

# Hawthorne's conundrum

[Food & Diet](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Much as his name suggests, Owen Warland wages a battle on society in *The Artist of the Beautiful* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Throughout the story, he strives to create the Beautiful, a lifelike butterfly, and overcomes many setbacks to succeed briefly, only to have it destroyed in the story's final paragraphs. Owen wishes to transcend the material world and rise to the spiritual through his creation of art- the Beautiful- and his abject rejection of the material world. However, the material world fights back and refuses to accept his search for spirituality; in the characters of Robert Danforth, Annie Hovenden, and Peter Hovenden, Hawthorne creates symbols of physical strength, love, and practicality that combat Owen's dreams of reaching a higher spiritual existence. At the end of the story, the reader must answer an important question: whether Owen's complete avoidance of anything material, even the good, in an attempt to create art is worth the loss of humanity and community. In *The Artist of the Beautiful*, Nathaniel Hawthorne writes the story of an artist's struggle to transcend the material world in order to show his audience the overwhelming importance of the community. With the creation of the Beautiful, Owen Warland spends the duration of the story rejecting the material world with the goal of ascending into the spiritual realm in a radical, often extremist, way. His choice prepares the reader to later determine for herself if the benefits of a full withdrawal from materialism outweigh the inevitable consequences. For example, when speaking to Robert Danforth about the utilitarian strength he gains from his blacksmith work, Owen counters with "' my force, whatever there may be of it, is altogether spiritual'" (Hawthorne 5). By specifically stating that his

creative force is spiritual rather than material, Owen expresses his desire to transcend the material world and work only with more divine nature.

Similarly, literary critic Joseph Church comments: “unsatisfied with nature’s comparatively un-elevated creatures and their ways, Owen determines to create in his artificial butterfly a “spiritualized mechanism” (469) symbolizing transcendent beauty and its capacity to inspire us heavenward” (Church 5). The artist does not create art simply because of its beauty; rather, he attempts to improve God’s design in nature and develop such a deep, beautiful creation that the artwork inspires the viewer and allows her to enter into a more spiritual world with the artist. In continuation of this idea of Transcendentalism, Hawthorne adds, “‘It has been delicately wrought,’ said the artist, calmly. ‘As I told you, it has imbibed a spiritual essence’” (Hawthorne 19). Clearly, Owen injects a part of his own soul and spirituality into the Beautiful he strives to create, which indicates how he wishes to become something greater than a mere man with no purpose greater than the mundane. Interestingly, critic David Urban raises questions concerning the nobility and wisdom of Owen’s decision to reject the material world, saying that his “disdain for such undeniably helpful, albeit banal apparatuses, reveals his revulsion towards the things of common people, a revulsion that is not a necessary extension of whatever reclusive or idiosyncratic behavior an artist might demonstrate while concentrating on his craft” (Urban 6). This further emphasizes his extremist views toward art and beauty by pointing out the lack of necessity in his behavior- the Artist can create art even if he does not aggressively denounce everything from this world.

Likewise, Hawthorne mentions a similar idea early in the text, commenting, “it seemed, in fact, a new development of the love of the Beautiful, such as might have made him a poet, a painter, or a sculptor, and which was as completely refined from all utilitarian coarseness, as it could have been in either of the fine arts” (Hawthorne 3). Owen’s love of the beautiful explicitly manifests itself in rejecting useful appliances; he takes his desire for spiritual enlightenment through art to an extreme by rejecting even the useful and good of the material world. Undeniably, Owen creates the Beautiful in an attempt to rise above the mundane material world by harshly renouncing it, leading the reader to question how this will work out for him in the end.

Although Owen endeavors to free himself from the constraints of the material world, several materialistic aspects hinder him, as represented by three other main characters: Robert Danforth, Annie Hovenden, and Peter Hovenden. Each individual causes Owen to suffer multiple mishaps with his progress on the Beautiful and, subconsciously or not, pulls him back down into the material world. For example, Robert Danforth’s mere presence has a significant, albeit disastrous, effect on Owen: “Heaven! What have I done!” exclaimed [Owen]. “The vapor! The influence of that brute force! It has bewildered me, and obscured my perception. I have made the very stroke- the fatal stroke- that I have dreaded from the first! It is all over- the toil of months!” (Hawthorne 5). Robert, a successful blacksmith, illustrates the epitome of pragmatic strength and his proximity to Owen in this scene causes Owen to inadvertently undo months of hard work on the Beautiful; Hawthorne indicates through this symbol of utilitarianism that the material world fights against Owen’s rejection of it and tries to hold him back.

Similarly, Joseph Church comments on Robert as a symbol of physical strength, saying that “Hawthorne depicts the blacksmith as a joyous embodiment of earthly eros” (Church 4). This further emphasizes the material aspects to his character by insinuating that he also represents sexual prowess, a stereotype of masculine strength. Secondly, Annie Hovenden, a potential love interest for Owen, causes him to lose progress on the Beautiful multiple times, most notably in this scene when he declares, “I have deceived myself... I have yearned for sympathy- and thought... that you might give it me... it was not your fault, Annie- but you have ruined me!” (Hawthorne 10). Annie clearly symbolizes love, yet another materialistic concept that keeps Owen from ascending to the spiritual level; blinded by his love for her, he foolishly confides in her in an attempt to bring her to this level with him, but when she breaks the Beautiful by mistake, he in fact is brought back down to her worldly level. Furthermore, Church focuses on the general obstacles she provides for Owen: “he finds inspiration in Annie, the young woman he loves, but when he learns she has married Danforth, the blacksmith, he ceases work” (Church 3). Not only does the love Annie symbolizes actively deny Owen the chance to rise spiritually, it simply seeks to slow down his progress by forcing him into spells of depression over his unrequited affection in which he cannot work.

Finally, Annie's father Peter also deters Owen from his goal: “Peter Hovenden's opinion of his apprentice has already been expressed. He could make nothing of the lad” (Hawthorne 3). Because Peter cannot comprehend Owen's preference for artistry over watchmaking, he represents the practicality of the everyday material world and the material spirit that seeks

to bring Owen down from his lofty interests. The main characters in *The Artist of the Beautiful* symbolize the material world that tries to prevent Owen from ascending to the spiritual world. Owen fails to truly transcend to the spiritual world because he so firmly rejects all the material world and isolates himself from even the good: love and community. This allows Hawthorne to show his readers that staying with the community trumps any artistic genius that can possibly be invented.

Objectively, Owen does not succeed: “but, while it still hovered in the air, the little Child of Strength, with his grandsire’s sharp and shrewd expression in his face, made a snatch at the marvellous insect, and compressed it in his hand” (Hawthorne 20). The child, the physical offspring of Annie and Robert, also possesses similar characteristics to his grandfather; this ultimate combination of love, strength, and materialism, Owen’s greatest obstacles in creating the Beautiful, defeats the artist in the end. In fact, Hawthorne himself foreshadows Owen’s inevitable failure when he writes: “Thus it is, that ideas which grow up within the imagination... are exposed to be shattered and annihilated by contact with the Practical” (Hawthorne 6). This emphasizes Owen’s defeat even early on in the story, saying that the material world consistently crushes the artistic. However, Urban writes of a deeper failure on Owen’s part, “whatever Owen’s final artistic achievement, neither it nor his position as the Artist of the Beautiful should be viewed as possessing genuine transcendent superiority” (Urban 4). He should instead be viewed as a radical extremist, soundly rejecting even love and community because they are of the material world; Hawthorne implores his readers to consider if this choice is worth the beauty one can potentially create.

Sarah Wright brings up a good point when she writes, “Hawthorne does not suggest, in this tale, that one who is hostile to everyday problems and practical concerns is therefore an artist” (Wright 4). This brings into question Owen’s artistry in general and asks the reader to decide if his rejection of the material world makes him the Artist of the Beautiful, or if he needs to achieve spiritual reality as well. Most importantly, Hawthorne agrees with Wright: “when the artist rose high enough to achieve the Beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes, while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality” (Hawthorne 20). This in itself suggests that Owen succeeds in his goal to transcend to the spiritual world, but, especially when combined with his other famous works, here Hawthorne insinuates the opposite: by rejecting all of the material world and separating himself from the community, Owen ultimately loses.

The community forms the basis of the greatest good in Hawthorne’s universe and Owen rejects it, which results in his loss of the spiritual and the Beautiful. Hawthorne uses Owen’s story of a man who tries to reject the material world and become only spiritual as a lesson to the reader that community is the greatest good. He sets the stage by painting a picture of a simple artist struggling to create the Beautiful, art designed to inspire the viewer to ascend to the spiritual world. By developing characters who reject his message of artistic spirituality and strive to bring him down, Hawthorne furthers his concept of the fruitless renouncing of the material world. He finishes this theme and poses an important question to the reader: whether

beauty or community should be considered the greatest good. In Hawthorne's mind, community trumps all.