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Journal Entry: Interpretations of Hawthorne

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It is really hard for me to take Hawthorne at face value. The latest stories I read by him are “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Birth-Mark,” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” It really bothered me that all three of these stories have a surface-level moral that is hammered into the reader with the intentness of a cement drill. Children—Hawthorne intones in “Young Goodman Brown,”—be understanding of the mortality of your neighbors and do not fall blind into puritanism, or else you will become “a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate” human being and your even your dying hour will be “gloom.” He continues in “The Birth-Mark” (or as I like to call it, the Second Commandment): do not be absorbed in yourself and in your quest for perfection so much as to miss the beauty of nature behind the delusions of your pseudo-ideals. And since commandments of the times, like books, must come in three volumes, he concludes with a decisive lecture on the dangers of “science without a heart,” genetic experiments, and tampering with nature in general. He might as well have just printed “Keep your hands off Nature” on a sign and saved some typesetting ink (and the reading time of generations of students).

Of course, it is possible that Hawthorne bonded spiritually with Emerson and really did want to write a pompous tribute to inherent wisdom of Nature, but I doubt it. He is too sarcastic, imaginative, and attentive to detail for that.

And so, reading these stories, I was always tense, waiting for some punchline that ridiculed both the characters for dumbly suffering over their self-induced problems and of the reader for taking them too seriously. And sure enough, each of these stories ends in an expression of black comedy. “Young Goodman Brown” ends with the farce of the exaggeratedly gloomy life of the perfectionist Brown. “The Birth-Mark” closes with the “hoarse, chuckling laugh” of the assistant Aminadab at Georgina’s pathetic and pointless death (“told you it wouldn’t work!”). And finally, the culminating scene of tragedy in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is rudely interrupted by Baglioni’s exclamation of triumph and horrified delight. It was this farce that first made me try to look for a deeper meaning, some secondary interpretation.

To figure out how to read these stories, I decided to examine Hawthorne’s attitude towards the mastermind of his works. Hawthorne’s mastermind is an idealist—a perfectionist who always looks for too much and finds too little.

These three books give three different versions of the ending of such an individual: Goodman Brown doesn’t find what he was expecting and gives up, Aylmer finds only a part of what he wanted and continues trying, to the unfortunate demise of Georgiana, and Rappaccini finds what he was looking for (or at least he might have thought so at first) and then has to deal with it his entire life. Ironically enough, the outcomes in each case are the more disastrous the more success the masterminds have. It is as though

Hawthorne as the author plays out some twisted meta-rival of his mastermind. He is that famous eastern fairy tale's genie in a bottle that grants three wishes to the guy who frees him, and each wish turns from fantasy to nightmare.

Perhaps in these three stories Hawthorne is the ironic meta-rival of the mastermind whose role it is to laugh at the idealist's detachment from reality, to remind them (and the reader) in this twisted way that intelligent forces of life exist outside of each individual and that Nature cannot be ignored or commandeered.

An important question that remains in this scenario and that I couldn't yet work out is the purpose and significance of the female roles. The real victims of the overabounding inquisitiveness of these masterminds are not the masterminds themselves, but the sidekick females of their life: Faith, the loving wife who was despised and forsaken by her husband, Georgiana, also the loving wife, who was objectified, unappreciated, idealized and then experimented on to the death, and, finally, Beatrice the loving daughter (notice a pattern here?) whose fate is "worse than death" in the truest sense—who was forced to be an outcast from society, poisonous on the outside in grave contrast with the gentleness of her nature.

Furthermore, with the increasing disastrousness of outcome, the roles of the women are more and more pronounced, from the practically unformed Faith to the minutely described and developed Beatrice. Perhaps this emphasis on the role of the woman is meant to underline the relationship between the woman and the man in her life. Each of the women is described positively in comparison with the male heroes (even the poisonous Beatrice displays a strength and pureness of character that is not present in her male counterparts). Hawthorne's masterminds are all men, and the desire to conquer the impossible (and to spend one's whole life doing it) is typically seen as a male trait, while women are more down to earth, focusing on keeping the family together and the children fed and cared for. So Hawthorne could be developing the theme that has always been actual to women: "How to Live with a 'Mastermind' Husband and Not Die Trying."

From this female perspective, it is not by accident that Hawthorne's heroines, no matter how beautiful or smart they were prior to meeting their husbands, seem to relinquish their independence, self, and even life for their newfound love, completely unappreciated by the object of their affection. Their fates are in themselves eloquent morals on such choices. And it is natural that the women begin to learn their lesson. Faith lived unquestioningly with the husband who despised her. Georgiana progressed—she "considered the character of Aylmer," but even so, although she probably realized what she was in for, she did allow herself to be objectified and experimented upon. Beatrice, the undeserving artificial leper of society, understood not only what both men did to her, but accused them outright before her death. We are left only to wonder if some version number four of this progression would have managed to stand up for herself without dying in the process. Maybe the successful fourth version is meant to be the reader herself.

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