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RESEARCH ARTICLE

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S TREATMENT OF SIN AND GUILT WITH HIS PENETRATIVE INTO HUMAN COMPLEXITY: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne's works belong to dark romanticism, cautionary tales that do suggest guilt, sin, and evil as the most inherent natural qualities of humanity. His depiction of the past relies on the historical fiction in which he expresses the common themes of ancestral sin guilt and retribution. It does significantly explore how Hawthorne's treatment of sin and its effects and his penetrative insight into human complexity give his works a great Psychological depth and also how Hawthorne was absorbed by the enigmas of evil and of the moral responsibility which is interwoven with man's destiny in nature and in eternity. Finally it brings home the point that Hawthorne's treatment of sin and evil gives a peculiar atmosphere to his novel and stories.

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INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is universally acknowledged as one of the leading novelists of America, not only belongs to the tradition of America but also to the tradition of genius. Genuinely preoccupied with the problems of sin, guilt, responsibility, he was primarily concerned with moral issues. Essentially reflecting his preoccupation with the moral issues, his novels and short stories do significantly highlight puritan morality, its hypocrisy and its dogmas. Almost all the moral issues are set against social background conveying his meaning and significance of mortal life. *The Scarlet Letter* was called "A tragedy of tragedy of true love crushed by an unfeeling society" (Stubbs 178). In order to bring out the essential difference in the outlook on life between the Europeans and the new Englanders, he relied heavily on the historical influence, the shadowy past for providing his day dream with a kind of anchoring in the real circumstances of the past. In the literary world of Hawthorne, one can find a combination of history and fiction, marvelous and the natural. Hawthorne's treatment of sin and its effects and his penetrative insight into human complexity gives his works a great psychological depth. His work generally advocates in a veiled way, the importance of collective existence, brotherhood of man, healthy human relationships and a complete balance of head and heart.

Having descended from puritan ancestors, his writings significantly reflect of Puritanism. The Puritan theory the element rested chiefly upon the doctrine of pre-destination, which preached there an elect few were destined to be saved by God's grace while the vast majority was doomed to damnation. The puritans also placed great emphasis on the inherent sin sinfulness of all men. Religion was nothing but morality and objective evidence was replaced by inner assurance.

Every behaviour of the individual took a symbolic value and the puritans of the seventeenth century were blunt men with no capacity for mysticism and talent for deep thinking. Highlighting the puritan morality, its crushing authoritarianism and the individual consciousness against the downright dogmas, Hawthorne did record the special flavor of the puritan life and its culture in his works. No doubt, all the elements of puritan character have passed into Hawthorne through a long succession of generations. As a major writer in American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne had to face the problem of social background and so he went back to the earlier times and the legends about his ancestors to recapture the colonial life of his ancestors. He is, to a great extent, a chip of the old block. To Hawthorne, the world of matter remained impenetrable, devoid of moral and religious values. The appearance of a dark world led Hawthorne on to darker thoughts. He felt imprisoned in a fantastic world that left him isolated and remote. His stories are partly historical and partly fictional. Michael Davit Bell observes rather rightly thus:

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“Nathaniel Hawthorne was the most historically minded of our major novelists. From his first tales to his final unfinished romance, he turned again and again to history- particularly the early history of his native New England, which provided the material greatest novel and for many of his best tales” (P 91). Despite the fact that there is seen a combination of history and fiction in his works, his recurrent theme is mostly sin and suffering. Hence “Melancholy provides the appropriate mood of the spell”. (coale 10). Hawthorne’s view of life was essentially tragic as one sees his frail erring characters blindly and deliberately choosing a path of evil and staggering beneath a heavy load of gloom and guilt. He was fully convinced of the positiveness and the reality of evil and his attitude to life reflected his important conceptions of sin. He considered sin as a natural product of the human heart which is a ‘foul cavern’. His second conception was ‘the violation of the human heart’, by which man was completely responsible for his evil intentions. He considered the form of romance suitable to human experience, for he is the artist blending the marvellous and the natural in his romantic theory.

The Scarlet Letter is considered the best of his novels which shakes any reader to his root for the very reason that it has sealed up the fountain of hearts. Out and out exploiting the concepts of sin, this novel is about the story of steadfast loyalty of a disloyal woman, Hester Prynne, who remains faithful to her love through seven years of hardship, social ostracism and isolation. It is a tale of adultery. Hester’s husband, an English scholar, arrives two years later to find his wife in the pillory with a child in her arms and a letter ‘A’ on her breast signifying ‘Adulteress’, as a token of her sin. The husband conceals his identity and determines to discover her paramour. Hester accepts her condition with resignation. Roger Chillingworth, preoccupied with a diabolical principle of revenge, finds that Arthur Dimmesdale, the revered and respected clergyman, who is an example of Christian purity and holiness, is the partner in crime. The minister, for want of courage and because of pride, suffers seven years with the cancer of hidden guilt. His attempt to escape with Hester is foiled by Chilling worth. After a period of mental agony, Dimmesdale confesses his sin on the pillory and dies in Hester’s arms. Here as elsewhere, Hawthorne was absorbed by the enigmas of evil and of the moral responsibility which is interwoven with man’s destiny in nature and in eternity. Hester’s sin is one of excessive passion. The very passion is responsible for her ruin. The shame and agony that she is made to suffer proceeds inevitably from her character. Hester compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride. She does embroider the scarlet letter as an expression of defiance and guilt and she dresses her daughter in equally flamboyant colours. Harold Kaplan does neatly observe thus:

“Hester is rich in her latent sensuality and peculiarly open to the demands of life instincts” (P129).

This is stressed by her relationship with Pearl, a child of excessive, unlicensed passion. Chillingworth represents Hawthorne’s idea of the ‘unpardonable sinner’. He represents excess intellect. To Hawthorne, the greatest sin is the violation of another soul and heart, simply for the purpose of finding how it would react. The sin of Arthur Dimmesdale is more of a complex nature. He is tormented by his own awareness of sin and his pride prevents him from confessing his hidden sin. He is the man of spirit caught between the force of intellect and the force of passion and so the deepest suffering of the conflict

is reserved for him: “The allegory transcribes divisiveness in human character and action. The divided self was his major theme” (Kaplan 129). The characters are shown searching to find the divided segment of their own natures. As a Christian, Hawthorne emphasized the moral duality which is as the centre of man’s being and founded moral action upon a redemptive change of heart John Caldwell Stubbs observes:

“The introspective mind is darkened by a war of dual selves, though one of the two remains hidden with a permanent veil over its face This was an image for the unexplored complexity of human character” (P 7)

Hawthorne also relates the ordeal of the private moral life to the growth of the public moral life. Dimmesdale is the public teacher, the standard bearer of morality. But he is simultaneously the sinner in private. Chillingworth is a doctor and a healer, a man of largest wisdom in the community but in his private life, he is a poisoner who was his wisdom for ruin. Hester has the public role of a sinner but this surface covers her actual sacrificial virtue, pronounced in her service to Dimmesdale, to Pearl and to the community at large. The conflict of public and private selves is the dramatic substance of Hawthorne’s tragedy. The story of “The House of the Seven Gables” starts with the dispute between Colonel Pyncheon and Old Maule, over a piece of land. The Colonel, with his great influence brings about the execution of Maule as a wizard. He takes over that piece of land and builds the house of the seven gables. One of the descendants of Colonel Jaffrey Pyncheon persecutes his Kinsmen Clifford and convicts him of murder which is never committed, in order to become the sole possessor of the cursed property of the Colonel firstly in the manner of Maule’s death, one can see the germ of evil. Here Hawthorne’s treatment of sin suggests social complexity. The colonel was the most vigorous person to speed the execution of Maule. Hawthorne here recognised the economic motive which entered into the charge of witchcraft. The same economic motive also operated in the case of Judge Pyncheon who was very much like his ancestor possessing the same ambition to enlarge and extend his family estate. Hence, Hawthorne again and again stresses the innate depravity of man through the Colonel and the Judge who in the words of Melville inherited not only the “big, heavy solid realities such as gold and hereditary position but the inescapable trait of character” (Matthissen 327). The judge also violated the sanctity of the human heart by trying to crush the already broken heart of his poor cousin Clifford. Hawthorne’s short stories also deal with the problem of sin and evil. His short story ‘*Young Goodman Brown*’ is deeply concerned with evil, bringing home in a terrifying manner, the tremendous power of evil and making one feel that evil throws its shadow far and wide and spares none. The tragedy of Good man Brown is that he is unaware of the power of evil and he is forced to realize the evil impact of sin. He is complacent and too sure of his own ability to resist evil and he exposes himself to the machinations of the devil by making a pact with it. Good man Brown witnesses a scene of lustful orgy and he is forced to realise that not only his father in his time but also the other respectable neighbours in his own time are participants of that lustful meeting. Good man Brown once emphatically stated:

“My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians Since the days of the martyrs” (Twice-Told Tales & other short stories 381). Now he is forced into an

accumulation of doubts and takes back his statements. The narration points towards universal evil and its legacy of distrust. To his amazement and wonder, Good Man Brown learns that evil is the ultimate fact of life and everyone is in the brotherhood of sin. Good Man Brown discovers the instinctive evil behind the conventional goodness of human character. Harold Kaplan over:

“In ‘Young Good Man Brown’, we also find the divided consciousness which is the necessary basis for the evolution of moral identity” (P130)

Good Man Brown wanders through the forest to hear the words of communion of his race and it is found that the ceremony of unification is the constant preoccupation of Hawthorne. Hawthorne’s short story ‘The Minister’s Black Veil’ centers on hidden sin. Mr. Hooper, a good preacher of a parish church appears on a particular Sabbath day with a black veil. The subject that he preaches has a reference to the secret sin which he wished to hide from his nearest and dearest friends and even from God Himself. Everyone feels as if the preacher has crept upon them behind his black veil and had discovered his hoarded iniquity. Hawthorne here suggests the universality of sin hidden in the bosom of everyone. The short stories like ‘Ethan Brand’ Dr. Rappaccini’s Daughter’ and ‘The Birthmark’ reflect the same theme. The protagonists of these stories strongly bear resemblance to Chillingworth of ‘*The Scarlet Letter*’, ‘Ethan lime-burner, who begins to contemplate on things above the reach of the ordinary intellect. This intellectual development disturbs the balance of his mind and heart. He commits a great sin by losing his hold over humanity. His moral nature ceases to keep pace with the growth of his intellect and the result of his life’s labour in his ‘unpardonable sin’” (Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* 4/9). He becomes a sinner, violates the purity of the human heart by annihilating the soul of an innocent girl. Hawthorne called his books ‘Psychological Romances’ as they reflect the psychological effects of sin on the individuals.

Hawthorne’s interest is not in sin but in the sense of guilt which follows it “The main theme of ‘*The Scarlet Letter* is not the sin of illicit love but the consequent sins of hypocrisy and revenge and their effect on the soul” (Wagenknecht 45). His treatment of sin and evil gives a peculiar atmosphere to his novels and stories. His world is romantic, symbolic, allegoric and ambiguous. All these factors create an atmosphere which is typical of Hawthorne. He took pains never to write a novel which aims as the probable and ordinary cause of man’s experience but a romance which according to him, is the meeting place of the actual and the imaginary. To conclude, Hawthorne’s works reveal the qualities of invention, creation, imagination and originality gripping the reader’s absorbing interest and hence his importance in the literary and cultural history of American literature speaks volumes for his greatness. “Hawthorne’s roots went deep into America; his fundamental concern was with the great themes of world art”.

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