

Aesthetic development in kant and hawthorne



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Beauty is a part of the human condition; we are attracted to what we find appealing and repelled by what we find unappealing. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scholars captured this concept and put into words what it means to experience beauty. Immanuel Kant, for one, had formed books on this experience, a state of perception that has opened doors to literary criticism consequentially. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, illusions of beauty and aesthetics have been crucial to character development, especially that of Clifford Pyncheon and Holgrave. By applying the concepts of beauty and judgement by Kant to Hawthorne's characters Clifford and Holgrave, we can use character comparisons to investigate the existence of various levels of aesthetic development.

The Kantian principles regarding beauty and judgement outline an overall step-by-step process. Humans are innately attracted towards something they find beautiful and then cast judgement upon it. This judgement process is the lasting impression that a person would make in establishing, yes, that an object was a thing of beauty: "In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (Kant, 414). This precognition aspect in identifying beauty is important in the concept of aesthetic identification and appreciation. It solidifies the concept that beauty is instant and natural, universally created in all humans. Kant additionally states, "The judgement of taste therefore not a cognitive judgement, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground

cannot be other than subjective" (414). From this statement, the aesthetic terminology takes its origins in referring towards the non-rationalized, logical moment in determining beauty. In the situation of Clifford Pyncheon and Hawthorne, it is vital to recall that both have the same human traits that can identify and process beauty. Beginning with Clifford, an examination of aesthetic development can be constructed.

Clifford Pyncheon, an older gentleman freshly released from prison, has the countenance of a child. It is not explained fully by Hawthorne what the technicalities of Clifford's small mind are, but it is noted his nature is described to be one of a "sybarite," one who is greatly impacted by beauty and chases after it diligently. This quality in his character becomes an important attribute towards the examination of his aesthetic development. The limits of Clifford's aesthetic development can be factored in two reasons. The first is that Clifford was naturally born with a small mind. Clifford's child-like mind simplifies his experience. This simplification, while limiting, creates room for aesthetic experience by his lack of knowledge and non-sublime encounters.

"But Clifford listened with rapturous delight. The sound, however disagreeable, had very brisk life in it, and together with the circle of curious children watching the revolutions of the wheel, appeared to give him a more vivid sense of active, bustling and sunshiny existence than he had attained in almost any other way." This moment exerts a sneak peek into the childlike development Clifford has in aesthetic appreciation. The limits to his mind inhibits Clifford for its inability to stretch to larger conclusions, rationalize, and create proper functionalities in reaction towards aesthetic appreciation.

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The second reason hindering Clifford's development is his time in prison most of his life. The seclusion and absence of beauty in the place took away from Clifford the ability to progress aesthetic appreciation in a way that is sustainable and slowly built. By being thrust into the free world, in nearly any situation Clifford experiences aesthetic appreciation he is overwhelmed by the stimuli.

These limiting factors function with Kant's exertions on beauty and judgement further. "It is readily seen that to say that it is beautiful and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object" (415). Clifford's stunted development creates this polar existence of aesthetic admiration and lack there of aesthetics. This dynamic points towards a dependency for the aesthetic gratification. When the beauty is taken away from him, his existence is bleak. Kant says that there is a precognitive moment of beauty appreciation. Likewise, the moment after this appreciation, a similar minute moment happens in which the opposite of sublime occurs--anti sublime. This concept goes with scholar Isaac Newton's law of "what goes up must come down." In this context, the highest of high feelings results in an absolute drop. Clifford forms a dependency on this aesthetic high because without it, and without developed aesthetic skills and appreciation, there is no other medium to land to than absolute nothingness. When beauty is not present, Clifford is absent and empty. This emptiness comes from the absence of aesthetics and overall withdrawal reaction. This withdrawal concept can be seen throughout the scene in which Clifford reflects on the dangerous move he made in nearly jumping out the window:

“ Possibly, in some sense, Clifford may have been right. He needed a shock; or perhaps he required to take a deep, deep plunge into the ocean of human life, and to sink down and be covered by its profoundness, and then to emerge, sobered, invigorated, restored to the world and himself. Perhaps, again, he required nothing less than the great final remedy--death!”
(Hawthorne, 115).

This scene demonstrates the deep emptiness inside Clifford that only aesthetic involvement can fill. By needing “ a shock” to get out of his tremulous spell of nothingness, Clifford acts in the most extreme and desperate way to rid himself out of the abyss. Therefore aesthetic obsession is not an overall positive experience. It is the highest form, meaning inherently there exists a lowest form. The experience of aesthetics and the immediate ceasing of it establishes a shock for a person in which they exists in that “ nothing.” For a developed person, the existence of beauty in other entities, even their memories, fulfills this nothingness. This sets up the explanation of the obsession of beauty in search of aesthetics for the stunted life Clifford has lived.

Aesthetic appreciation is a heightened experience for Clifford because of the limited life he has lived so far. The examples by Hawthorne illuminating beauty are symbolic of the aesthetics Clifford sees. Additionally, the emotions triggered from the aesthetic appreciation overtake Clifford’s very being.

“ So it proved with Clifford. He shuddered; he grew pale; he threw and appealing look at Hepizbah and Phoebe, who were with him at the window.

They comprehended nothing of his emotions, and supposed him merely disturbed by the unaccustomed tumult. At last, with tremulous limbs, he started up, set his foot on the window sill, and in an instant more would have been in the unguarded balcony.” (115). The powerful window scene demonstrates how powerful aesthetics are and the appreciation of them. Another powerful moment within the novel is the train scene in which Clifford knows he is free from Judge Pyncheon and rambles emotionally to a stranger on everything he is feeling. This out of character moment is a direct result of the aesthetic appreciation experience. However, this moment is important in realizing aesthetic reaction comes in different forms. In this scene, Clifford succumbs to aesthetic experience from not means of sight, sound, or touch but rather an euphoric moment of complete enlightenment. According to Whitney Davis’s *Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts : Queer Beauty : Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond*, the existence of various forms of aesthetic appreciation coincide with Kant’s statements on beauty and judgement. “ According to section 17 of Kant’s Third Critique, the judgement of ideal beauty (le beau ideal) cleaves individual expressions of interested pleasure, such as a pederastic appreciation of the youthful male body, from the increasingly disinterested accumulation of multiple judgments rendered on the same or similar objects by the same person or by other people” (Davis, 37). The different aspects in different ways that affect Clifford therefore cannot be limited to one set kind.

Clifford’s enticement with aesthetics becomes his life mission. “ Beauty would be his life; his aspirations would all tend towards it; and, allowing his

frame and physical organs to be in consonance, his own developments would likewise be beautiful" (Hawthorne, 74). This devotion to the chase of aesthetics secludes Clifford tremendously as a character and puts him in his own world. While the chase of aesthetics is not an uncommon attribute in human existence, the severity in which Clifford commits himself to it becomes stunting in no longer only aesthetic appreciation but in personal growth in a whole. Clifford no longer is apt to his surroundings if aesthetic admiration is found. He exists only as a being, not a functional expanding person.

The other character who expresses aesthetic development in Hawthorne's novel is Holgrave. In his profession as an artist, he already has a formed relationship with beauty. This relationship includes the ability to differentiate the different levels of beauty and what is "true" or not. The truth-telling ability comes from his daguerreotypes reflecting what the true character of the subject. "While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could detect it" (Hawthorne, 63). The daguerreotypes' truth is impactful in connection to Holgrave's aesthetic development for they stand as representation of art and beauty. Davis's work describing Kantian themes can be applied to Holgrave's art: "In Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment and in the Kantian tradition, in fact, the erotic attractiveness of natural objects (or their figuration in works of art) had been defined as a kind of human interest that must be entirely superseded in order for a truly disinterested aesthetic judgment to emerge" (Davis, 3). Davis's claim here describes as applied to Holgrave's pictures and

how as the artist behind the pictures, he recognizes the natural attractiveness of his subjects, being the reason why he photographs them. Holgrave's character takes the form of an artist.

As an artist, Holgrave is inspired by the aesthetic beauty and finds means to preserve it through photographs. This formation in steps differs greatly from the aesthetic appreciation Clifford exhibits. Holgrave is able to rationalize the aesthetic experience and expresses his appreciation for it by daguerreotyping. Clifford's occurrence with the aesthetic is to be swept up into it and is so involved in it, he no longer is present in reality. Hograve's aesthetic development has matured enough where he appreciates the aesthetic while still being present in reality. Davis would argue that this concept of grounded judgement in the aesthetic does not go against the precognitive need that Kant emphasizes. " This process of accumulation and modification in aesthetic judgement, constituted and communicated socially, is neither mysterious nor sinister" (37). Holgrave's profession therefore would fit under this ideal. As an artist, Holgrave has an established sense of what he finds aesthetically pleasing. For this rationalization to occur, Holgrave would have to have had a spectrum in what he considers beautiful and what he does not. Through many encounters with the aesthetically pleasing, Holgrave has been dulled to the numerous beautiful stimuli he has been exposed to. This dulling has not taken away his appreciation and awe for the aesthetic, but rather just has grown his development in aesthetic experience.

With the further development presented in Holgrave's character, the process of aesthetic appreciation is advanced further. Davis states that " The psychic
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and social process must be a transitive one, whether or not Kant drew attention to the fact. Each order of judgement in the subjective consolidation and social transmission of an ideal, then, harbors possibilities not only of fulfilling the other order of judgement” (Davis, 38).” This means that Holgrave’s internal psychic process of aesthetic admiration coincides with his social portrayal of it. Through the physical portrayal in the daguerreotypes, Holgrave demonstrates the social aspect in his judgement of beauty. This takes an interesting turn in his sharing of the daguerreotypes with others. The spreading of what Holgrave finds socially aesthetic solidifies what his spectrum looks like in the development of aesthetic appreciation. Clifford by comparison is so enamored by aesthetics he does not have enough development to be able to share with others the same beauty in which he admires.

Holgrave’s manipulation of aesthetics is seen throughout the novel as well. With the storytelling of the older Pyncheon and Maule feud, Holgrave’s storytelling is so finely tuned and beautifully composed that it takes an overwhelming effect on Phoebe. “ It was evident that, with but one wave of his hand and a corresponding effort of his will, he could complete his mastery over Phoebe’s yet free and virgin spirit; he could establish an influence over this good, pure, and simple child as dangerous, and perhaps as disastrous, as that which the carpenter of his legend had acquired and exercised over the ill-fated Alice” (Hawthorne, 147). Hawthorne illuminates what kind of aesthetic relationship Holgrave has by insisting “ To a disposition like Holgrave’s, at once speculative and active, there is no temptation so great as the opportunity of acquiring empire over the human

spirit; nor any idea more seductive to a young man than to become the arbiter of a young girl's destiny" (148). This section builds up the concept that within aesthetic development, when such control and maturity arises, the next step is the control of one's own aesthetic ability over that of another. To consider this idea, examine the functions of artistic professions. The expression and control in portraying the aesthetic vision that one achieves through proper build up of aesthetic development is meant to influence audiences in some way. Be it inspiration or mesmerization, art fulfills the aesthetic needs of other peoples through the hands of the aesthetic master. Further along in this scene Holgrave contemplates his effect over Phoebe and is crucial to recall he acts upon this in a certain way.

The aesthetic control that Holgrave acquires is demonstrated even more in his rationale of his control. By self awareness and aesthetic development, Holgrave is able to consciously realize that his control over Phoebe from his story telling could be detrimental to her. Phoebe's exposure to the hypnotic powers of Holgrave's aesthetic story telling reveals her own vulnerability in lesser aesthetic development. Within this same scene, Phoebe reacts confounded and out of sorts after being released from Holgrave's power. "No, no! I consider myself as having been very attentive; and, though, I don't remember the incident quite distinctly, yet I have an impression of a vast deal of trouble and calamity--so, no doubt, the story will prove exceedingly attractive" (148). Such a trance from which Phoebe arises from is similar to the out of reality experience Clifford exhibits when caught up in his aesthetic admiration. The sameness in being overtaken by the beauty of the aesthetic being performed and the consequences from that absence point to the

concept that Phoebe additionally has lesser aesthetic development than Holgrave. The differences in levels of development from Phoebe and Clifford are quite apparent however. While Phoebe is overtaken by Holgrave's abilities, she proves to have her own level of development. When first meeting Phoebe, it is said that "nothing, indeed, was absolutely plain to her..." (48). This small bit of information regarding Phoebe demonstrates that Phoebe is able to find beauty in everything. Differing from Clifford who chases beauty, Phoebe contains the discipline to apply aesthetics to objects.

Application becomes an active notion that gives Phoebe her own control of her aesthetic development. When overcome by aesthetic development higher than her own, Holgrave's specifically, Phoebe becomes a bystander and can only passively absorb the aesthetic experience put upon her. This is comparable to Clifford's entire relationship with aesthetics in the sense he has devoted his life to the chase of beauty only to become, in a sense, a slave to the experience. Phoebe's additional contribution to aesthetics is that of her very being. Phoebe's physical being radiates aesthetic admiration. Through multiple accounts throughout the book, Phoebe's effect throughout the plot line is to influence the other characters. Clifford takes a special appreciation of Phoebe's presence: "A beauty—not precisely real, even in its utmost manifestation, and which a painter would have watched long to seize and fix upon his canvas, and, after all, in vain—beauty, nevertheless, that was not a mere dream would sometimes play upon and illuminate his face" (95). This attraction to her aesthetic vibe constructs the concept that Phoebe in herself has aesthetic properties in the novel. Being that Phoebe cannot control these properties, just as a work of art cannot control what it has been

created to be, this aesthetic presence does not give her more aesthetic development.

Throughout Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Kantian principles of beauty and judgment create the essence of key characters. Readers are able to see how powerful aesthetics are in the overall human experience. In the case of Clifford, aesthetics can overtake a person's life in the pursuit of an insatiable fill. In the situation of Holgrave, aesthetics becomes a mean of living as one is able to reach a level of aesthetic development that he is able to control the experience. In the case of Phoebe, aesthetics becomes the very core of oneself and influences the aesthetic development of others by merely existing. The concept of aesthetic development is applicable to everyday life in what humans find beautiful and overtaking. The pursuit of high levels of development in turn makes one better rounded as a person in being able to choose where beauty is found and how it can be in turn applied in a different medium. Kant's philosophies ring deeply from our very being, since the effects of beauty and aesthetics shape who we are throughout life.

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