

Hawthorne and His Audience: History, Dream, and Moral Values

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Essay

Storytellers have traditionally been the preservers of history and the narrators of heroics; they both teach and entertain. Nathaniel Hawthorne embodies this category of storyteller, constructing his imaginative stories around real-world events. Hawthorne begins with the reality of events known to his audience, but creates a bridge between that reality and imagination. Merging reality with imagination may be similar to merging realism and romanticism, two modes of thinking that chronologically split the nineteenth century down the middle. Hawthorne as storyteller resides in the middle of the century, and his storytelling uses aspects of both realism and romanticism.

Romanticism rebelled against the neo-classicism of the Age of Enlightenment, especially in terms of its use of formal language, a striving toward objectivity, and an orientation toward reality, favoring instead the use of the common language, a tendency toward subjectivity, and an orientation toward the imaginative. As a romanticist, Hawthorne uses the common language, and, as we shall see, directs his audience toward subjectivity, while he makes a moral point through his use of the imagination. But when Hawthorne was writing, realism was gradually influenced by the increasing reliance upon the example of science and scientific method.

An analogy of images dramatizes the difference between the two modes of thinking and writing. When the Romantic Movement was at its height, images of people were painted into portraits, and the portraitist could easily improve the appearance of the subject, smoothing over wrinkles and ignoring warts or large noses, for

example. However, in 1835, the first daguerreotype photograph was produced, and, after that, portraits could be exact images of their subjects, wrinkles, warts, large noses, and all. Photographic realism became popular in a short time,¹ realistic writers attempted to show their subjects in this manner, as well. And Hawthorne's stories exhibit characteristics of realism. As a realistic writer, Hawthorne focused on the "specific action and the verifiable consequence" (Harmon and Holman 432). As Hawthorne manipulates his audience behind a supposedly disinterested narrator, he shows another trait of the realist: an interest in "the effect of [his] work on the audience and its life" (432). Hawthorne's stories had a moral that related to his audience's everyday lives.

In his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne made a distinction between the novelist and the romancer, but believed that both dealt with reality. Hawthorne considered realistic fiction (the novel) to be different from a romance in terms of the presentation of truth. According to R. K. Gupta, Hawthorne believed that "While the novelist [of realism] fritters away his energy in an exact notation of surface details, the romancer can ignore the details and concentrate on a presentation of the fundamental mental facts of human behavior" (Gupta 317). Hawthorne, like all good writers of fiction, bridged the gap between reality and imagination, but unlike all other writers, Hawthorne also bridged the gap between realism and romanticism by building his imaginative tales on reality. And as the story grows in his mind, the theme or idea, the moral, reveals itself as the narrative unfolds.

His tales usually have a moral and draw the audience into the story. Part of the reality with which he begins is the Puritan heritage of his original audience, to whom he appeals with Biblical allusions. The Biblical allusion is used to provide a consideration of morals, and Hawthorne's narrative technique makes the audience part of the tale. It is the relationship of the narrator to the audience in Hawthorne's tales which makes the listener a conspirator with the narrator and a compatriot of the character,

¹According to J. M. Cross, in 1835, Nicéphore Niépce and Louis J. M. Daguerre produced the world's first daguerreotype photograph, and by 1853, the New York *Daily Tribune* estimated that in the United States three million daguerreotypes were being produced annually.

and which causes the listener to share the guilt that the character in the story feels. For guilt is never lacking in a Hawthorne story. He knows that his audience will understand his frequent allusions to the Bible and to Puritanism and will be able to make a link between his tales and their everyday lives. Hawthorne uses historical events and figures which his original audience also understood, stories of many events handed down in oral form until they had become traditional tales. One example is the story upon which he apparently based "Roger Malvin's Burial," the story of a 1725 battle between frontiersmen and Indians called Lovell's Fight, which had been repeated orally for more than a hundred years.

Hawthorne's storyteller characteristics were his use of a) history to place moral responsibility, b) the dream to compare with reality, c) allusions to Puritanism and the Bible to compare actions with rules, and d) a moral to link the story with everyday life. He formed a relationship between the narrator and the audience, implicating the listeners in the actions of the tale; the audience could see themselves behaving in the same way that Hawthorne's characters did, e.g. Reuben Bourne, or they could pass moral judgment on the characters' actions as in "Young Goodman Brown." It is of interest to apply these observations to two of his stories, "Roger Malvin's Burial" and "Young Goodman Brown," to test the validity of these purported characteristics of Hawthorne as storyteller.

Hawthorne gives the historical context of "Roger Malvin's Burial" as a 1725 battle called Lovell's Fight which takes place between frontiersmen and Indians, from which several survivors struggled to reach their homes, leaving some of their comrades behind with a promise to return. We can ascertain that this factual account inspired Hawthorne because Hawthorne refers to "the date" of the battle, the "retreat of the survivors," the wounded who "had been left behind," the "hope for reinforcements" which never came, and the "state of uncertainty which prevailed for a time as to the fate of the various survivors" (Orians 315). In "Roger Malvin's Burial," Hawthorne places the story in the same historical year, details the retreat of Reuben Bourne, who is uncertain what will become of Roger Malvin as Bourne leaves the wounded Malvin behind, hoping for reinforcements; for years, no one knows the fate of Roger Malvin, just as in the oral history upon which the story is based. Because this story had become traditional,

Hawthorne's audience was familiar with it; therefore, it provides a familiar context for the story he wants to tell, which is a story of guilt and morality. But, as G. Harrison Orians points out, "The significant thing is Hawthorne's technique, the way in which his fancy played upon the theme, transforming a minor incident into a totally different story of the human soul, and elevating it from a merely objective affair into a psychological study" (318). His imagination could then turn the story into what Orians calls a story "of the human soul," and give the historical incident another layer of meaning.

Although Hawthorne begins by alluding to a historical event, "he brooded until a few facts turned under his deft hand into a story of human responsibility, concealment, and remorse that was to be the forerunner of later and more elaborate stories" (Orians 318). He begins this story by reminding his audience that the story is "naturally susceptible of the moonlight of romance" and says that "Imagination [. . .] may see much to admire" in the historical event (78). That reality is blurred by visions or dreams is demonstrated numerous times in the text of the tale as Roger Malvin, his daughter Dorcas, and Reuben Bourne have dreams, fantasies, or unclear vision. Reuben Bourne, the protagonist, has been having "unquiet sleep," when he returns from the battle (79); he is having "a vision of the conflict" in his "dreaming fancy" (80). Roger Malvin's words to Reuben seem to fill the "lonely forest with a vision of happiness" (82). After Reuben leaves Malvin, Hawthorne tells the audience that "His wound [. . .] confused his reason" (87). As Reuben recovers at home, his "recollection strayed drowsily" and he again has "unquiet sleep" (88). For years thereafter, Reuben has "a haunting and torturing fancy" about his father-in-law, but Hawthorne labels them "mental deceptions" (90). Indeed, Reuben Bourne hears a "voice audible only to himself" (91). His "secret thoughts" have kept him from being able to "love deeply except where he saw or imagined some reflection or likeness of his own mind" (92). Hawthorne claims that the forest in the story "differed widely from the dreamer's land of fantasy" (93) as the Bourne family enters it; Reuben experiences "a momentary confusion in his mind" and behaves "like a sleep walker" as he hunts (96). Dorcas's song is infused with "magic" as she prepares the camp for a meal (99). The twilight is "sufficiently dim to create many illusions in her expecting fancy. [. . .] [S]he

seemed indistinctly to see [her son's] face [. . .] and once she imagined" that she sees him (100). Dreams and visions and fantasy appear throughout the tale, juxtaposed against the "reality" of the character's waking life. These "unrealities" allude to the discovery of Reuben Bourne's secret shame.

Another way Hawthorne connects with his original audience is to use allusions to Biblical stories with which they were all familiar. Reuben can easily be seen as a counterpart to Abraham as Abraham is called by God to leave his home, to sacrifice his son, and to father a nation. Hawthorne's mention of the "three days' travel" of the survivors in the story is reminiscent of Exodus 8:27, which has Moses say, in part: "We will go three days' journey into the wilderness and shall sacrifice to the Lord our God, as he shall command us." Abraham is called by God to leave home in Genesis 12:1: "Now the Lord said unto Abram, 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred and from thy father's house unto a land that I will shew thee.'" Hawthorne may have had this passage in mind when he describes Reuben Bourne's dream-like state of mind; he writes: "There was, however, a continual impulse, a voice audible only to himself, commanding him to go forth and redeem his vow" (Hawthorne 91).

Reuben Bourne believes that he, like Abraham, has been called by God to go forth into the unknown. Hawthorne mentions the "strange influence that had led him away from his premeditated course" and says that Reuben "believed that a supernatural voice had called him onward, and that a supernatural power had obstructed his retreat" (97). Other similarities exist between Abraham's experience in the Bible and Reuben's experience in the story. For example, in the Old Testament, Abraham receives promises from God:

That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.
(Genesis 22:17-18)

Hawthorne's wording is very similar to that of the Genesis account of Abraham's promise:

and when hoary age, after long, long years of that pure life, stole on and found him there, it would find him the father of a race, the patriarch of a people, the founder of a mighty nation yet to be. When death, like the sweet sleep which we welcome after a day of happiness, came over him, his far descendants would mourn over the venerated dust. Enveloped by tradition in mysterious attributes, the men of future generations would call him godlike; and remote posterity would see him standing, dimly glorious, far up the valley of a hundred centuries.

(93)

In addition, Reuben and Cyrus can be seen as figures of Abraham and Isaac with an important exception: Abraham does not fail in his responsibility and is required to sacrifice his son only figuratively, whereas Reuben does fail in his responsibility and must carry out the sacrifice literally, when he shoots his son. And because he and Dorcas are past childbearing age, he will not receive the promise God made to Abraham to father a nation. Even though Reuben is similar to the figure of Abraham, he departs from that similarity in neglecting his responsibility.

Not only does he neglect his responsibility, but he also lies to protect his outward honor, and Reuben Bourne must pay for his youthful sin. In his youth, he and Roger Malvin, an old man, are the only survivors of a battle. As the old man lies dying, beseeching Reuben Bourne to leave him there to die, to come back when Reuben's health has improved, and to bury Roger Malvin's bones, Reuben swears that he will. When Reuben Bourne returns to Malvin's daughter, she guesses that her father is dead, and Reuben tells her no different—a sin of omission. However, Reuben goes on to tell her that he has buried her father and erected a monument to him. This statement is an outright lie, and from there Reuben Bourne continues to sin. He has shown his selfishness. In leaving Roger Malvin to die alone in the wilderness, Reuben is guilty of a "selfish love of life" (Hawthorne 89). In concealing the first sin, Reuben also becomes guilty of "moral cowardice" and "prevarication" (90). Hawthorne writes that Reuben has a "guilty feeling" as he tries to make his actions "justifiable" (86), and "concealment" of what Hawthorne labels "a justifiable act"

accounts for the "secret effect of guilt" (90).

Not only does Hawthorne use Biblical allusions, but he also frequently alludes to Puritan principles. Hypocrisy, a major theme in Hawthorne's fiction, can be found in "Roger Malvin's Burial" in what Paul Reuben calls the "problem of guilt," in which a "character's sense of guilt [is] forced by the puritanical heritage or by society." As Malcolm Cowley writes about Hawthorne, "In his plots he laid more emphasis on sin and retribution than on reformation through divine grace" (13), much like the puritanical heritage. Robert Gale shows how Reuben Bourne isolates himself through his sense of guilt: "By failing to tell the truth, Reuben creates a situation in which he seems to himself to be more sinful than he really was" (181). Sin must be atoned for, and only when Reuben sacrifices his only son, just as the Old Testament Abraham was required by God to do, can his soul rest. It is only after he kills Cyrus that he can purify himself and pray for the first time in years, as both his tears and the withered top of the oak tree fall upon Reuben, Dorcas, Cyrus, and the bones of Roger Malvin.

Hawthorne's familiarity with the area in which Lovell and his frontiersmen made their 1725 fight against the Indians "conveys an illusion of objectivity" (McIntosh 196), but he creates a response from the audience from his descriptive words; for example, by describing the "howling wilderness" (Hawthorne 96) as having a "virgin bosom" (92) when the Bournes leave the settlement to enter the wilderness (197). James McIntosh pays attention to the "flexible control of point of view" (190-191) in the story, pointing out that the narrator is able "both to enter his characters' minds and to pass ironic judgment on them" (191). This is the way the storyteller is able to influence his listeners or readers also to pass judgment on the characters. McIntosh notes the voice of the narrator as "that of a wishfully innocent reader" who wants "to imagine a Reuben or Cyrus purified of conflict" (198) in the wilderness; the audience can easily identify themselves with the narrator.

But it is Hawthorne's use of seemingly rhetorical questions during the telling of the tale that stops his audience and makes them think. As they answer the rhetorical questions in their minds, they may either identify with the character or take the moral high ground and judge the character. For example, Hawthorne has Reuben ask Roger Malvin, as Reuben is agonizing over whether to

stay with Roger Malvin and perhaps lose his own life, "Were your situation mine, would you desert me while life remained?" (83), and the audience sees the wisdom in Reuben's leaving. Then the narrator asks: "and who shall impute blame to him if he shrink from so useless a sacrifice?" (87), encouraging the audience to identify themselves with Reuben. Later in the story, after Reuben has ruined Roger Malvin's farm and quarreled with the neighbors, the Bourne family leaves the settlement and enters the forest. At this time, the narrator asks, "Oh, who, in the enthusiasm of a daydream, has not wished that he were a wanderer in a world of summer wilderness, with one fair and gentle being hanging lightly on his arm?" (93) as if to put a positive spin on the situation so the audience will not think too harshly of poor Reuben for making his family homeless. On the hunting trip, after Reuben has shot at "some object behind a thick veil of undergrowth," and allows the subsequent "low moan" to go "unheeded," the narrator asks the audience, "What were the recollections now breaking upon him?" (97). The audience here should respond with fears of their own, recalling their own mistakes and falling into sympathy with the shooter. And, finally, the narrator asks the audience to consider the dead top of the oak tree and asks, "Whose guilt had blasted it?" (98). It is at this point that the audience realizes that the guilt belongs to Reuben Bourne, and because they have understood Reuben's feelings and identified with his actions throughout the story, they must now accept the guilt that follows.

Hawthorne repeats this pattern in "Young Goodman Brown," a story published three years after "Roger Malvin's Burial"; he uses historical events and figures to place the story into a context that the audience is familiar with; then he builds a bridge between that reality and the fictional characters and their actions. "Young Goodman Brown" is an example of Hawthorne's exploration of the relations between reality and fantasy. Even though his tales begin with "a series of events which may look like a realistic plot" (Stoechr 393), Hawthorne looks for "an available foothold between fiction and reality" (Stoechr 394); indeed, Melville described one of Hawthorne's works as "being spun 'round about in a web of dreams" (qtd. in Stoechr 394). Taylor Stoechr calls this propensity "a particular artistic stance [. . .] a promotion of fiction to a rank of reality above life" (394), "gaining its significance from expression in language" (395). As the storyteller spins his tale, he points out a

moral truth which has significance for his audience.

In "Young Goodman Brown," a young Puritan husband leaves his wife, allegorically named Faith, at sundown to meet with the devil and thereby test his faith. He does meet with a figure of evil and sees many of the Puritans from the village of Salem consorting with the devil; among them is his wife, Faith. As Brown calls out to her, he awakes from his apparent dream, only to suspect all of his Puritan neighbors of evil for the rest of his life, which turns him to gloom and dissatisfaction. He loses his faith entirely. Hawthorne knows history and uses "actual historical personages" in Goody Cloyse and Martha Carrier, who were "unjustly accused" of being witches (Hurley 414). As well, there are references in the story to King Philip's War and to the Puritan persecution of the Quakers. Hawthorne's original audience no doubt knew about these figures and events, and this history gave his story a basis in reality from which to spin his fantasy.

But "Young Goodman Brown" is another story about guilt. The protagonist loses his faith because of what he imagines he sees and what he imagines comes true for him. According to Taylor Stoehr, "Young Goodman Brown" is "about the nature of belief in imagined realities" (404). Stoehr writes that "The products of the imagination, though they may comprise the highest truths of all, are only 'supposed' truths, 'as ifs' which crumble at the touch or disappear in the daylight" (412). Hawthorne connects the meaning of this story with the ordinary life of his audience. In this way, Hawthorne "bridge[s] the gap between imagination and reality" (Stoehr 399), both in the mind of the protagonist and in the minds of his audience.

Again, Hawthorne describes dreams and visions in the text of the story. Faith is the first character to be "troubled with dreams"; it is for this reason that she asks her husband to stay with her as he is leaving on his evil errand (53). As Brown proceeds on his errand, there is the "sudden appearance of his companion" whose serpent-staff could "almost be seen to twist and wriggle"; however, the narrator puts it down to "an ocular deception" (55), without needing to remind his audience that for hundreds of years this kind of "deception" had been supposed to originate with witchcraft. As Goody Cloyse approaches, she sees Young Goodman Brown's companion as "the very image of my old gossip, Goodman Brown," the Young Goodman's father (58). His companion's

thoughts seem to "spring up in the bosom" of Brown rather than to be spoken; a maple branch becomes "strangely withered" from his companion's touch (59). Brown hears "voices" from "riders" who "appeared to pass along the road," though "neither the travelers nor their steeds were visible" (60). Brown "fancied" that he could hear his "townspeople" (61). At the meeting, the "congregation alternately shone forth, then disappeared in shadow, and again grew, as it were, out of the darkness" (63). "Among them," Hawthorne writes, "appeared faces that would be seen next day at the council board" (63). Brown is "bedazzled" (64), and "he could have well nigh sworn that the shape of his own dead father" is one of them (65). He sees the "worshippers" "flashing forth, as it were, in a sheet of flame" (65). The next morning, Young Goodman Brown is "like a bewildered man" (67). The narrator says that "it was a dream of evil omen," and after that Brown would often wake "suddenly at midnight" (68).

The setting of "Young Goodman Brown" is Puritan New England, and the characters in this story exhibit adherence to a strict Puritan code. For example, two real women who had been accused by the Puritans of being witches are named in this story. The town is peopled with a minister, a deacon, Faith, and an old woman who teaches the tenets of Puritanism to children. Puritans saw the world in terms of good or evil, and therefore made much of the devil. As well, the figure whom Young Goodman Brown sets out to meet at night in the forest, the representation of the devil, has a staff that is much like a serpent. This serpent-staff is an allusion to the story in the Old Testament in which the Egyptian magicians' staffs become serpents. In Exodus, specifically chapter 7, verse 12, Aaron's staff becomes a serpent when he throws it to the ground to show Pharaoh the power of God. Pharaoh's magicians match Aaron's feat by turning their staffs into serpents also, but with an important exception: Aaron's serpent-staff swallows the magicians' serpent-staffs. Hawthorne implies that the Egyptian magicians have access to the power of the devil, but there may have been some spiritual pride involved in the competition.

The moral of "Young Goodman Brown" may be spiritual pride, and this may be Goodman Brown's sin. Brown believes that he is so good that he can test his faith by meeting with the devil and remain pure. Brown wants not only to be a good and pure Christian but also to have the knowledge that the devil offers:

Hawthorne writes, "By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin [. . .]. It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin" (66), allowing Brown "recognition of sin," in himself and "then in others" (Paulits 581). It is only after Brown awakes from this seeming dream that he gains this knowledge. His life is forever gloomy after he returns to Salem village because he can see only darkness in the hearts of all humans.

Two critics, Taylor Stoehr and Thomas Moore, have separately and individually pointed out the aesthetic distance that Hawthorne's narrator keeps from his stories and his audience. Stoehr writes that Hawthorne's narrator maintains a certain distance in the telling of the story, presenting "his tales as purported translations, parts of an unpublished book, stories told him by others, [or] imagined historical events" (399). As well, Hawthorne uses many "expressions of apparent circumstance: 'as if,' 'as though,' 'it appeared that,' 'it seemed that'" (402), encouraging an interpretation by his audience, asking them to identify with the character or to judge the character's actions based on their own sense of morality while the narrator seemingly remains neutral. Moore writes that Hawthorne "invites readers into the text by implicitly including them in the 'moral group,'" and then as the audience labels itself "moral," it accepts the invitation to judge others (Moore 314). By holding himself apart from the story and the audience, the narrator can subtly manipulate the audience's feelings toward the characters and the action.

In "Young Goodman Brown," too, the narrator asks questions to make the audience pause to contemplate. As well, in this story the reference to real events in history "emphasizes the primary guilt of the Puritans for whose descendents (of whom he was one) he was writing" (Pearce 335). As Brown is making up his mind about which direction to go, he decides not to follow Goody Cloyse; because she is going "to the devil," Brown asks, "is that any reason why I should quit my dear Faith and go after her?" (59). The audience will no doubt agree with him here. The audience can further identify with Brown as he asks, "But where is Faith?" (64), and the narrator asks about one of the shapes that Brown sees: "Was it his mother?" First losing his wife and then finding his mother among the evil congregation would no doubt cause chills to run up the spines of Hawthorne's audience. And, then, during the ceremony, Brown sees "A basin [which] was hollowed naturally, in

the rock" (67), and the narrator asks, "Did it contain water, reddened by the lurid light? or was it blood? or, perchance, a liquid flame?" (67). The audience is encouraged to believe the worst. And the following morning, when Brown passes by his Faith without speaking, the narrator asks the most important question: "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" (68). Here, I maintain, the audience will believe that the whole thing has been a dream because, up until the end, the audience has been sympathetic with Brown. The audience will believe that he has done no wrong, or the audience will believe that his acts, like their own, are justifiable.

"Roger Malvin's Burial" is an allegory with fleshed-out characters who think of themselves as Biblical figures; Hawthorne's language alludes to the Old Testament, and his symbols emphasize the moral of the story. His protagonist is isolated from both family and society and walks around in a dream state until he pays for his sin. "Young Goodman Brown" is an allegory as well, but the protagonist in this story turns from a Christian existence to a life in which he sees nothing but sin. By using historical events and Bible stories with which his original audience were doubtless familiar, Hawthorne is able to lend credibility to his tales. In this way, Hawthorne is also able to move from realism to romanticism, from reality to imagination in his stories. By asking the audience to pass judgment on the characters and their actions, he draws them into the tale and encourages them to feel sympathy for the characters. But by identifying with the characters, the audience ultimately must share their guilt.

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