

## SHORT STORIES OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE – A DISSERTATION ON EVIL, SIN, AND GUILT

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### Abstract

Hawthorne claims a central place in American letters, becoming, in time, an influential force in the artistic development of such writers as Herman Melville, Henry James, William Faulkner. He focuses on social and psychological forces underlying human behavior and insists on finding and understanding the sources of humanity's darker side. He appears to explore themes like as isolation, monomania, guilt, concealment, social reform, and redemption. His works preserve the tinge of human emotions and sensibilities that stir the conscience of readers. His stress on evil, sin, and guilt in is very interesting as these qualities rule the character of the individual. His short stories, in particular, appear as the dissertations on these traits of human character. The present paper is a humble attempt to bring the influence of these qualities on the life of an individual.

Keywords: Transcendental philosophy, conviction, redemption, alienation, liminality.

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Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) is an American fiction writer. His choice of genre is romantic fiction. His works often appear like the critical analysis of human nature pivoting on the inner chambers of the heart where guilt and sin are the spokes that control the gyre. Hawthorne moves with a presumption that man is basically an embodiment of evil and is susceptible to sin and guilt. He tries to capture the scanned picture of the inner self of the characters to trace out these hidden traits. According to him evil, sin, and guilt control the nature of man. The pompous exterior is only a guise to hide the perverted interior to make him appear rationale and humane. If this veil is pulled off, the inner recesses of the human heart are exposed. The short stories echo this opera and the novels too sing the same tune. The present paper is a humble attempt to portray the qualities of evil, sin, and guilt that invest the protagonists in his short stories.

The aim of any religion is to equip man with weapons like love, tolerance, etc, that help him in the battle against these formidable enemies. The fanaticism which moves the individual's perception away from this ideology makes him blind to the actual philosophy of the religion leading him astray from the desired path. The rigidity in religious practices leads to chaos giving way for many discrepancies which pave way for temporary ideologies. The transcendental philosophy, for instance, tried to mitigate the severity of puritan philosophy, which imposes the heavy toll on the life of the people. Nathaniel Hawthorne is also influenced by the transcendental philosophy at the beginning, the effect of which is seen in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester in particular practices the transcendental philosophy of giving more importance to her conscience than to the established dogmas of the society. The other characters try to find coherence with society in which they live. Hawthorne's does not fully sink into the stream of transcendental philosophy which can be observed in his short stories. His choice of romantic fiction especially the short story, gives him the flexibility to present his ideas without sacrificing the true spirit of his thought. He is able to maintain his stand safely not getting confused with logic and rationale. The themes of evil, sin, and guilt which are connected to the life of humans in all ages are dealt objectively as per the demand of the situation. He aims at portraying, in his own words, 'The Truth of human heart.'

Hawthorne interests vets in bringing the life of the individual in connection to their moral attitude. He believes that an individual has to lead a life in harmony with nature and society. Any attempt made by him against this proves detrimental to him and his society. To maintain this harmony man he has to adhere to the moral tenets innocently than question it with his intellect. According to Hawthorne true knowledge doesn't lie in questioning the mystery of creation or unraveling the secrets but a patient understanding and trying to justify the ways of God to man. This very conviction thrilled Milton and the result is to be seen in *Paradise Lost*. I may assert Eternal Providence,

And justify the ways of God to men (line 25 – *Paradise Lost*)

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The ambition of humans should be to imitate godly virtues rather than god as a creator or destroyer. The disobedience of man which makes him move away from this truth and provokes for a vain sport with his intellect and knowledge is sure to invite troubles that can even be escalated to an extent of sin which costs him at the price of his identity in the society. Loss of identity is the greatest punishment making him a prey to his own prejudice. The scope of redemption is out of the spear of such a confused mind. In the short stories like The Birth-Mark, Rappaccinni's Daughter the protagonists come up with the audacity to prove their intellect which makes them alienated from their due rights in life. The protagonist of the Short story The Birth-Mark, Aylmer, losses his wife because of his over-enthusiastic efforts to erase the birthmark on his wife's cheek. Dr, Rappaccinic's in the story Rappaccinic's Daughter experiments on poisonous herbs making his daughter as the object of his experimentation. In both cases, protagonists try to defy nature. Hawthorne considers this as one of the reasons for alienation an invincible for that is sure to hurl him into the valley of distress making vulnerable to the trinity evil, sin, and guilt.

The characters in the short stories of Hawthorne in a process of gaining a unique identity sacrifice the place they hold, with a view to gain the place which they aspire. This makes the individual fall into a state of liminality. He can neither claim the original state nor strongly contend for the other which he has been trying. This keeps him away from both the candidatures throwing him into oblivion. In stories like The Young Good Man Brown, Minister's Black Veil, The Artist of the Beautiful the protagonists struggle for creating the liminal space which protects them from losing the identity completely. They finally create a space which gives them a safe landing in terms of justifying their character.

The eminence of man lies in recording all the changes that take place on the planet. In the process of chronicling, it is his own story that he records. Literature is man's dairy that keeps the record of this changing nature of man. Evil, Sin, and guilt are the main themes that recur in defining the nature of man. The instances in history and literature give ample evidence to prove that man's character is basically evil. The course of the history of man is a long war against these qualities. In some instances he wins the battle, in other cases, he surrenders himself to this formidable foe. The literature is a record of man's heroic resistance against these qualities.

Human history is the understanding of these basic traits with the perspective of the age and time. The sanctity attached to different sentiments keeps changing with the time and society. Adultery which pinched and excited the emotions in Hawthorne was of no meaning to society which has already gone through the trails of the time and moved a bit ahead of all these considerations, legalizing it as a part of the culture in the name of liberalization which is an unavoidable intrusion in any civilization. William Congreve's The Way of the World uses the theme of adultery with such triviality that, it sounded ridiculous to attach much importance to

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the concept as if there is no scope for adultery. The play, *The Way of the World*, premiered in London in 1700, speaks about the ethics far ahead of its age.

The novel *The Scarlet Letter* which was written more than a century later dealt with the theme in an utmost serious tone and tried to define the moral standards of the people in the society of America. Hester is alienated from the society owing to her unjust relation with a man Mr. Arthur Dimmesdale. He, in turn, suffers psychological alienation only because of the feeling of guilt that tortures him for his relationship with a lady which he dares not to reveal.

The world as it is now is evolved out of many changes starting with a ball of fire. The evolution of the planet has to undergo many changes in order to get the desired shape of what we enjoy today. The clarity cannot be reached without a storm of confusion. Any sort of clarification deliberately creates confusion in order to establish itself strongly. Literature is a product of sensible and sensitive hearts. Hence the works written in different periods hold their stand as they depict the plight of the society of those times. The clarity and the freedom which we enjoy today are not established overnight. The intellectual sobriety is very essential in order to solve this confusion for the benefit of its survival. The scientifically proven fact which demanded empirical clarity might have once been an abstraction. The time unlocks the doors of maturity and allows a man to understand the nature of truth. A man should mentally fit to receive that wisdom. If he intimidates himself with the concept of purity and maturity even before he is due to achieve it, he becomes a prey to confusion alienates himself from his society which makes him suffer an identity crisis. Hawthorne feels that this is the reason for all evils. The repercussions of such an evil he brings in the short story *The Man of Adamant*. Richard Digby tries for penance by moving away from the society of his fellow men. He tries for salvation even before he is fit to practice it. This unwise act converts him into a statue of adamant.

Adam was alienated from the empire of god for his act of disobedience. He couldn't move into the society of fallen angels as he differed from them, He couldn't again claim paradise and god's society, as he had lost the right. So alienation is but the truth he had to accept. Hawthorne brings in the same predicament in the life of the protagonists in his short stories. His stories often appear as dissertations on the effect the evil sin and guilt on the human character. Man promulgates the liberty and freedom leading to intellectual promiscuity. The confidence often assumes the shape of audacity damaging the serenity and simplicity which are true human virtues. Evil can be read as Envy, vengeance, infidelity/ignominy, and licentiousness. The propensity of evil naturally expands its empire in exponential rate leaving no place for virtue to propagate. Thus, the colonial rule was established by evil. This justified the idiom *Man's Nature is basically evil*. The quality of virtue remains a mere pretension. Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays a man in this very shade. The different faces of evil- jealousy,

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doubt, selfishness, envy, fanaticism etc have been portrayed in different hues. The characters themselves stand as signposts to navigate the reader's perception towards these cursed and forbidden qualities. In Hawthorne's short stories, it is not the circumstances that define the character of an individual, but the characters themselves create circumstances driving them into a jungle of confusion.

Evil like an enchantress traps the conscience of an individual, ultimately hurling him into the valley of vice with no way to escape. The characters try to remain in the wretched state by trying to justify than to deny. The stories like Young Goodman Brown, The Minister's Black Veil, The Lady Elenor's Mantle, Cappuccino's Daughter, Rogermalvin's Burial, Hedger's Experiment, The Egotism, Bossom Serpent, Ethan Brand, Devil in Manuscript etc scan the negative shades of the man bringing dark and hidden dimensions of the character. The other romantic writers of the period, though, dwell on similar fields; Hawthorne moves a step ahead by purely confining his plots to pure imagination, not giving scope for practical justification. There are many other writers from remote centuries who have chosen evil as their theme for plot construction. Christopher Marlowe's, Dr.Faustus, Goethe's Romances etc. have portrayed primary emotions like anger, fear, avarice, ego etc.

The fate of characters like Goodman Brown, Richard Digby, and Rev. Hooper is linked with religion. All three assume a greater understanding of sin and righteousness than others, and in their arrogance, they become further removed not only from human society but from spiritual communion with God. In spite of their wisdom, they separate themselves from all sources which are liable to bestow them the essential ingredient of life that is love. This separation or alienation is pervasive in Hawthorne's works.

The assorted male artists (Kenyon, Holgrave, Coverdale, and Warland) seem to be linked to the Faustian and demonic scientists in their failure to share the common human experience. The sin of cold, dispassionate observation and ruthless experimentation is common to Ethan Brand, a thinker, Miles Coverdale, a poet, Holgrave, a photographer, Kenyon, a maker of graven images, as well as to the scientists, Chillingworth, Aylmer, and Rappaccini. Hawthorne characters show a lot of loyalty to evil. The protagonists prove their inability to stand on the path of virtue proving true to the genes of Adam who committed the act of carnal sin. They do not have perfect harmony with virtue. They strive to stand stiffly on virtue but their instability wobbles their confidence tracking them towards evil. By the time the realization dawns, the protagonists sink in the whirlpool which spares them no option but to give up hope and surrender to the fate, the ultimate pronouncement in the jurisdiction of God. The characters of short stories which are alienated spiritually invite other evils like fear, obsession, doubt, jealousy, ego, hatred etc. Hawthorne feels that if humans fail to control these negative traits and allow them to go beyond the measured proportion get eliminated from the register of humans. A man likes to enjoy these qualities as they appear to promote

self-interest, but they are the arrows aimed at one's own self, that are sure to hit when he is found inattentive, causing a spiritual paralysis. Hawthorne warns the readers to be vigilant to such influence which is ready to sting the conscience of man.

Hooper in the story *The Minister's Black Veil* is separated from the society just because of black crape. He does not repent for his separation rather pities the people around him for their ignorance. He alarms them of the impending doom that is sure to befall on them if they do not learn to be loyal to God. According Hooper pretense is the real invisible veil that hangs on the conscience of every individual preventing him to see the reality.

"Why do you tremble at me alone?" "Tremble also at each other. I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a black veil!"(Minister's Black Veil).

Thus many of Hawthorne's short stories appear as dissertations on evil, sin, guilt that prevent the man from leading a peaceful life on this planet.

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