artist in his spiritual achievement and his earthly limitations, so too does his creation embody Hawthorne's views on art. This delicate butterfly obviously belongs to the "middle world" of human existence because of its imperfections; equally obvious is nature as the source of inspiration for its creation. The butterfly itself, we might say, is the symbol of the delicate balance between the real and the ideal; in its exquisite beauty, in its ability to fly a little higher than man, and in its very frailty, it once more achieves for Hawthorne the symbolist aim of embodying "*the eternal correspondences between the visible and the invisible universe*."

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