

Unattainable perfection



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The expression “ I am only human” is a phrase coined by people in order to blame their faults on humanity. The question many philosophers have asked is if perfection is attainable. In his short stories, “ The Birthmark,” “ The Minister and the Black Veil,” and “ The Gray Champion,” Nathaniel Hawthorne illustrates the human condition as one of human imperfection and sin that can be destructive if not controlled. Hawthorne effectively portrays what can happen if an individual is not monitored by society in his stories. He emphasizes the role of the individual in the society and the limitations that the society must place on that individual.

Using symbolism, characterization, and paradoxes, Hawthorne emphasizes humankind’s faults and their imperative role in the character of all men. Most importantly, he emphasizes that perfection and the cleansing of all sin is not possible. Hawthorne uses symbols and extended allegories to elucidate the true nature of human attributes. “ The Birthmark” is a story about an obsessive scientist name Aylmer who strives to perfect his wife. The predominate symbol in this story is the birthmark on his, other wise perfect, wife: a mark of “ deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape” (Hawthorne148).

This mark is identified very closely with Georgiana, Aylmer’s wife, because it changes with her emotions and motions. This suggests that Georgiana does not merely have an imperfection embedded in her skin, but that she is imperfection embodied. Hawthorne specifically marked Georgiana as an imperfection because she is a woman, tainted with sin from the dawn of Adam and Eve (Fetterley 3). Because all of mankind is Eve’s children, this

mark is “ the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature...stamps ineffaceably on all her productions” (Hawthorne 149).

Hawthorne thus emphasizes that men are supposed to be imperfect in comparison to pristine and refined nature. Therefore, humans should look upon nature as a role model so that they can be as close to perfect as possible. This is what Aylmer does as he attempts to perfect the flower he shows Georgiana. However, he does this in a frenetic, destructive way which is his flaw and proves that not only women are imperfect. His elusive goal is evident when, at first, the flower is perfect, but then the “ whole plant suffer[s] a blight, its leaves turning coal-black as if by the agency of the fire” (Hawthorne 155).

The moral is that humans should not meddle with nature because nature is already perfect: Hawthorne’s unique way of expressing a “ universal sympathy with Nature” (Longfellow 1). The parallel result of Georgiana dying after achieving perfection represents that the perfection of man goes against nature. Mr. Hooper’s veil in the “ Minister and the Black Veil” is also an example of human lubricity. This veil covers the majority of his face, and does not “ intercept his sight, further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and unanimated things” (Hawthorne 10).

The Black Veil represents the sin that he has committed and the facade that he chooses to hide it behind. However, it also shields him from the sin of his entire community (Emmett 1). His own sin has allowed his vision to see things in “ a darkened aspect” so as to see that everyone has his own dark secrets (10). He realizes that although everyone professes to be pure, their

entire life is a front to hide their true selves: their imperfect selves. If each individual and the society they make up is imperfect as stated in the “Minister and the Black Veil,” then so is a country made of humankind.

As America was the first country formed from the true aspirations of mankind, it is destined for corruption. This is why Hawthorne has created the symbol of “The Gray Champion”. Representing a “type of New England’s hereditary spirit, and his shadowy march, on the Eve of danger,” this champion is the guardian angel of the country: the faith that has founded and developed the nation (Hawthorne 9). Although Hawthorne specifically speaks of protection from war and enemies, inner corruption also looms. The individual flaws of its citizens can eat at a country from within without religion and a faith in God to keep them on a righteous path.

Hawthorne’s characterization allows the reader to understand the state of mind and decisions of his characters. This, in turn, helps establish the weaknesses that they have that make them human. Although the character with the apparent imperfection in the “Birthmark” is Georgiana, it is Aylmer that best depicts the human condition. He is said to represent “a type of spiritual element” and yet Georgiana observes that “he handles physical details as if there were nothing beyond them, yet spiritualized them all and redeemed himself from materialism” (Hawthorne 153).

This suggests that while Aylmer considers himself a man of science, it is the supernatural and abstract things that he is experimenting with. His “faith in man’s ultimate control over nature” is his tragic flaw (Hawthorne 148). Killing his wife in the pursuit of an impossible goal is an example of an individual

not being checked by the natural flow of the society. By making this vice so evident, Hawthorne reveals that ultimately, everyone's faults are obvious. With this blunt style, Hawthorne fights against the ambiguous nature of humans.

Father Hooper is likewise flawed, but his uncleanness is even more apparent. His obvious flaw is his secret sin that involves his association with a recently deceased young lady. The community respects him, but also fears him to the point that "their instinctive dread causes him to feel more strongly than aught else" (Hawthorne 19). Consequently, the respect and responsibility he bears from the society, the hatred of himself, and his understanding that everyone and "the Earth, too, [has] on her Black Veil," forces the reader to sympathize with him (20). In Poe's words, it "smothers the sin" (2).

By creating sympathy for his character, Hawthorne clearly expresses that sins should be pardoned because they are human nature. He conveys that humans should accept their condition. Although the Gray Champion is an allegory, he too has characterization. He is a "shadowy march" and "follows darkness, and adversity, and peril" (Hawthorne 9). Although he is the hero and protector that the country needs, he must be darkness to face the malfeasance that is present in battle. Thus, human kind must be willing to accept their impurities in order to face the evil that is found in the world.

The small amount of sin and evil they possess, can protect men from evil because those that are all good are innocent and naive. Because Hawthorne creates forgivable characters who are clearly "only human", it is clear that

he believes that people do have some good in them and should strive to express this instead of absolute perfection. The paradox is a statement that is both true and untrue. Hawthorne viewed human nature as a stream of paradoxes that seems incompatible, but is the base of humanity. Ergo, he uses contradictory words and characters throughout his stories.

Perfection is an element that is judged differently by different individuals. One common perception is that, despite the phrase “practice makes perfect”, no one is perfect. This is a key theme in the story “The Birthmark” where Georgiana is described as “so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest possible defect (the birthmark), which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty [is] ... the visible mark of earthly imperfection” (Hawthorne 148). Illustrating that humanity craves for perfection; this quote exemplifies how imperfection highlights perfection.

This is why one rejoices when others do poorly (so they can stand out as extraordinary). The birthmark can be both beautiful and imperfect because there is a small difference between perfection and imperfection. Humans are imperfect beings that can harm themselves when striving for perfection, an abstract and indefinable concept. The minister grows sad and frustrated in the “Minister and the Black Veil,” when “children flee from his approach” and he is deemed an “irreparable bugbear” (Hawthorne 19).

This becomes paradoxical because, as the minister, he still retains the respect of the society. The community is to be criticized for being judgmental without true fact, but Hawthorne indubitably accepts this as an inescapable component of human nature. Humans easily judge their peers based on

fickle allegation and slander. This is why the media in our time is so destructive. While this is most definitely one of our greatest flaws, it also helps us protect ourselves from dangerous individuals that, from Hawthorne's point of view, need to be controlled by their society.

In "The Gray Champion," Hawthorne described the soldiers as "solemn, [but with a] warlike peal of ...voice, fit either to rule a host in the battlefield or be raised to God in prayer," a contradictory statement (Hawthorne. 5). This behavior can be compared to how people can be so full of faith yet so violent and how religions can preach peace and compassion, but declare war on each other. These are the many great paradoxes of human kind.

The truth is that both faith and violence are instincts of human nature (the former to compensate for death and the latter to defend oneself or obtain what is wanted or needed) This is ironic because without violence, there would not be so much death. It is a good thing that these components are "deeply meshed in the texture of human experience" (Arvin xv). Without the paradox of human nature, the entire world would be off balanced with too much evil, or too much good. Without one, the other can not be distinguished. Humans have one thing in common with each other: our imperfect and sinful nature.

Hawthorne's purpose is to force readers to see this as he did in his "observation journals" (Hilton 2). He believed that once this is acknowledged, people can succeed without pretending to be pure or punishing themselves for their nature. Society should instead concentrate on restricting the dark part of humanity. In his stories, Hawthorne creates symbols, characters, and

paradoxes that represent the complex state of the human condition. He clarifies that perfection is not attainable, but that perfection of human nature is not essential for mankind to thrive and be good.