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ENGL 3103

11/11/2015

Veils of Hawthorne

Biographical Information

It would be a stretch to call Nathaniel Hawthorne an isolationist¹, and instead we could call him, and many do, a private man. As I read through bits of Hawthorne's biography, I am coming to think, more and more, to think his life seeped into his works more than many people think. It reminds me of Mr. Hooper's "simple piece of crape," the crape being the veil in question in the story "The Minister's Black Veil" (Hawthorne 410). The image of a lifelong veil worn about one's face in real life would be striking, but because it mirrors what he may have felt at the time for Hawthorne. What is meant by this is that if we consider his history alongside, to include his is it would be much more difficult to understand his work, and therefore it should be considered when reading stories similar to "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."

The *Columbia Literary History of the United States* refers to Hawthorne much, at one point saying he "attempts to place himself in a world he felt congenial and often felt bizarre" (Elliott 208). It is plausible how he may not have felt harmonious in relation to his environment.

¹ This is not to say at one point he was not fairly isolated. Many sources indicate he not only "lived quietly," as Baym puts it in the biographical section of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, but that he stayed mostly at his own home from 1825 to 1837 until he met his future wife Sophia Peabody (370). During this period he would have been an isolationist, but I felt that it was his privacy that really carried through, and not necessarily his isolation.

Further, Baym, general editor of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, begins the second paragraph of a mini-biography of Hawthorne's life with the following: "Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. His prominent Puritan ancestors on the Hawthorne side of the family were among the first settlers of Massachusetts and included a judge in the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692." On Biography.com, the general editors give this statement about the son of William Hathorne: "William's son, John Hathorne, was one of three judges during the Salem Witch Trials in the 1690s. Nathaniel later added a "w" to his name to distance himself from this side of the family." This distance is important to my discussion as a form of veil within his life.

Late in 1837, Hawthorne met Sophia Peabody, an artist, would be wife, and mother of his three children Una, Julian, and Rose Hawthorne. While writing throughout his life, he moved around working odd jobs in order to meet financial needs, such as the position of an industrious consul in Liverpool from 1853-57. Hawthorne from that point moved back to his family's Concord home up until his death in May, 1864, when on a trip to New Hampshire.

My Kinsman, Major Molineux²

Jumping right in, Robin, the protagonist in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is attempting throughout the story to connect with Major Molineux in order that he may receive some aid getting established at the unnamed "little metropolis of a New England colony (Hawthorne 374). He spent much of the time being rebuked, refused, and rebutted by various situations, all of which cause him to feel very alienated, from both his missing kinsman and the rest of the town, making up the bulk the tale.. Finally, near the crux, Robin encounters the Major in all his "tar and feather dignity" (Hawthorne 385). So here, the isolation of Robin, is very unintentional, and

² First published in *The Token* during 1832.

yet once he finds the feathery Major he wants nothing to do with it. This distance is not dissimilar from that which Hawthorne creates by adding the W to his name between himself and his ancestors.

Young Goodman Brown³

Young Goodman Brown within this tale seems to have separated from two different situations throughout, and both are intentional. First the distance Goodman Brown creates between himself and Faith, his newly wedded wife, for what I imagine is her own mental or physical safety from the antagonist or the situation he is about to enter into, either one at the point is more likely. Still, after some time wandering the wood with his insidious companion, Goodman Brown finds his township, I assume, practicing some malevolent ritual in a clearing, and this forever forces him to shun them in his mind, along with continuing to shun his own wife.

The story seems to be against religious hypocrites at first, but something sticks out. If the hypocrites are those with whom the devil has made a deal, where does Goodman Brown fall in here? Perhaps that is the reason for excluding his wife after the incident was to save her from his own corruption. It's an interesting parallel how he tries to keep Faith pure of their influence by distancing himself from the townsfolk and Faith herself. These separation situations, for Goodman Brown, stem from religious motivations and concern for his wife. This does not particularly remind me of Hawthorne's private self, but suggests to me that he was aware this reason for separation was necessary up until the point that Goodman Brown, in the end, keeps mostly to himself everything he has, to include his opinion. This echoes very nicely a passage from the Custom House section of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hawthorne states "we may prate

³ First published in the *New-England Magazine* during April, 1835.

of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil" (451)

The Minister's Black Veil⁴

This story, of all of the ones that have been analyzed thus far, makes me think of Hawthorne's attitude about privacy most. It is not simply the source of my title, and a sort of parable of a real person's life⁵ but somehow I find the minister's plight the most representative of Hawthorne's own refusal to remove the veils he had drawn up throughout his life.

Mr. Hooper, the minister and protagonist, starts off this story with what seems his first outing with his veil upon his face. The veil itself draws attention, much like my attention is drawn to Hawthorne here. Yet unlike the members of Mr. Hooper's congregation, who are given to say things like "I can't really feel as if good Mr. Hooper's face was behind that piece of crape" and "He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face." (Hawthorne, 410)

Whatever the case, Mr. Hooper treads forward in the tale, eventually coming to a defining moment in this and for me feels most representative of Hawthorne's want for privacy and separation later in life and reasons he should not be denied it.

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 the man does not vainly shrink from the

⁴ First published in *The Token* during 1836, making it one of the last short stories published prior to the *Twice-Told Tales*.

⁵ Baym states, in a footnote, that "In this case, however, the symbol had a different import. In early life he had accidentally killed a beloved friend" about the person thought to be the man of this parable (409).

eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived and die! I look around me, and lo! on every visage a black veil! (Hawthorne, 418)

Each case is just an example of something real here. Each one is absolutely correct. Yes, we do keep secrets from our friends. Even more interesting for me though, is the interesting "Custom House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* which touches on something of a similar note

. . . we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but the still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. To this extent and within these limits, an author, methinks, may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader's rights or his own. (Hawthorne, 451)

Here, Hawthorne addresses the audience directly, and a little compare and contrast is in order so that everyone is on the same page with what I mean. On the surface, Hawthorne's use of the word veil seems little more than a funny coincidence. The last sentence of the first of the above two quotes makes it more so. "On every visage a black veil" is the privacy to which we are entitled. We should indeed "keep the inmost Me behind its veil" in the presence of my friend and my beloved.

Rappaccini's Daughter⁶

⁶ First published in *The Democratic Review* during December 1844. This date in particular is of note due to the proximity to his first child's birthdate, which according to Hawthorneinsalem.com, a website about Hawthorne's life and family, was in March 1844. This would place his writing quite near her birth, and perhaps serve as an inspiration for the story in the first place.

Within this story, the last one written out of the works I have spent time analyzing directly, is the story of Giovanni Guasconti and Beatrice Rappaccini in "Rappaccini's Daughter." Giovanni, recently moved, lives upstairs overlooking a rather beautiful garden, attended by Signor Rappaccini. During the course of the story, Giovanni becomes infatuated with Signor Rappaccini's daughter, Beatrice. She, as well as the garden, turn out to be rather toxic, and this transfers over to Giovanni. Near the end, at the crux, an antidote is provided, which Beatrice drinks, only to find it acts as a poison to her instead of an antidote. There ends the story.

Now, it's good to note that neither character really had a choice in their separation from society, and have less to do with the Hawthorne's attitude than the last example, and more to do more with the general attitude that Hawthorne held than the last one. Instead, this seems to deal more, as perhaps did "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," with involuntary separation. Yet, unlike Robin from that story, Giovanni and Beatrice really don't get a choice in their situation at any point. Yes, Giovanni does take some decisive actions to be sure, but there are things at play that we don't realize until the end of the story.

Beatrice begins and ends the story in much the same situation (excluding her death mind) in that she is separated from society here much like Robin was in his story. Other than this and the involuntary manner in which she is separated from society, she and Robin have little more in common. She has spent most of her natural life like this, judging from Signor Baglioni's comment "You have heard of this daughter, whom all the young men in Padua are wild about, though not half a dozen have every had the good hap to see her face" (Hawthorne, 435), and yet ends the story with no resolution in her favor. Giovanni on the other hand seems to me to be more representative of Robin's, from "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," hypothetical life. I very

much doubt that he has been sheltered from society in the same way as Beatrice was, seeing as the above quote was addressed to him in the first place by someone to whom he is not related.

Yet Giovanni may well have still gotten the worse ending, aside from getting no real closure in the first place, within the confines that Hawthorne had provided. Seeing as he now must deal with the fact that he is now poisonous, the real question he could face is that now that he is harmful to others, should he remain separated from society, or run about and wreak havoc among his peers? Either way his normal life is now out of the question, and the antidote that Beatrice had drinks might well be just as effective for him as it was for Beatrice. In this way, Giovanni now is left with less choice in the matter than say Robin had when Robin choose not to associate with his kinsman.

Summary and Conclusion

With all these little things here, it may do some good to summarize what it is I mean to get at by mentioning here. I've addressed some of the various ways one can go about being separated and isolated from either society or people in one's life. I've provided some parallels that connect the stories to each other and connected Hawthorne himself to his work, in an attempt to make it clear that I think reading Hawthorne is much easier when we read it with an understanding that he was a private man and his history, given to holding his opinions from his works, and his efforts to do this give us insight on choices he makes within the stories he wrote.

Yet, it seems he wasn't entirely successful. We should, as readers, give his personal history some thought when reading his works. To say a person isn't affected on any level by their experiences is all but silly. With an artist, or in this case author, it can be especially noticeable within their works, and indeed herein is examined one aspect of his life. If only this one aspect of

his life considered in conjunction to his work holds this much possibility, then the entirety of his life would hold even more sway, and in this lies why you should care about this.

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