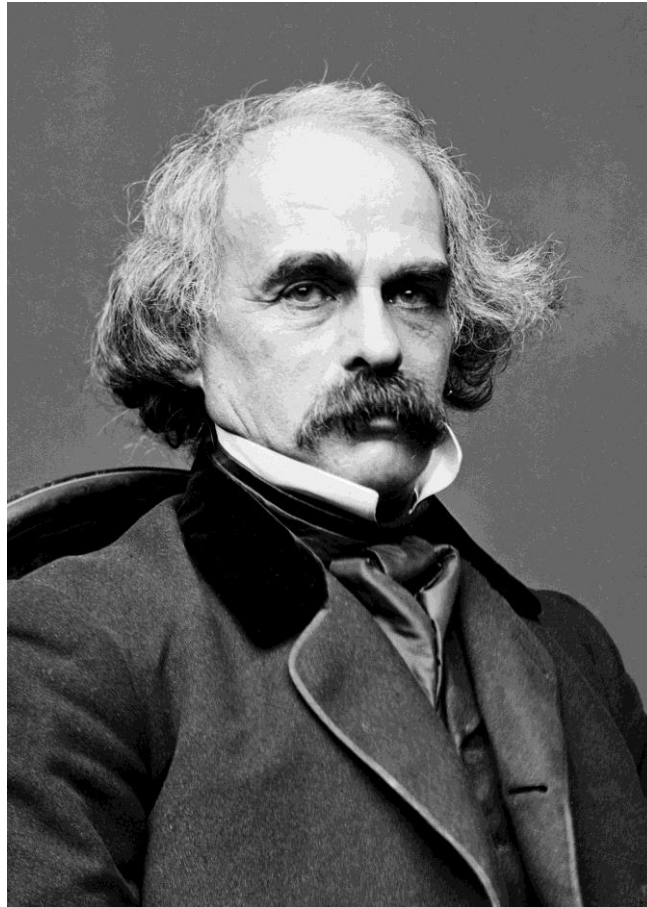


**The Enigma of Evil and Concept of Sin as Reflected in the Fictional
World of Nathaniel Hawthorne: An Appraisal**

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.



Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne

Abstract

This paper throws light upon one of the leading American novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels and short stories which highlight the Puritan morality, hypocrisy and dogmas set against the social background. This article aspires to prove that his works are not just fictional exercises, but inner dialogues that are faithful not to the doctrine but to dynamic mental

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conflict and their subtlety, their ambiguity, their delicate poise between revelation and concealment arise from anguished self-exploration.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Puritan morality, Religious dogma, Inherent sin, Hypocrisy, Hidden sin

Nathaniel Hawthorne – Puritan Background

Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the leading American novelists, established himself as one belonging to the American tradition of genius, whose works, especially novels and short stories are nothing but an attempt to convey the meaning and significance of mortal life as he saw it. Fully preoccupied with the problems of sin, guilt, responsibility, he was fully concerned with moral issues and values in life. No doubt, he was adept at depicting the narrow Puritan society in the early seventeenth century, stressing the need for the people to be human and sympathetic in all respects. His literary output does significantly advocate in a veiled way, the importance of collective existence, brotherhood of man, healthy human relationships and a complete balance of head and heart. His treatment of sin and its effects and his penetrative insight into human complexity gives his fictional world great psychological depth and intensity. For depicting human experience and the nuances of feelings he uses the form of romance, blending realism with fiction, in an artistic way.

Having descended from Puritan background, his writings significantly reflect the elements of Puritanism, especially the inherent sinfulness of all men. Recording the special flavour of the Puritan life and culture with a focus on the Puritan morality, its crushing authoritarianism; and individual consciousness against downright dogmas. Hawthorne exhibited in his fictional world marked love of cases of conscience, the taciturn and scornful cast of mind, the habit of seeing sins everywhere hell gaping open, exposure to the perpetual torture of the hearts of men, closed before man and open to God. All puritan elements have passed into the literary world of Hawthorne.

Recapturing the Life and Values of Ancestors

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As a major writer in American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne goes back to the earlier times and the legend about his ancestors, not only to face the problem of social background, but also to recapture the colonial life of his ancestors. He is, to a great extent, a chip of the old block. His forefathers are said to have crossed the Atlantic so as to uphold their faith and this urgent conscience haunted the imagination of Hawthorne himself. Samuel Chase Coale observes:

“Hawthorne’s haunted mind viewed a physically visible world as dark and inscrutable. His mind attracted cemeteries, crypts, caverns and dark forests, displayed a passive sensibility but no active strength” (P 2)

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 no doubt partly historical and partly fictional. In the words of Micheal Dovitt Bell,

“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 for his greatest novel and for many of his best tales” (P 91)

Sin and Suffering as the Recurrent Theme

Though a combination of history and fiction is seen in his works, the recurrent theme is mostly sin and suffering. Hawthorne’s view of life was essentially tragic, as one could see his frail erring characters blindly and deliberately choosing a path of evil and staggering beneath a heavy load of gloom and guilt. Being fully convinced of the positive goodness and the reality of evil, his attitude to life did reflect his basic concept of ‘sin’ which was considered by him as a natural product of the human heart, ‘a foul cavern’ and his second conception was the violation of the human heart by which man was completely responsible for his evil intentions. In his

introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne implicitly asserted that the divided self was his major theme.

Hawthorne considered the form of romance rather suitable to human experience. The romantic approach in his words is much more ordered, patterned and less chaotic than the reader's experience in his daily life. He uses romance to debate about human experience. John Caldwell Stubbs writes:

“The distance of the romance gave Hawthorne a form in which he could experiment with and develop the self-conscious use of artifice” (P 7).

Blending Marvellous and the Natural

Hawthorne blends the marvellous and the natural in his romantic theory. He points out that there was a balance of the marvellous and the natural existing inherently in New England superstitions because New England's experience gave him a material base. He relies on historic influence, shadowy past of witchcraft in the real demoniac circumstances of the past. His aim is addressed to the place where the actual and the imaginary meet. This meeting is called 'spiritualisation of experience' by him. Herold Kaplan avers:

“A combination of moonlight and firelight... is necessary to make things human. The moon is the distancing imagination and the fire is the fire of life” (P 146).

Hawthorne, by exploring the subjective experience of mankind with his love of paradox, ambiguity in statements, duplicity in conclusions and symbolism in art, gave essentially a modern twist to his treatment of themes in his works.

The Scarlet Letter

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is considered the best of his novels which fully exploits the concepts of sin. The novel is about the story of the steadfast loyalty of a disloyal woman,

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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 Chillingworth. 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 enigma 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 same and the agony that she is made to suffer proceeds inevitably from her character. Hester compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride. She embroiders the scarlet letter as an expression of defiance and guilt and she dresses her daughter in equally flamboyant colours. "Hester is rich in her latent sensuality and peculiarly open to the demands of life instincts" (Kaplan 129). This is stressed by her relationship with Pearl, a child of excessive unlicensed passion.

Idea of the 'Unpardonable Sinner'

Chillingworth represents Hawthorne's idea of the 'unpardonable sinner'. 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. In the words of Harold Kaplan, "The allegory transcribes divisiveness in human character and action. The divided self was his major theme". (P 129) The characters search to find the divided segment of their own natures. As a Christian,

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Hawthorne emphasized the moral duality which is at the centre of man's being and founded on moral action upon a redemptive change of heart. Harold Kaplan 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 129)

Violation of the Autonomy of Conscience

More than the torment of the moral isolation which composes his theme, the concentration is more upon the violation of the autonomy of conscience. The vengeance of Chillingworth against Dimmesdale was diabolical because it was based on the witness of his secret inner life. This was considered the most cruel punishment - the humiliation of the soul. 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 uses his wisdom for destruction. 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. In the Scaffold, one can see the confrontation of public and person, the place of revelation and the place of punishment, so that the individual and the community can finally come to terms.

The House of the Seven Gables

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 out 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

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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 does suggest social complexity. In those days, when recorded statements were non-existent, the colonel used his hereditary weight and influence to get rid of the poor carpenter, Maule, who clung stubbornly to what he considered his right. Maule died a victim to the terrible delusion which possessed those influential classes who according to F.O. Matthiessen, "took upon themselves to be leaders of the people and who are fully liable to all passionate error characteristic of the maddest mob". (P 325) The colonel was the most vigorous person to spread the execution of Maule. Hawthorne had 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. Here 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". (P 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 Characters

Hawthorne is said to have given a depth and psychological intensity to his characters, undreamt of in fiction before him. The central theme of most of his works is not sin alone as a theological problem but also the psychological effect of the conviction of sin on the lives of people. The true Calvinist seeks conviction of sins as a preparation for a promised salvation and Hawthorne sees it as an admission to the brotherhood of man. His *The Scarlet Letter* centres on the broken law, the hidden guilt, the hunger for confession and the studious cold heart. He does concentrate his attention not so much on the external action as on the agonised process going on in the minds of the characters. One can see the sufferings of the young minister first from the point of view of Chillingworth and then from within the unfortunate Youngman's mind. In a sure way, Hawthorne goes on exploring the soul of the young minister which is unparalleled in all literature for its psychological interest. It is emphatically argued that Hawthorne's interest is not in sin, but in the sense of guilt which follows it. Edward Wagenknecht holds thus:

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“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”. (P 45)

It is this revelation of the human soul which gives the novel its unique appeal. In ‘young Goodman Brown’ Hawthorne imaginatively recreates for the reader the Calvinistic sense of sin and the theory that in actuality shaped the early social and spiritual history of New England. Young Goodman Brown’s journey to a witches’ Sabbath in the forest is usually taken as a generalised tale of initiation, a timeless allegory of the discovery of evil, of the true nature of man. It is Brown’s own naive asserting of virtue in the world that provokes the devil into unmasking the corruption of Brown’s townspeople and ancestors. His revulsion against all mankind at the end ignores the fact it was he himself, who decided at the outset to enter the forest.

He uses his vision of universal corruption to hide from himself and his sinful urges. In Hawthorne, by a wonderful feat of transmutation, the psychological state is better explored than its religious significance. Goodman Brown, after peeping into “the secrecy of men’s bosoms becomes a bewildered man. His eyes have been opened to the true nature of his fellowmen and he is thence forward a man of gloom. He is thus responsible for declining fellowship with his men. “He becomes another of Hawthorne’s fanatical and morbid escapists, beginning in self-repression and ending in self-isolation”. (Michael 79) Brown is unconsciously but deliberately undermining the hallowed image of the noble fathers that he has been taught to revere. Brown feels a “loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart”. (Hawthorne 390) He clings to the notion of saintliness separated from sinfulness. Faith wants to be a loving wife but Brown, having seen her dark capacities, refuses to acknowledge any other capacities. As a result, he cuts himself off from the brotherhood of men:

“A latent capacity for evil in brown would have prompted him to visit the forest. By clinging hypocritically to simplistic morality, Brown loses his chance to enter humanity”. (Caldwell 72)

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Man should not disclaim his brotherhood even with the guiltiest of man. Losing his faith in human beings, he becomes a stern, sad, if not, a desperate man, “for his dying hour was gloom”. (P 393) In “Rappacene’s Daughter”, unlike in “Young Goodman Brown,” the process is reversed. The protagonist discovers an essential good existing in depth behind the terrifying surface of evil.

Hawthorne’s Short Stories

Hawthorne’s short stories also deal with the problem of sin and evil. His short story “The Minister’s Black Veil” centres 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 dying speech of the minister connects his black veil with the hypocritical secret sins of mankind. The minister is surely the prototype of Arthur Dimmesdale, who is also a concealed sinner. Hawthorne’s ‘Ethan Brand’, as well as ‘The Birth mark’ reflects the same theme found in the protagonists of *The Scarlet Letter*.

To conclude it may be said that the novels and short stories of Hawthorne reflect the pre-occupation with moral issues. They all highlight the Puritan morality, its hypocrisy and its dogmas. All the moral issues are set against the social background. His works are not fictional exercises, but inner dialogues that are faithful not to doctrine but to dynamic mental conflict. Their subtlety, their ambiguity, their delicate poise between revelation and concealment arise from an anguished self-exploration.

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