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Irony and Satire in Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Abstract

Hawthorne was a child of American Renaissance. He has been called as a writer of romances than of novels. Hawthorne's views have been expressed to stress the powerful philosophical thoughts of Transcendentalism and reform. He has used imagery and language in his writings which confirm his kinship with the transcendentalism. He was a product of New England society and imbibed its idealism, but he was attached to the philanthropists and the reformers whom he knew so closely at Brook Farm. There is a powerful satire in *The Blithedale Romance*. Hawthorne with his interrogating mind and ardent sense of rationalism has perceived the incongruity, and the absurdity in characters, and situations which he has satirized. Most of his short stories and novels have an element of satire. Hawthorne as an observer of life could penetrate and probe the ambiguity and inconsistency. He has been treated as an ironist. Hawthorne's short stories, "Endicott and the Red cross" and "old Esther Dudley" contain irony. Hawthorne had a powerful critical temper and

questioning mind and with his searching study and deep analysis, he could reveal the divergence between theory and practice of existing utopia. He vehemently satirized the sham, hypocrisy, and duplicity in religion and politics and the life of women. His profound insight enabled him to perceive the irony and incongruity in situations and events. He has used irony even in language. The ironist is a philosopher and the detached observer who is acquainted with both the sides of a problem. Hawthorne as an ironist has succeeded in lending poignancy to situations.

Keywords

Hawthorne; Idealism; Skepticism; Transcendentalism.

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Hawthorne was a child of the American Renaissance. That was the time before the American civil war. The flowering of the American Renaissance started in New England. The writing of imaginative literature in America began to be taken as a serious profession by the natives of New York early in the nineteenth century. Hawthorne mainly a romanticist has portrayed contemporary New England life. He explored the metaphysical truths in his creative works. He perpetuated puritan ideals and envisaged ethical considerations. He imbued his works with symbolic significance and psychological realism, and embodied a sense of guilt and isolation in his novels. He ranks with great writers of America who have shown predilections for spiritual problems.

Diverse views have been expressed to stress Hawthorne's attitudes to the powerful philosophical thoughts of Transcendentalism and reform, but a minute study discovers a note and undercurrent of irony and skepticism. Hawthorne was fully acquainted with the Transcendentalism through his familiarity with the Peabodys, the subsequent marriage with Sophia Peabody, and also because of his stay at Brook farm and Concord.

Hawthorne believed that Transcendentalism influenced the current literature of the world. One of the famous author Arlin Turner remarks that Hawthorne had a transcendental thought, to attract him, its radicalism, for example, its stress on soul, on the individual, on self-reliance and independence and the conventions of society, all are concerned with such concepts as symbol, shadow, and substance.

Hawthorne has used similar imagery and language in his writings which confirm his kinship with the Transcendentalism. Two of his short stories, “The Threefold Destiny”, and “The Great Stone Face”, enshrine divinity, in humble life, conveying some of the basic ideas of this philosophy, but Hawthorne cannot be classed as a transcendentalist. A strong note of skepticism and distrust of shadowy and unreal permeates his writings. The short story, “The Celestial Railroad”, alluding to a giant characterized by “a heap of fog and duskiess”, is denunciation of the philosophy of the New England Transcendentalism despite Hawthorne’s esteem for Emerson. He professed his faith in perfection of man and society as depicted in “The Birth Mark”, but the presence of evil and guilt in the universe are also real.

Hawthorne is a rationalist and puritan who decried the harsher and the severer codes of the early puritans. Inspired by the idealism of the puritans, he became a critic of the exacting discipline of New England Puritanism. Hawthorne was attracted by the ideals of reform. The nineteenth century in America was an era of reformers and idealists. His interest in reform was accentuated through his associations with Elizabeth Peabody whose main interest centered on the educational reforms and the abolition of slavery.

Like Shelley, he never preaches complete abolition of the human institution or never suggests their overhauling. Hawthorne was a product of the New England society and imbibed its idealism, but he attacked the philanthropists and the reformers whom he knew so closely at Brook Farm.

Hawthorne's famous novel, *The Blithedale Romance* reveals a powerful satire in it. The persons like Orestes, Brownson with their ideas appeared hateful to him, for their lack of culture and blockheadedness. But this denunciation does not indicate his lack of sympathy for the community. Sargent Hall has pointed out that a certain quality of nuisance eventually became apparent to Hawthorne in the activities and personalities of reformers.

Hawthorne was against the temperance society, because they curbed the cheer induced by the drinks. In "A Rill from the Town Pump" there is a strong element of Sarcasm in the story in which water has been described a great reformer with his collaborator cow criticizing the unbecoming zeal of temperance. He has pleaded for the use of wine in *The Blithedale Romance*, and speaks of gin for the poor revelers of Liverpool slum.

In his work "The Christmas Banquet" he derides the reformers for their high fault in notions and the exaggerated utopian scheme. Hawthorne never subscribed to the utopian plans, and their ambition to overhaul the materialistic society, but he is not devoid of humanitarianism.

"Arlin Turner" reveals a few factors which engendered sarcasm and bitterness in Hawthorne towards the reformers and the philanthropists. Hawthorne became disillusioned during his stay at Brook Farm, because of impractical plans of his fellow brethren. Among them he saw charlatans making capital of popular gullibility. He saw the haunted souls, women in particular, seeking refuge from emptiness within.

Hawthorne is believed to be sincere, but misguided pursuer of the better life. He could see the folly and shallowness of the better life. He could see the folly and the shallowness of the drawing room social philosophers who were declaiming that the golden age was at hand, and offering panaceas to hasten its advent. Hawthorne realized the absurdity of the dreamer's plans and hypocrisy, and the superficial approaches of the visionaries and reformers. Coupled with this was the problem of sin which he found a universal thing.

There was predominance of evil which could not be eradicated. The excessive zeal of the misguided reformers landed them in a quandary, and their efforts ended in fiasco.

The third factor which intensified Hawthorne's skepticism in the utopia and the perfectibility of the nineteenth century thinkers is his belief that man was governed by the deterministic forces. Turner observes that the deterministic thought of Hawthorne left him no room to believe in the efficacy of reform. Retribution for sin is inevitable, he thought, and surely retribution would be no less inevitable for man in the mass than for man as an individual. It is not difficult to read, "The Birth Mark" as an allegory of mankind's desperate striving for perfection, or to see Owen Warland's perfect but useless ephemeral butterfly in "The Artist of the Beautiful" as a symbol of the hopeless attempts to perfect society with society, then directed and driven by unalterable forces, inherent within itself and also exerted from without, as from the postman's feeble effort to alter the course of the human destiny can be only more pitiable as they are more sincere. This shows that man in his helplessness cannot contribute much to the progress of society whose course or movement has been controlled by the deterministic forces.

Hawthorne with his interrogating mind and ardent sense of rationalism has perceived the incongruity and the absurdity in characters, and situations which he has satirized. Most of his short stories and novels have an element of satire.

The nineteenth century American literature has produced grim humorists and satirists like Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Artemus Ward and Bret Hart. Antony Trollope observed in the North American Review that Hawthorne's writings had been characterized by satire.

The House of Seven Gables, *The Blithedale Romance* have satirized one or the other vice of the time. *The House of Seven Gables* satirises the decayed gentility and the pretensions of the aristocracy continuing the puritan

traditions. *The Scarlet Letter* is an ardent criticism of the harsher codes of the puritan doctrines of New England in the seventeenth century. *The Blithedale Romance* flings sarcasm on the exaggerated idealism of the Blithedalean Visionaries. In “Marble Faun” Hilda’s virtues have been derided.

Hawthorne levels his scathing criticism against religion and wealth in “The celestial Railroad.” “The Devil in Manuscript” and “Feathertop” are also satirical in their spirit. Hawthorne’s other sketches, “The Hall of Fantasy”, “A Select Party’s” and “Sunday at Home” besides others have introduced satire.

Hawthorne as an observer of life could penetrate and probe the ambiguity and inconsistency. He has been treated as ironist by Arlin Turner who quotes Annie Field’s comments to support his view. Hawthorne’s stories, “Endicott and the Redcross”, Rappaccinni’s daughter, The old Manse, “The Lily’s Quest and old Esther Dudley” contain irony. The novels, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance* have also introduced irony. “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle” and “The Ambitious Guest” contain ironical spirit.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dr. Chillingworth asks Hester to promise not to reveal his identity, he is her former Husband. Hester replied that might prove the ruin of her soul. But it is Chillingworth who realizes that his soul has been destroyed. “Endicott and the Red Cross” depicts a powerful irony. Endicott stresses that the puritans migrated to America to enable them to have freedom to worship according to their conscience. But Roger Williams is to be turned out of the colony for not conforming to the official views.

Arlin Turner commends the use of irony in language in “Rappaccio’s Daughter.” Beatrice is redundant with life. To her the perfumed breath of the plant from which her poison is extracted is the breath of her life.

Hawthorne has a powerful critical temper and the questioning mind with his searching study and deep analysis, he could reveal the divergence between theory and practice of existing utopia. He vehemently satirized the sham, the

hypocrisy and duplicity in religion and politics, wealth, the life of women, and his profound insight enabled him to perceive the irony and incongruity in situations and events. He has used irony even in language. The ironist is a philosopher and the detached observer who is acquainted with both the sides of a problem. Hawthorne as an ironist has succeeded in lending poignancy to situations.

The original idea of sin intensified his belief that the roots of evils were deeper and it was beyond the efforts and the capacity of the reformers to eradicate evil. These are the reasons which turned him into a satirist. “The Celestial Railroad”, “Feathertop”, “Sunday at Home”, and “The Hall of Fantasy”, are satirical.

In his novels he has indicated the harsh codes of puritanical doctrines and sin with this satire is linked his use of irony which he has used in his novels, and the short stories. The stories, “Endicott and the Red Cross”, “An Old Woman’s Tale”, “The Old Manse” and *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, have introduced powerful ironical situations which lend poignancy to his satire. Along with this, he has used the irony of language also in “Rappacini’s Daughter.”

Hawthorne has referred to the Irony and emblems, and his characters speak and think in ironic manner. Holgrave in *The House of Seven Gables* states that the pyncheon chickens, “betokened the oddities of the pyncheon family” and that the chicken was a irony noted in this novel.

Thus Hawthorne has been regarded as a great writer of the prose which has wit, irony and satire. The quality of his works, the choice of appropriate words, and the effectiveness of the narrative combined with this artistic tools of pattern, design and the use of the light and color constitute a distinctive trait of Hawthorne’s creative genius and achievement.

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