

# MORAL ETHICS AND PERVERSE EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES IN HAWTHORNE'S WORKS

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## ABSTRAK

Makalah ini menyajikan sebuah analisis terhadap tiga karya Nathaniel Hawthorne. Dua karya Hawthorne yang dianalisa berupa cerita pendek, yakni "The Birthmark" dan "Rappaccini's Daughter." Selain itu, makalah ini juga mengulas satu novel karya Hawthorne, yakni *The Scarlet Letter*. Di dalam ketiga karyanya, Hawthorne menjelaskan tentang etika moral dan sikap keras kepala sebagai strategi emosional berkaitan dengan kesalahan manusia. Oleh karena itu, etika puritan menjadi latar belakang penting dari ketiga karya Hawthorne tersebut. Hawthorne berusaha mengkritik etika puritan, tetapi juga berusaha menonjolkan sikap-sikap hipokrit yang menyertainya. Untuk itulah Hawthorne tidak hanya menyajikan etika moral, tetapi juga beraneka strategi emosional yang diperankan oleh tokoh-tokoh di dalam ketiga karyanya berkaitan dengan etika puritan yang represif.

**Kata Kunci:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, etika puritan, strategi emosional

## A. INTRODUCTION

As the title indicates, this paper is meant to discuss two surpassing aspects of Hawthorne's fictions, namely the moral ethics and perverse emotional strategies. In spite of his greatness, according to literary critics, it was really his self confidence that he included those aspects in his works. To be faithful to his idea, consequently he did not get encouraging support from the non-academic readers (Bradley et.al. 1962).

Before he proved his utmost creativity in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne began his creative enterprise with some shorter forms of masterly stories and tales. Indeed, in his early career, he seemed to face difficulty in transforming the function of literature, *dulce et utile*<sup>1</sup>, into his works. He got involved in serious moral teaching by preaching the readers in no different linguistic code. Hence, he could not equalize the function of *utile* with that of

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<sup>1</sup> The term *dulce et utile* refers to the function of literary works. *Dulce* is the aesthetic function of literary work, while *utile* is the didactic function of literary work. (Wellek and Warren 1977:29-37)

*dulce*, though he attempted to create symbolic and romantic events in his stories.

His characters appeared to be so monomaniacal that resulted in his readers' aversion against his works. Only in his symbolic romance, *The Scarlet Letter*, did he successfully invent an aesthetic seriousness, the higher pleasure or sweetness and the seriousness or utility of literature. Ironically, he finished the book when he was almost completely at a loss (Bradley 1962).

A year after Melville published his famous fiction, *Moby Dick*, Hawthorne also published *The Scarlet Letter*. It was Melville, Hawthorne's best friend, who supported him. Melville said, in his essay on Hawthorne, that failure is the true test of greatness. Melville suggested that Hawthorne needs to risk defeat by constantly attempting more demanding and original creative enterprise (Lewis 1962:7). Indeed, Hawthorne did not have as much avid taste as Melville did in intellectual and emotional acumen. His constant search for the solution of moral problems showed that he sought after reformation.

In his works entitled "The Minister's Black Veil", "Rappaccini's Daughter" and *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne wanted to show that unpardonable sin was none other than

hypocrisy and intolerance. In those stories, Hawthorne had minimized didacticism. To do that, he employed some biblical vocabularies and Christian doctrines to describe the protagonist's flaw. In those works, Hawthorne no longer sermonized his readers, but expressed his own inner dialogues. His characters no longer attached to the Christian doctrines, but they were attached to their own dynamic mental conflicts. The protagonists of those three works suffered typically similar agony. They were involved in an unresolved conflict between the desire to articulate the truth or conceal it.

Literature is closely related to mythology and religion. Therefore archetypal approach is considered the most accurate method to analyze literary works. In other words, archetypal approach will be very useful to analyze Hawthorne's works. When we refer to Northrop Frye's ideas of symbolism – apocalyptic and demonic – we can find that in those three stories, Hawthorne employed some demonic symbolism<sup>2</sup>. He applied four of the demonic symbolism proposed by Frye. The first world is the sinister human world. In that symbolism, there are two individual poles. On one hand there is the tyrant-leader, inscrutable, ruthless and

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<sup>2</sup> Frye classified demonic symbolism into seven symbolical worlds. However Hawthorne seemed to use only three of them.

melancholy. On the other hand there is 'pharmakos' or the sacrificed victim who has to be killed in order to strengthen the others. Rappaccini, for example, was a representation of the ruthless and tyrant. He sacrificed his daughter for his ambition to win himself over nature. To fulfill his scientific arrogance, Rappaccini isolated his daughter, and eventually killed her.

The second world is the demonic erotic relation. It is a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty and frustrates the person who possesses it. It is generally symbolized by harlot, witch, or physical object which people seek and regard as a possession but can never be possessed. This world is represented in "Young Goodman Brown." In this short story, Hawthorne set out mysterious setting to show the dark and grave atmosphere. The young Goodman Brown left his wife to seek the erotic demon.

The third demonic symbolism is the parody of marriage. Hawthorne exposed Rappaccini's ambition to match his daughter with Giovanni through a cunning trap. He also sets out vegetable world as a representation of sinister forest. The tree of death and the tree of forbidden knowledge in "Rappaccini's Daughter" ruined all natural objects. The following quotation is a clear example of the third demonic symbolism. It is Giovanni's instant

statement as he first saw Rappaccini's garden:

Was this garden, then, the Eden of the present world? And this man, with such a perception of harm in what his own hands caused to grow, -was he the Adam (Hawthorne 1967:322).

The fourth demonic symbolism is the inorganic world, such as cities destruction, dreadful night and the great ruins of pride. This symbolism was obviously implied in *The Scarlet Letter*. It is the ruins of Dimmesdale's pride and hypocrisy. In "Young Goodman Brown", Hawthorne also presented Brown to undergo dreadful nights in a dark and lonely forest. Moreover, the main characters in Hawthorne's works like Dimmesdale, Hooper and Brown suffered from nightmares and mental uneasiness.

## **B. MORAL ETHICS**

Like Edgar Allan Poe or Herman Melville, Hawthorne spoke a lot about moral ethics. He exposed mental and imaginative inquiry so that his character could entangle in incessant search for the reformation of moral depravity. Hawthorne exhibited hypocrisy and intolerance as genuinely sinful. He rejected the notion that mental uneasiness was caused by evil desire. This kind of moral ethics is presented clearly in "The

Minister Black Veil.” In this short story, Hawthorne exposed moral comment. It dealt especially with Hawthorne’s incessant search for the concealed sin. However, he did not present a clear agreement on what moral point should be when he exposed his protagonist’s reason for wearing veil. The only clue concerning with Hawthorne’s moral value was his revelation of the black veil, which was a symbol of the secret sin hidden even before God’s eyes. The following quotation illustrates that.

What but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loath somely treasuring up the secret of his sin (Hawthorne 1967:298).

Hooper with his black veil was not only Hawthorne’s protagonist but also a symbol of the secret sin and obstinacy. Hawthorne cunningly placed his symbol among some sensitive events and moments. He showed that the black-veiled Hooper came to the funeral in order to expose the mysterious sin behind the corpse. As the veil was disclosed, the corpse had slightly shuddered. Hawthorne thought that it was necessary to show that the only witness to this prodigy was a ‘superstitious old woman.’ In this occasion

he also implied that all mortal races might be ready to face the dreadful hour when they should snatch the veil from their face.

The black veil added to the gloomy mood of the funeral. It changed the cheerful mood of wedding into dreadful shocking funeral. Wedding is the most specific moment for man and woman to declare that they love each other, and be true to each other. Thus, secret or sin has to be disclosed. Instead of disclosing his sin, Hooper unsettled his parishioners by wearing black veil. He even rejected to explain the reason. He also thwarted his marriage and cast aside his fiancée who incessantly searched for the secret concealed behind his veil. Hooper’s rejection to clarify the reason showed that his obstinate hypocrisy could not be perished by woman’s love or even intimate brotherhood.

Hawthorne lived during the puritan period. It is probable that he was influenced by the common views of the puritan societies. This is shown by the subject matter that he presented in his stories. He is concerned with profound truth, hidden wickedness and torture. His protagonist like Hooper, played a role as a melancholy symbol. However, his other protagonists like Rappaccini and Beatrice represented tyranny and sacrificed victim respectively.

Like all Hawthorne's monomaniacal characters, Rappaccini attempted to undergo a mysterious desire. He sacrificed his daughter, Beatrice, to fulfill his ambition to win the scientific competition. As the result of Rappaccini's arrogance, Beatrice was doomed to be isolated from her milieu. To be the victim of her father's ambition, Beatrice should bear ill nature that would endanger all natural beings. Even love could not cure and neutralize her ill nature.

Hawthorne's anxiety towards intellectual arrogance is also presented in "The Birthmark". The Birthmark is different from Rappaccini's Daughter. In "The Birthmark", Hawthorne was concerned with puritanical concept of perfection. Aylmer, the protagonist, was a scientist whose love to his bride decayed as soon as he saw his wife's defect condition. His love to science was greater than to his bride. Therefore, he treated his wife, Georgiana, as a guinea-pig. Aylmer's intellectual arrogance was hidden behind his ambition to perfect his beloved wife. It was really a portrait of puritan humiliation of all mortal life contrasted to the power of God. Georgiana's stigma suggested a kind of hidden sin, either good or bad.

Hawthorne's fatalism accelerated his doubtful pathos against the idea of puritan perfection. He created a character, Aylmer, to show how puritan belief may

sacrifice anything. Aylmer sacrificed his wife for the sake of mortal perfection he aimed to gain. He intentionally let his character, Georgiana, being killed by her own husband so that his readers recognized how serious the idea of human perfection was. The following quotation shows Georgiana's statement as she is dying:

"My poor Aylmer," she repeated, with a more than human tenderness, "You have aimed loftily; you have done nobly. Don't repent that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the earth could offer. Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!" (Hawthorne 1967:317).

Before Hawthorne ended his story, he set out a valuable dialogue between Aylmer and Georgiana. He presented Aylmer's ambition won the argument and at the same time won his reader's impression of this fatal concept of puritan perfection. By reading this story closely, the reader's attention would be distracted from the misinterpretation that Aylmer's sexuality was flawed. This story reached its climax on Georgiana's realization that she is defect, when Georgiana said:

"Danger? There is but one danger – that this horrible stigma shall be left upon my cheek!" cried Georgiana. (Hawthorne 1967:313).

As a moralist, Hawthorne realized that people were responsible for whatever they did. Yet he did not let his characters

to fully aware of their motivations. As we can see, Hooper, Aylmer and Brown were presented as remote and weird human beings. None of Hawthorne's characters would explain why they strictly kept the idea of secret sin, or the fatal flaw of human beings. Hawthorne's himself did not explicitly explain this matter. Hawthorne would not let his reader to misunderstand his characters' monomaniac, but he let the reader to have a sympathy and deeper contemplation over human contemptuous desire.

Apart from the previous tales discussed above, in *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne balanced to concept of hypocrisy and truthfulness. He presented Dimmesdale's conflict with his inner sin in complicated manner. Hawthorne defended Dimmesdale in order that he could suggest tolerance to the strict puritan society concerning the unpardonable sin. To Hawthorne, it was unfair to punish sinner, especially when the sinner did the sin because he/she was ignorant. Therefore, he created the protagonist, Hester, to be the sinner who confessed her committing adultery without blaming her partner. Consequently, she got cruel punishment from the puritan society, while at the same time, Dimmesdale, the other sinner, contemplated himself in hiding his sin. The following quotation shows how the puritan society blamed the sin upon

her: "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the Statute book." (Hawthorne 1967:45).

Because Hester dared to admit the sin, she had to bear the punishment. On the other hand, Dimmesdale concealed the sin that he had committed deep in his heart. He, even proudly held his position as clergyman despite of being sinner. To insinuate the fraudulent attitude of Dimmesdale, the narrator of the story gave the following comment:

"... guilty as they may be, retaining, nevertheless a zeal for God's glory and man's welfare, they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because, thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them; no evil of the past be redeemed by better service." (Hawthorne 1967:113)

Although Dimmesdale himself is sinner, he had been trusted by his parishioners. Many of his parishioners felt free and relieved after they confessed their sin to Dimmesdale. In this case, Hawthorne tried to reflect to poles of mortal sin. One pole depicted the naïve but honest adulteress who considered herself as sinner and the other pole reflected the hypocritical attitude of Dimmesdale, the clergyman who committed similar scandal but he was untouched by law. To strengthen his moral concept, Hawthorne

insisted that the readers pay serious attention to Dimmesdale's mental uneasiness. Yet, he also asked the reader to sympathize Hester's love and attachment to her punishment.

### **C. PERVERSE EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES**

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne exposed that anxiety played very important role in the development of his characters. In that story, the reader could not find cheerful characters, except for the fortunate and isolated Pearl, the product of the sin. To recall Hawthorne's greatness as an introspective writer, one must feel that the kernel of his works is the real human drama, in which there is no existence but death. He not only made the readers sympathize Hester's freedom but also showed his power of presenting Dimmesdale and Chillingworth as the victim of compulsion. Here, Hawthorne faced ambiguity; denying moral ethic or accepting it. Dimmesdale's intense guilty feeling and Hester's 'rebellion' were the evidence of his ambiguity. Hawthorne supported Hester's rebellion by saying:

"Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter; which had such potent and disastrous efficacy than no human sympathy could reach her ... God, as a distinct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a

lovely child." (Hawthorne 1967:76).

Hawthorne's ambiguous stance was portrayed when he also commented on Dimmesdale's bitter conflict. The following quotation shows Hawthorne's comment:

More than once-day, more than a hundred times-he had actually spoken! Spoken! But how? He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity; and that the only wonder was, that they did not see his wretched body shriveled up before their eyes, by the burning wrath of the Almighty! Could there be plainer speech than this? ... They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. (Hawthorne 1967:123).

The above mentioned quotations showed Hawthorne's perverse emotional strategies. He did not merely talk about moral and evil, but he went further and became mature in seeing his worlds. He talked and suggested that one should survive in such a bitter world. For this purpose he confronted the puritan vengeance with cowardice so that he could let the readers trace the truth and unveiling evil desire or imperious guilt. He suggested that there was positive freedom to receive the truth. On one hand, Hawthorne exposed Hester's accepting the punishment in order that he could show

Hester's better future. On the other hand, he showed that Dimmesdale's delayed renouncement eroded his energy and ruined his life.

Almost all of Hawthorne's works ended in the tragic death of the main characters. In this case he showed that he was a fatalist.<sup>3</sup> With a certain purpose to criticize Puritanism and involve in a continuous study of human welfare, Hawthorne 'killed his main characters in order to emphasize the demonic side of the other characters. For example, in "Rappaccini's Daughter", Hawthorne showed the conflict between the good and the bad characters. The evidence of the conflict could be seen in the dialogue between Rappaccini and his daughter, Beatrice.

"... I am going, father, where the evil which thou hast striven to mingle with my being will pass away like dream – like the fragrance of these poisonous flowers, which will no longer taint my breath among the flowers of Eden. Farewell, Giovanni! Thy words of hatred are like lead within my heart, but they, too, will fade away as I ascend." (Hawthorne 1967:350).

Through a careful reading, one could conclude that "Rappaccini's Daughter" was

not a real tragedy as it was *The Scarlet Letter*. Rappaccini suffered his tragic failure, but his fighting against nature was not strongly clarified.

Hawthorne developed a better characterization in "The Birthmark." The scientific power was represented by Aylmer and the natural virginity was illustrated by Georgiana. Georgiana's submissive character was too weak to fight against Aylmer's eminent arrogance. They symbolized passive nature and curious scientific power. Hawthorne balanced those two powers and as an introspective writer he won the reader's catharsis by telling a fatal ending. The scientist successfully perfected natural defect, simultaneously he failed to possess natural virginity.

#### D. CONCLUSION

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has successfully developed a touching tragedy. This work was different from that of his two previous works. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale was not only confronted by Chillingworth, but also with Pearl, the fruit of his own evil desire. Besides that, he was also confronted by his own guilty feeling. His death which was coincided with his renouncement of his hidden sin became a complete end of his struggle.

In his other works, Hawthorne exposed different antagonism. Beatrice

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<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the mythical pattern of romance or tragedy, Hawthorne himself was a fatalist. However he was different from Thomas Hardy. Hawthorne's fatalism appeared to be more optimistic and rationalistic than Hardy.

and Georgiana kept their passive antagonism, while Dimmesdale tended to oppose his antagonist. In contrast with Dimmesdale, Hester got herself be friend with her antagonists because she had Pearl. Hester also endured the same torture as Dimmesdale did, but her freely acceptance and tolerance enabled her to survive.

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