

Critical Paper on Short Stories

by Nathaniel Hawthorne



Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the most significant writers in the 19 century whose writings can be classified in the romanticism category. His works were mainly filled with dark romanticisms and had symbolic meanings with guilt, retribution and ancestral sin as some of his main themes. The *“Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Tales: A Norton Critical Edition”* contain twenty one stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne which are fully annotated and are accompanied by some of the letters written by Hawthorne during the period of his authorship. They therefore provide the reader with an insight not only to his tales but also a deeper insight in some of Hawthorne thoughts when he was writing the tales. Thesis statement: Most of Hawthorne tales are riddled with retributions, ancestral sin and guilt as the main themes.

In the “Birthmark” Nathaniel Hawthorne symbolizes marriage strife’s with the blemish on Georgina’s face. In the book Aylmer has an almost perfect wife save for the small blemish on her face. Being a man of science he concocts elixir a scientific cure to remove the blemish. His wife’s blemish that constantly bother’s him to other men is what makes her perfect but Aylmer is constantly obsessed by the blemish and so Georgina permits him to take away and so Aylmer not only takes away her natural beauty but her life as well. The theme of marriage strife in the Birthmark is symbolized Aylmer’s petty obsession to erase the blemish that other men view as her charm of her beauty. Aylmer constantly pesters his wife over her blemish until she agrees to let him remove it. “Has it ever occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?” (The Birthmark 84). When Georgina eventually agrees to let

him remove the blemish she symbolically gives Aylmer permission to take her life. Her husband's constant obsession with her flaw also takes away her confidence to a point where she total agrees with him (Pakditawan 147). Nathaniel also uses Georgina's blemish to symbolize earthly imperfections. In most of his works Nathaniel equates the pursuit of science as answer nature's little questions as evil and this theme is also depicted in the Birthmark.

In the "The Minister's Black Veil" Nathaniel uses the black veil as to symbolize transgression and sins. The story which is about Parson Hooper's life describes the preachers uninspiring and boring sermons. But all that changes when he preaches wearing the black veil. The creepy veil frightens his congregation and it symbolizes their hidden awful deeds and thoughts. In other words the preacher uses the veil to symbolize his congregations' hidden evil acts and thoughts. His theme is therefore applicable in live since in most cases human being in society hide their real evil acts and thoughts behind their straight faces.

In the story "Rappaccini's Daughter" Hawthorne again uses symbolism. In the story which is about the good and evil vile plants are used to symbolize evil. Hawthorne also uses Rappaccini's Daughter to symbolize Eve while her father the corrupt and evil man is used to symbolizes the devil. In the story "Roger Malvin's Burial" Nathaniel uses words characters and objects to symbolize ideas that the story etches in a readers mind. The oak is used to represent the memory persistence's and signifying the unchanging location. It is also used to signify sins, the conscience and life.

In this story "Young Goodman Brown" Nathaniel takes the reader through the tough journey of discovering one owns strength amidst powerful evil forces as depicted by the Brown. According McIntosh the

story and that of “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” are two of Nathaniel’s most famous tales with allegorical significance he also noted that the author paid much attention to their symbolic meanings. He also compares the periods that the tales were written to the realities of the depicted society and period and draws the conclusion that Nathaniel’s writings had much significance to the society at that period in that they reflected the dilemmas and the moral questions that were constantly arising in the society back then and issues that were rampant. Brown’s wife Faith is used to symbolize the good forces that oppose evil. He also uses pink ribbons to signify her innocence, beauty and purity. The Allegorical story is set in an evil place Salem where witchcraft and supernatural happenings are prevalent. Nathaniel who was a puritan writer again uses the theme of good versus evil in this story just like in most of his works. The story also has similarities to the “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” in that the protagonists in both stories embark on personal journeys of self discovery. In “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” Robins embarks on a personal journey in search of his relative in order to get his help and establish a livelihood. While Goodman Brown in “Young Goodman Brown” embarks on a faith restoration journey. Nathaniel used the characters Martha, Carrie and Goody Cloyse in the “Young Goodman Brown” to symbolize witchcraft and evil. They are also used to signify the satanic powerful forces that Goodman must overcome along his journey in the forest in order to gain greater faith (Newman162). Both their life journeys are significant to the modern society since they signify the modern challenges that people in the modern society face. Since we are constantly taking self discovery journeys to find out who we really are. These self discovery journeys often leave an individual stronger than they were or help one discover their own personal strengths.

In the story “Wakefield” Nathaniel explores the theme of husband absenteeism. The protagonist Wakefield is depicted in the story as a man

who does not care about his wife and is happy to live away from her. By escaping his wife Wakefield is depicted as escaping his life and therefore Nathaniel uses his ghostlike appearances to signify this escape from life. He is also portrayed as an irrational and unstable man for his choices. McIntosh noted that Nathaniel like in the other two tales focused on their symbolism. Though he escapes from his life he still keeps tabs at what is happening in what would have been his life. In other words he haunts his life. The theme in this story is most relevant today since Wakefield depicts a man who rather than dealing with his marital problem chooses to run away from them and by making such a choice he stops to “live” (Current-García 98). This is today a common occurrence in the society divorce is prevalent and common day to day occurrence.

The story “Ethan Brand” is a tale of Brand’s struggles with his own internal values with those of the society. Brand is depicted as a proud man with a marble heart incapable of embracing the real morality. He performs psychological experiment on Esther and in the process destroys her and therefore commits the unpardonable sin. Eventually he commits suicide. Nathaniel uses words to symbolize relieve when he describes the skies as being glad of Brand departure (Gale 197).

Macintosh noted that Nathaniel used significant symbolism in his tales that denoted the happenings of the society that he depicted in his tales at that period. He also notes that the Nathaniel Hawthorne gave symbolic meaning in his tales that tally with the challenges faced by the modern society and thus they are significant even today although they were written years ago (McIntosh 217).

Works cited

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