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The Dimensions Of Light And Darkness In Hawthorne: A View Of Young Goodman Brown And The Minister's Black Veil

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Abstract:

Of all the writers of the American Renaissance, three, i.e. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe are adjudged the most outstanding and produced works of the highest quality. One thing was common to all three, they lacked the idealism and optimism that was characteristic of the Transcendental writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and others. Instead of optimism, their writings were gloomy and inconclusively probing the very essence of human existence. In spite of the profuse admiration and praise to which Hawthorne was exposed as evidenced in Poe's and Melville's encomiums upon his writing, Hawthorne, we perceive, was prone to a sad and brooding countenance reminiscent of the impression that he possessed a knowledge deeper and darker, of the world and the human potential for evil. His works portray knowledge of and an indescribable perception of something dark and ominous about man and the universe in which he lived. This intuitive urge to unravel the dark recesses of man becomes worrisome given the background of Transcendental optimism prevalent in American literature of the preceding period and to which Hawthorne was closely connected though not enthusiastic about. The radical departure of these writers and their pessimism have gingered this attempt to explore, "The Dimensions of Light and Darkness in Hawthorne: A View of Young Goodman Brown and The Minister's Black Veil", two of Hawthorne's very symbolic tales.

Key words: *Light And Darkness; Symbolism; Knowledge; Alienation And Humanity*

1. Introduction: Hawthorne's Solitude And View Of Humanity

Why was Hawthorne's perception of man so dark and pessimistic? Hawthorne was not alone in this view of man and the environment. Along with Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, they have been described as dark romantics who saw man as susceptible to sin and annihilation and opposed to the Emersonian belief in man as the epitome of God's perfection and goodness in the universe. They saw human action and indulgences as self-destructive or nihilistic. As a result of this negative vision, the world is conceived of as dark and mysterious, inscrutable and decadent. Hawthorne, Poe and Melville, therefore, attempt to penetrate this dark world to reveal the true essence of the universe and man's place in the universal scheme of things. In their probing they were confronted with inconsistencies and contradictions leading them to diverse conclusions about man's evil potential in a dark and mysterious world. Melville opined that evil is inherent in man and only requires the right conditions for it to be activated. Put differently, the writer's felt that the nature of things in the universe has exposed man's inherent potential for evil and destructive capacity. This position seems to be supported by the fact that from ancient to modern times, in Literature, religion and social life, man is depicted to be in a perpetual struggle to trace or unravel the elusive, ever mysterious and nagging problem of good and evil in the universe and human society but without much success. Often man has met with death or insanity in this probing. Also from Shakespeare's and Marlowe's Renaissance man to Poe, Hawthorne and Melville's romantics and T.S. Eliot's modern era, the quest for knowledge and tranquility in human society is unceasing yet the vision of the world is still a "waste land" and man simply a journeyman in it. The mysteries of life still remain unsolved. Hawthorne, therefore, devoted his life to this unending search and his findings seemingly led to his brooding countenance and pessimistic view of life. He saw men, not only as sinners but as perpetual failures whose quest for fulfillment and perfection becomes an anathema.

To try to penetrate Hawthorne's vision in two of his tales, *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Minister's Black Veil*, this writer wishes to look at the dimension of light and darkness that Hawthorne explores in the two stories. Light and darkness will therefore, be examined from two symbolic perspectives which operate interchangeably and are open to multiple interpretations. They include:

- Physical light and
- Truth, which is often veiled and impenetrable.

How do light and darkness affect the truth or is the truth better perceived in physical light or in darkness. Hawthorne's main concentration seems to be the problem of moral growth or degradation in man and so he confronts humanity with this problem. In his analysis of human characters, he presents them as either failures or nitwits in the hazardous confrontation with existential problems. Thus Hawthorne becomes aware of the tragic potential of man and the painful realities which bedevil human

existence. He finds he is unable to reconcile himself with these inconsistencies hence his perilous perception of man's interaction with fellow human beings especially within the context of innocence or youthfulness as depicted in Goodman Brown's disappointment with humanity.

As an artist with a very strong moral vision, Hawthorne is haunted by human inadequacies which he artistically represents in the two tales of *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Black Veil*. The stories depict the inner working of Hawthorne's mind and relationship with people, his sense of inadequacy, the pain of isolation and alienation and the loneliness he feels as a result of his deep knowledge and perception of the depravity of man.

In a book titled *The Lasting Loneliness Of Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Study Of The Sources Of Alienation In Modern Man*: Henry Fairbanks (1965) explains Hawthorne's literary production in terms of his loneliness and isolation and posits that Hawthorne was separated from God, Nature and man as well as the self as a result of his awareness and obsession with human sinfulness and depravity. To a perceptive, sensitive writer that Hawthorne was, the knowledge served as a catalyst to contemplate seriously on an examination of the human potential in the universal scheme of things. In this explication, Hawthorne arrives at a deeper insight into the perversity of man which leads him further and further away from society and into insulation and isolation. Like Mr. Hooper who veils himself from his Parishioners scrutiny so does Hawthorne isolate himself from human society for fear of extermination. In the last scene of his death, Hooper admonishes his parishioners in the manner Jesus Christ addressed the women of Jerusalem not to weep for him but for themselves and their children. Hooper tells his people "why do you tremble at me alone, tremble also at each other". By this act, Hooper makes us realize that sin and guilt are not peculiar to one individual, but is a collective human predicament.

In *The Minister's Black Veil*, therefore. Hawthorne makes it obvious that all of us humans are wearing masks or veils of pretentiousness. The only difference is that the Minister's Veil is physical and attests to his guilt while ours are masked and impenetrable. We hide the truth in ourselves. The black veil worn by Mr. Hooper, the minister, becomes a symbolic representation of the sinful nature of humanity shown in the reactions of the congregation rather than a representation of the secret sin of the minister. Hooper physically and openly attests to his sinfulness by wearing a black veil but he really has nothing to confess except that like all men, he has his own inadequacies. Physical attestation in daylight does not make Hooper a greater sinner than all his Parishioners who are frightened of him. Hooper's black veil becomes a source of knowledge and thus, rather than blind him to the knowledge of human sinfulness, it is instead, a revelation of truth which the people cannot penetrate but which dawns on Hooper and affords him inner knowledge of truth making him a better preacher as the Parishioners now see him. Hooper, the Minister, achieves light or knowledge through the dark black veil. The black veil is used by Hawthorne here as a symbol of darkness which is supposed to hide or veil human corruptive tendencies but instead serves as a source of light and knowledge to Mr. Hooper the minister. Hooper, like Hawthorne, thus penetrates the depravity of his parishioners in the same way Hawthorne sees human depravity and so both of them withdraw from contact with humanity. Hawthorne here posits that sin and guilt are inherent in man but not peculiar to anyone individual, that sin and guilt develop in the human psyche and so is common to everyone. Therefore, Hawthorne, like Poe and Melville, attempts to probe the inner recesses of man in the attempt to reveal the nature of sin and evil. They attempt to penetrate and illumine the deep dark recesses of the human mind, the exposition of which makes them bid a retreat or escape from the physical world of imperfection into the depths of their own solitary beings.

The Minister's black veil becomes a physical and literal representation, not of the ministers sinfulness, but reminiscent of the sinful guilt of the townsfolk which keeps them uncomfortable. Hawthorne's concern is less with the Minister. It is the people who are aroused, through the veil, to a moral assessment of their own inadequacies as human beings. Even though, the Minister, as a human being, is not innocent, he and his black veil, are only catalysts and so symbolic of light by which the truth is revealed. They are the physical light which illumines the truth that is veiled. The veil itself, as the main symbol in the story becomes the light from which humanity glimpses at the veiled recesses of their minds and their hidden sins. Hawthorne's manipulation of light and darkness and their effect raises suspense. His use of the romance as a literary category frees him from realistic detail and allows him to manipulate the atmosphere of the scenes and actions of characters between light and darkness or a dream-like world to expose the truth hidden therein. Hawthorne perfects this technique in *Young Goodman Brown*.

While Edgar Allan Poe (1987) asserts that "the issue of the Minister's self-veiling was a mystery conceived to be solved or inferred by the reader", one still gets the strong feeling, as earlier surmised, that the veil is a catalyst and symbolic of light, manipulated by Hawthorne for the revelation of humanity's sinful guilt since no one is privy to the minister's sinfulness. His guilt is simply that of humanity which everyone partakes of, Hawthorne's technique of ambiguity helps to heighten the darkness surrounding the minister's black veil in the minds of the people. The light that reveals Hooper's physical black veil which people behold disintegrates the barrier between him and the people who now behold their own hidden guilt. Hooper, therefore, gains knowledge and is able to advise everyone that they all wear "black veils". He, therefore, leads everyone to a realization of common or shared guilt and depravity - yet the guilt of sin in man is or stands repressed and hidden from the rest of the world. It remains personal even to the brightest light. Hawthorne's position here is that the veil as a catalyst to knowledge and understanding on the part of the people is more effective than any sermon by the minister which they hear only once a week, perhaps once on a Sunday. The veil the minister carries is seen everyday and serves as a reminder of their veiled sins.

In *Young Goodman Brown*, light and darkness also have a special significance. Melville describes the tale as "the deep mystery of sins", which conforms with Hawthorne's deep puritan belief in the doctrine of the fall of man. The doctrine emphasizes the imperfection of man which raises doubts in everyone's mind about the goodness or evilness of man. Hawthorne's attempt to grapple with the complexity of good and evil in human society is therefore depicted in the story of *Young Goodman Brown*. As an exponent of romantic Literature, Hawthorne was prone to melancholy and altered states of consciousness which favored a cynical study of the psychic disposition of humanity. This, in turn, opened up a corresponding exploration of dark aesthetics. *Young Goodman Brown* is thus open to several complex interpretations as the reader's mind fluctuates between a complex system of

meanings and sensations alluded to by the artist. Thus in *Young Goodman Brown* our ability to distinguish reality from fantasy is marred by the narrative action which fluctuates between light and darkness both of which are symbolic of different kinds of knowledge. Hawthorne, therefore, fits very well into the class of romantic writers described as "dark romantics" because the stories of *The Ministers Black Veil* and *Young Goodman Brown* present the ordinary natural world as mysterious, dark and decaying particularly in the eyes of the protagonists, Hooper and Brown. Brown, the protagonist in *Young Goodman Brown*, is unable to discern the true nature of man which is evil and hellish. Both Hooper and Brown only come to a full knowledge of their society through a sort of initiation; Hooper through the black veil and Brown through the "evil forest", but they themselves die uncomprehended. Brown goes through personal torment and uncertainty regarding the true nature of man and human society and so becomes an outcast imbued with a deep knowledge of the evil potential of man like Hawthorne himself. Brown's awareness of this evil potential only comes in a trance-like journey through the night when he is taken through the evil forest within which he beholds all the supposed good people partaking in evil rites including even his own wife, Faith, another symbolic character whom Brown saw as an epitome of innocence and trust. Again Hawthorne falls back on fantasy and the symbolism of light and darkness which makes the true meaning of the narrative difficult to interpret. Brown is not operating in the realm of reality but in a dream-like world hence the reality or the truth of his vision is questionable. *Young Goodman Brown*, therefore, depicts Hawthorne's black vision of life and the impact of sin and evil on man which he tries to communicate to the world through the symbolism of light and darkness. The story becomes a pointed assertion by Hawthorne that everyone of us humans has an evil secret in his person. Brown's discovery of this fact confounds him as he is faced with this vision of human capacity for evil; he loses confidence in humanity and becomes distrustful of all human company. However, Brown seems to have gone too far with this distrust because he was not even too sure of the vision in the forest. The forest becomes the overriding symbol which affords Brown knowledge of humanity just as the black veil illumines Hooper and makes him a better minister. Hawthorne plays on the darkness symbolism which in the evil forest becomes the light that leads Brown to the knowledge of the depravity of humanity.

To Hawthorne, therefore, the world of "light" becomes a world of "lies" where we hide our evil natures while darkness becomes the key to the revelation of truth and the true nature of our hidden sins. Hawthorne probes beyond light to the deep recesses of the human psyche in the attempt to reach the reality and truth of the human essence. This probing reveals the power of darkness and evil in humanity. In *The Ministers' Black Veil* and *Young Goodman Brown* therefore, Hawthorne seems to make a categorical statement on his conviction about the nature of humanity and the concept of inherent sinfulness and depravity in the light of puritan principles that were enunciated and dominated lives in the New England society of his time. This knowledge of the inadequacy of humanity drives Hawthorne to solitude and loneliness. Solitude, like Hooper's veil, becomes a symbolic interpretation of something gnawing within Hawthorne's own being, a knowledge of unfitness or inadequacy which is opposed to transcendental perfection and achievement prevalent during his era. The solitude arises from his probing of the secret emotions or motivations of human behavior which he feels are predominantly occasioned by guilt. The Young Hawthorne was not a recluse and his sister Elizabeth confirms this when she says of him.

If there was any gathering of people in town, he always went out, he liked a crowd. But this contact with the world seems to have opened Hawthorne up to the realities he was to artistically recount in his works. Hawthorne himself attests to this when he asserts.

If I had sooner made my escape into the world, I should have grown hard and rough, and been covered with earthly dust, and my heart would have become callous by rude encounters with the multitude.

Ironically, this is exactly what happened to Hawthorne as he was soon to be exposed to "rude encounters" which made him to become skeptical and pessimistic about the human potential. His contact with the world in his *Twice Told Tales* is seen as his attempt "to open an intercourse with the world". But this contact, it would appear, only led to disillusionment and withdrawal which we see recorded in *The Minister's Black Veil* and *Young Goodman Brown*. Hawthorne, like Hooper and Brown, withdraws from the world as he gains knowledge and truth through "blackness" and "darkness". Hawthorne's own knowledge also comes from a kind of darkness in his youth which he describes as "---- a period of dream-like isolation and solitude spent in a haunted chamber -----". Hawthorne's writing can, therefore, be conceived of as a kind of dialogue with humanity in which failure by humanity to comprehend him leads him to his supposed isolation and solitude. Hawthorne, therefore, pleads in his 1851 preface to the *Twice Told Tales* that his work requires to be read in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which it was written;

If opened in the sunshine, it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages.

Thus in *The Ministers Black Veil* and *Young Goodman Brown* light and darkness become significant as the means by which the truth is revealed to mankind. Through these works Hawthorne reaffirms his puritan belief in the doctrine of the fall of man. The works can thus, best be conceived of as the psychological illumination of the dark recesses of the human mind. Through them Hawthorne penetrates the mind and tries to lay bare the hidden secret guilt of the individual which by extension are also applicable to everyone as is true of Hooper and even Brown. Brown, in his subconscious or dimmed consciousness, falls victim to the devil who uses deceptive images to convince him of universal human depravity which he then applies to realistic situations and so loses faith in life and humanity. This in itself is destructive and so author and his protagonists are destroyed in their quest for knowledge about the hidden secrets of human existence.

Human knowledge of the human potential is therefore limited and complete knowledge is impossible or can only serve destructive rather than constructive purpose in man.

The uncertainty about the human penitential and consequent fright of destructiveness is equally alluded to by W.B. Yeats in his play *The Player Queen* in which, a young man frightened of life, chooses to remain in bed until he is carried to his grave. This is another kind of isolation or insulation from the evil one perceives in life. The countryman in the play observes

... I know a man once that when he was five-and-twenty refused to get out of his bed. He was not ill-no, not he, but he said life was a vale of tears, and for forty and four years, till they carried him over to the churchyard, he never left his bed. All tried him ... and all he'd say was "Life is a vale of tears (*Player Queen* P.83)

Symbolically, therefore all human beings in their active daylight actions live in their dark beds because “life is a vale of tears”. Only darkness reveals our true natures which are wrought with depravity. In Hawthorne, evil is viewed as an aesthetic element with the dark as a contrast to light which Hawthorne uses very effectively in *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Minister’s Black Veil* to explore the hidden human potential for evil.

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