

A Thematic Study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Works: A Review

Dr. Gopal Kumar Jha, Ph.D

Dept. of English, LNMU, Kameshwarnagar, Darbhanga (Bihar) India

Abstract

The *Scarlet Letter* established Nathaniel Hawthorne as a major writer of the nineteenth century and the foremost chronicler of New England and its colonial history. Leland S. Person also explains some of the significant cultural and social movements that influenced Hawthorne's most important writings: Puritanism, Transcendentalism, and Feminism. His major works include - *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance*, as well as short stories and non-fiction.

Key Words: *The Scarlet Letter, Chronicler, Colonial, Puritanism, Feminism*

Hawthorne's major themes and thematic patterns include self-trust versus accommodation to authority; conventional versus unconventional gender roles; obsessiveness versus open-mindedness; hypocrisy versus candour; presumed guilt or innocence; forms of nurturance and destructiveness; the penalties of isolation; crimes against the human heart; patriarchal power; belief in fate or free will; belief in progress (including scientific, technological, social, and political progress) as opposed to nostalgia for the past; the truths available to the mind during dream and reverie; and the impossibility of earthly perfection.

Historical issues include marketplace facts- for example, where Hawthorne's short stories first appeared (unsigned and low-paid), and which stories he chose to collect in *Twice-told Tales* and in later anthologies. Related issues include how each book was advertised, how well it sold, how much money Hawthorne earned for it, and how it was reviewed. Scholars should also know something about the whys and wherefores of Hawthorne's career options during and after college, of his undertaking literary hackwork and

children's books, of his interlude at Brook Farm, of his appointments to the Boston Custom House, the Salem Custom House, and the Liverpool consulate, and of his efforts to win reinstatement at the Salem Custom House. Additional historical issues include Puritan versus Whig ideas' about the self and the historical past; the political practices and social climate of Jacksonian democracy; and genteel assumptions about women's roles. Still other historical issues concern the particular place and period in which Hawthorne set each story.

Personal issues include the various ways Hawthorne's family history and specific events in his life influenced his writings- most obviously the introduction to "Rappaccini's Daughter" and his letters and journals. One can easily recognize how "Young Goodman Brown" incorporates facts about his Puritan ancestors, and they are interested in asking such questions as whether the concern with female purity in "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Birth-mark" may reflect Hawthorne's anxieties in the aftermath of his marriage, and how Hawthorne's anxieties about his role as an artist are expressed in "The Birth-Mark" and "The

Artist of the Beautiful". Researchers might also speculate about how Hawthorne's experiences of intimacy and deprivation in the aftermath of his father's death inform his fiction (for example, Robin's nostalgia for a home that excludes him). Other personal issues that interest students include Hawthorne's relationship to the Mannings' mercantile values, his antipathy to Salem, his experiences at Bowdoin College (including his nonconformity and his friendships with Bridge, Pierce, and Longfellow), his lifelong strivings to develop his talents and support himself by his pen (during his self-defined "twelve lonely years", during his political appointments, and so forth), his secret engagement, and his identity as doting but fallible husband and father.

Hawthorne had said, "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true". His philosophical reflections are apparent in his diverse forms of writing and style stated below-

1. Sketch versus tale and short story.
2. Romance versus novel.
3. Characters recurrent "types" and interrelationships; authorial intrusion or objective display; heroism, villainy, and what Hawthorne seems to condemn, admire, or sadly accept.
4. Image clusters and patterns (for example, dark versus light, natural versus unnatural, sunshine and firelight versus moonlight and reflections, labyrinths).
5. Subjective vision (including fantasies, reveries, dreams, and narrator's questions about objective "reality".)
6. Narrative antecedents, including biblical parable, Spenserian romance, allegory

(Dante, Bunyan, and others), Gothic horror tales, sentimental love stories, old wives' tales, fairy tales, and so on.

7. Reworking of notebook entries into fiction, and the relationship between earlier works and later ones.

8. Hawthorne's open-ended endings.

9. The relation of prefaces and expository introductions to Hawthorne's plots.

Never ending conflict of individuals against society in which the recurrent theme of appearance versus reality is central and woven into different elements of the novel is the yarn of **The Scarlet Letter**. This theme is adopted by both the Puritan Culture to subjugate its members and hide the truth, and by a protagonist who claims a new identity and violates the Puritanical codes.

The Birthmark is a tale full of wildly successful, almost magical, scientific experiments; it is untouched nature itself that is shown to be more powerful than any manmade creation. Aylmer has the ability to make lovely sights and amazing aromas from nothing, but he doesn't have the ability to control his wife's spirit or prolong her life. On the other hand, Georgiana does have some measure of power over her husband's spirit, a power that comes not from science but nature. For example, when Aylmer's spirits flag, he asks Georgiana to sing to him, and the beauty of her voice restores his good mood. Unlike her husband's potions, her voice is entirely natural but has a much greater effect. In addition, Georgiana's birthmark also demonstrates the power of nature because it captivates and intoxicates almost everyone who sees it. In the end, Aylmer's attempt to control nature with

science ends only in death and unhappiness.

Other short stories deals with a motley of themes like **Puritanism** in “**The Maypole of Merry Mount**” and “**Young Goodman Brown**”, **Good versus Evil in Man** in “*The Minister’s Black Veil*” and “*Roger Malvin’s Burial*”, **Dreams and the Otherworldly** in “*Ethan Brand*”, **Self-alienation** in “*Wakefield*”, the main character removes himself from his daily responsibilities, choosing to live a strange life in between life and death, **Innocence and Love** In “**The May-Pole of Merry-Mount**”, the Lord and Lady of the May are saved from harm and taken in by the Puritans because they demonstrate a pure and passionate love. Love can triumph over all, but at the same time, can lead individuals astray if impure, **Betrayal and Guilt** in “**Roger Malvin’s Burial**”, in which the main character Reuben fails to execute a vow he made to Roger, a wounded comrade. Reuben tells Roger’s daughter that he has given the soldier a proper burial, hiding the fact that he left his partner to die in the wilderness alone. Another story that demonstrates **betrayal**, but with a different emotional reaction, is “**My Kinsman, Major Molineux**”. When Robin sees his relative tarred and feathered, he experiences both terror and pity, but in the end laughs along with the rest of the crowd. **The Wives of the Dead** deals with the theme of **Loss**. Hawthorne’s story illustrates how a person’s response to death and loss reveals true character. Both women mourn the loss of their husbands. However, Mary’s “mild, quiet, yet not

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feeble character” and her faith enable her to endure the emotional torment of her husband’s death with more equanimity than Margaret. She prepares a meal and sets the table soon after the mourners leave, and tries to help her sister-in-law calm down. Margaret, on the other hand, of a “**lively and irritable temperament**,” cannot accept the loss and remains bitter, dwelling on the past and taking no comfort in her faith. Later, Mary drifts into sleep with relative ease, while Margaret stays awake “groaning in bitterness”. The motivation of each in not waking the other after hearing their respective news reflects their characters.

Hawthorne also tried his skill in Literary Sketching. Techniques common to Hawthorne’s sketches also inform his tales and romances, often contributing to the peculiar power of given works. Literary Sketches have aesthetic possibilities inherent in their form. Theoretically, the sketch is a work of prose in which the fictional elements Aristotle calls character and spectacle prevail over plot as the primary structuring agent. Hawthorne’s best sketches equal or exceed many of his tales in the depth of their psychological insight and the ironic power of their historical perspective. The interaction between sketch and tale underscores a struggle between thematic elements in Hawthorne’s longer fiction as well. Throughout his literary career, Hawthorne gains compelling results by juxtaposing the temporal dynamics of a tale with the pictorial disposition of a sketch.

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