

Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Quest for the Moral Right Path

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Abstract: American literature is much in debt to Nathaniel Hawthorne who helped American literature flourish a great deal. Through his works, he presented his specific narration style, which contained the new genre of romance and tales, through which he tried to make the world familiar with his personal line of thought and belief. What he did was the presentation of his social and individualistic concerns in the form of themes he fulfilled. One of the themes which were of prime importance for him was morality as a basis on which social and individualistic foundations of the society would stand. His presentation of moral matters was specific and considerable. He presented morality of his characters as a result of the decisions they made at the critical decision points. As a puritan descendant, Hawthorne wanted to illustrate his experiences and thoughts through letting his characters play normally and choose at the moral critical decision points. At the end of his stories, the reader comes to a moral, which is a result of his characters' struggles as they chose in difficult moral dilemmas and through bearing the consequence of their actions. This article tries to examine one of the most important themes, Hawthorne had in his mind: the hardship of decision making regarding the right path to morality and the consequences of moral decision making. [Mohsen Mahmoud Rowshanzamir. Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Quest for the Moral Right Path. Journal of American Science 2012; 8(2):112-115].(ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>. 18

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1. Introduction

A moral decision as depicted by Hawthorne is a determination which gets fulfilled by the character at a situation which is called a moral dilemma by philosophers. It is a complex situation that will often involve an apparent mental conflict between moral imperatives, in which to obey one would result in transgressing another. This is also called an ethical paradox since in moral philosophy, paradox often plays a central role in ethics debates. Nathaniel Hawthorne, as a morality oriented American author, has dealt with many moral themes in his novels and tales. One of the themes which were of great significance to Hawthorne was morality as he illustrated it through challenging moments of decision making (Miller, 1991:67). In fact, Nathaniel Hawthorne owes some of his fame to the specific style he used to represent his life experiences and thoughts; and these ideas took form as he was growing as a puritan. He wrote many tales and novels which came to an end with a moral point and this is achieved as a result of characters' struggles between good and evil and their moral choices they made as they tried to preserve their faith or gain earthly advantages. These characters played roles freely as the author had decided for them through making decisions at vital decision making points, as they had to choose between good or evil, in other words, morality and immorality (Mellow, 1980: 167). Hawthorne has tried to show the consequences of

moral decisions and what the characters came to as the result of their choices. Among the most important themes Hawthorne tried to depict in his stories are Morality and alienation.

The themes of moral decisions and alienation can be easily seen in many of his works from which the tales "Young Goodman Brown", "The Birth Mark", "Minister's Black Veil", and "Roger Malvin's Burial" are good examples. These are the stories which show drastic materialistic and spiritual changes in the characters' lives as the result of the decisions they make at the very important critical moral dilemmas (Kaul, 1966).

As one example, "Young Goodman Brown" can be mentioned as a short story which shows the importance of moral decision based on the faith the character nourishes in his heart. In this tale, the main character loses trust in his wife, which is a symbol of his faith and community. This mistrust and anxiety has been shown in the best way possible. Another example is "The minister's Black Veil", which is again the story of taking an important decision and the fear of its out comings. The character is worried about his sins and their being revealed to the community. He has to decide about how to control his worries and keep them hidden. He is worried about whether to reveal or to keep them and the out comings of both decisions. Yet another is "The Birth Mark" in which Hawthorne depicts a character who gets obsessed with a small mark on his wife's face

which is a symbol of small impurity of her earthly beauty. He has to decide between her spiritual purity and love or her earthly beauty. To remove it or to let it remain is a decision he has to make; as the result of that decision he destroys the love he has kept in his heart (Eliot, 1994). In "Roger Malvin's burial", Hawthorne illustrates a young man who has to decide whether to stay with his companion and face the probable death or to leave him dying and save his soul. What happens for him is the result of the a moral decision he takes.

In these tales, Hawthorn presents the hardships of a sound decision to be taken, while the character knows and feels the consequence. Hawthorne lets his characters play their roles freely and shows the readers the consequences of their actions and decisions at their moral dilemmas.

2. Discussion

"Young Goodman Brown" is the story of a good natured- man, hence the name of the story. He leaves his wife, called Faith, who is a symbol of his religious faith, innocence and purity. He starts a predetermined journey and faces devil temptations in the forest and changes as the devils in the forest made him loose his faith in the community he was living in. Young Goodman Brown has to decide between the evil temptations surrounding him and the religious purity and a faithful life. From the beginning of his journey, he knows the facts and he is afraid of the outcomes.

In this story, Hawthorne has used names which are symbolically meaningful. Young Goodman brown is a normal human being with good and evil aspects. His wife, "Faith", is also a symbol of religious faith, purity, and perfection:

She "thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap" (Hawthorne, 1835:5)

This also refers to the innocence and the religious faith and the community he leaves behind. Hawthorne again tries to show the link between individualistic and social moral matters. For him personal moral matters lead to social immorality or even social disregard to the moral bases. He accepts the evil spirits by entering into the dark forest by leaving behind his personal faith and the social religious norms of his society (Harris, 1988). The first point at which he has to make a decision is at entering the forest. He is conscientiously aware of the action he is launching, because of this, he is afraid of walking into the forest. This refers to his good natured part of his soul; and the fact that a moral decision is hard to take; he has not yet decided to give up to devil. At the beginning he runs into an old

man holding a serpent representing Devil of which the character is afraid. Hawthorne tries to show the role moral conscience plays in wakening human being. In this regard, there are some clues in their first conversation they had:

"You are late, Goodman Brown" the old man said. "faith kept me back a while." Goodman replied (Hawthorne, 1835:6).

At first he can resist the Devil strongly, as in his reply to the Devil's question why he was late, he replied: "The clock of the Old South was striking, as I came through Boston; and that is full fifteen minutes ago." (Hawthorne, 1835:6).

He loses faith and follows the devil into the forest of faithlessness. At last, he sees all the people, among them his own Faith, busy doing devilish rituals; which is a symbol of his loss of faith, he catches sight of the pink ribbon in the sky. The pink ribbon is the symbol of deserted faith. The next day, he is not sure if what he had seen was a dream or reality. With no religious faith, one cannot find a way to the realities of the society. With his faith destroyed, he cannot trust anyone even his wife Faith. He takes asylum in alienation and dies as a miserable and lonely man. Hawthorne emphasizes on the idea that individualistic morality leads to social moral structure, and lack of good faith will lead to alienation and destroyed social communication among the individuals. A community without moral foundations is the result of the immorality of its individuals.

Hawthorne presents to show dilemma between morality and religious faith in a situation illustrated in the "The Minister's Black Veil". The main character, Hooper, a religious leader, is wearing a black veil to disguise his sins. He feels guilty about them but his pride and fear of their disclosure makes him wear black veil to hide the realities. This refers to immoral tendency of man as a fallible creature to hide his sins and keep them from disclosure instead of returning to the right moral path. Man's fallibility and imperfectability is shown to the people by the veil he puts on his face. (Kaul, 1966).The veil does not hide his sins, but represents him as sinister and evil: "it caused children to flee when he approached because he would not remove the veil even for a moment..."(Hawthorne, 1837: 11).

The people suspect him and doubt in his faith and ask why he does not take his veil. The secret sin he tries to hide leads to his dishonor in the eyes of community. This hiding not only does not lead to his tranquility and help him escape from it, but also paves the way to other defects. By not unveiling, Hooper is committing another sin; that of pride. In reality, the veil is a barrier, which does not let him

see his guilt of pride. As a minister, he speaks and guides others publicly, while he is deep in hypocrisy. He wears the veil to hide his sins from the public disclosure but the people are sure he is hiding his evil personality. The congregation becomes obsessed with the hidden guilt, and they are sure by hiding a secret sin the person will never be free from it. He cannot find a way to forgiveness nor does he have a way back to the community as a normal member of the community. Hooper decides not to remove the veil and lives a lonely life. He dies lonely and alienated because of the decisions he made at the moral dilemma. His wrong moral decision and personal sin lead to his social alienation.

Much in the same way, Hawthorne presents the themes of morality and alienation in "The Birthmark". The main character, a scientist, has the idea that the congenital mark on his wife's face represents her evil character and has destroyed her beauty. In order to restore her purity and beauty, he decides to remove it through an operation in the course of which, she loses her life. Here, the birthmark seems to act like a veil, which hides her true beauty and purity and represent her as evil. The scientist says to her:

"no, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of nature, that this slightest possible defect--which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty--shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection." (Hawthorne, 1837: 5).

He is very much obsessed with the mark at the expense of ignoring her beauty and purity. For him, the mark is a symbol of her defect and his own fear of alienation. (Eliot, 1983). He makes a potion that kills her, while it appears acceptable enough: "is so beautiful to the eye, that I could imagine it as the Elixir of the life" (Hawthorne, 1837:12).

Aylmer ignores the fact that she had other perfect spiritual characteristics other than physical beauty; the characteristics he destroyed because of his egoistic orientation to his wife and her rights as a human being. (Harris, 1992). Hawthorne depicts how one person's disregard of others' basic rights may lead to destruction and death. Here again, a personal immoral behavior leads to social immorality. Hawthorne emphasizes on the moral lesson that at important moral dilemmas both ways appears to somehow acceptable and beautiful enough, and man has great difficulty in choosing the right path.

"The Birthmark" stands to represent a number of things. It represents Hawthorne's social criticism in regard with society's thirst for knowledge at the expense of human rights and moral standards of community which came as a result of social and scientific changes, Hawthorne observed during his

course of life in the nineteenth century (Randell, 1984). What he wanted to express was his desire for the simplicity of scientific explanations and a much more observance of morality and human rights. Hawthorne was worried about the downfall of a society through too much attention to science and technology and ignoring morality. He had the concern over the important moral decisions to be taken by human beings at crucial moral points. He warns us not to ignore human prosperity which is the outcome of moral life. He emphasizes on the need for spiritual insight and intuitive understanding.

In some of Hawthorne's tales he has created situations of moral complexity and uncertainty in which the conventional standards of right and wrong provide little guidance to help eradicate the confusion. A good example in this regard is, "Roger Malvin's Burial" which is considerable from the view point of moral perplexity and doubt. (Colacurcio, 1993). This is a short story in which human being is dealing with the question of choosing right from wrong in a situation in which both apparently weigh the same and he receives no contribution from the usual goodness criteria. Hawthorne has examined situations in which a person is facing ethical complexities; Colacurcio (1993) brilliantly refers to positions deeply based on our uncertainty about our own motives.

As Roger Malvin and Reuben Bourne try to make their way out of the forest, the latter faces a moral dilemma. Malvin will not survive the long journey, and if Reuben waits with him, he will also die. Hawthorne illustrates Reuben's decision making as complicated as possible. He shows how one person's doubt in moral situations affects his life as long as others. Hawthorne questions his inner motives, as he decides to leave his companion dying in the forest.

For Reuben the motive of his action is never clear; he is doubtful about the reasonability of what he did to his companion which was the result of his decision taken at a crucial moral dilemma. He is suspicious about selfish motivations based on which he chose to leave him alone. He feels guilty which brings him social consequences (Carlson, 1977). In effect, there is no way for Reuben to get rid of the burden of the dilemma he had faced. In "Roger Malvin's Burial", Hawthorne tries to focus on the moral fact that if one ignores the call of heart to obey convention to be after worldly benefits, he can hurt others as well as destroy himself. In the woods with his severely wounded future father-in-law, Reuben faces a very difficult moral decision to take. He must decide whether to stay and die with Roger or try to escape from death and save himself by leaving. His father-in-law urges him to go, but asks Roger to return and

bury his corpse. After leaving him, Reuben fears losing his future wife if he tells the truth, so he says: "My hands were weak, but I did what I could . . . There stands a noble tomb-stone above his head, and I would to Heaven I slept as soundly as he!"² (Hawthorne, 1832: 12).

He embarks on a chain of moral failures. Then Reuben begins to feel guilty, not for leaving Roger, but because:

"concealment had imparted to a justifiable act, much of the secret effect of guilt." (Hawthorne, 1832:12)

Although Reuben's and his dishonesty and lie saves his relationship to Dorcas – his future wife- and his stature in the community, guilt destroys his life. Feeling miserable within, he behaves miserably to others. He loses a healthy communal relationship with others as the result of one individualistic moral failure which led to higher and greater social destruction.

3. Conclusion

In all these short stories, Hawthorne creates characters who have to decide at critical moral point. In "Young Goodman Brown", "The Minister's Black Veil", "The Birth mark", and In "Roger Malvin's Burial" the main characters are religiously faithful. They try to remain faithful and reach piety; however, as the result of their wrong choice, they go stray from the personal moral way which leads them to social immorality. Young Goodman Brown, suffering from a weak faith, starts a journey which he, himself, is not sure about its reality. He loses his faith and easily led to a social alienated life. (Buel, 2006). Again, Hawthorne, tries to focus on the importance of personal morality. He is showing us that many social moral problems that individuals face come from their lack of personal basis in individualistic moral foundations. As a result, individualistic moral ideas lead to decent communal health.

The same type of characterization can be observed in Minister Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil" in that he is also hiding and alienating himself from the community as the result of individualistic immorality. He is afraid to face his worries, so he hides himself behind his veil. Another depiction of social alienation and immorality as the result of individualistic lack of moral basis can be found in "The Birthmark", in which the husband is obsessed with the facial mark and thinks he has to release her from the defect to be accepted fully; as the result, he alienates his wife

from the society and in the challenge with the nature, the wife is killed. Similarly, In "Roger Malvin's Burial", Hawthorne is trying to depict the same of moral decision taken at a dilemma and its consequence on the social life of the character. What Hawthorne had in mind was a portrayal of the hardships facing human being in the moral dilemmas. So the characters in many of his short stories are in search of higher levels of perfection, whether religious faith or physical beauty. The result they get in the form of social alienation or dishonor is the consequence they receive as a result of their wrong decisions they made at their moral critical points.

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