

Spiritual Sublimity and Romantic sensibility the Saga of Art Depicted in the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Dr.T.S. Rajeswari

Assistant Professor Department of English KL University Vaddeswaram near Vijayawada,
522502, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract:

The artistic exuberance, earlier to nineteenth century, was shrouded under the influence of religion and politics. Religion sabotaged the progress of artistic forms restricting it to place of worship and royal palaces. The art forms, during the period of early civilization, mainly depicted the scenes of religious importance and the valour of monarchs. It took all most some centuries for art and artist to break these shackles and parade into the life of a common man. American culture copied the western and orient cultures encouraged the models depicting the importance of religion. Hawthorne, the nineteenth century American writer, depicted the life of an artist in his short stories. His opinions are valuable as he prefers to liberate art from the dogmas of religion and infuse the spirit of democracy in it. In all most all the stories at one point or the other Hawthorne brings his views on the artist. He explicitly brings the ideas through the characters as well the setting creating an aesthetic ambience very naturally blending with the artistic permeance of the characters.

Key words: Spiritual sublimity, aesthetic sensitivity, spirituality, romantic fiction.

The American art forms, for centuries, were shrouded under the mantle of English culture and civilization, remained in the incubation state, and stayed away from the interest of the common public. America as a nation has manifested advancement in the fields like education, politics and matters of social importance. Contrastingly arts have always seemed to have little connection with everyday life. Architecture, painting, literature, and the other arts forms were regarded rather remote things, vaguely foreign, holding no direct concern with people. "As people we have been proud of American civilization and of its political and social institutions, but we have been less confident about our performance in the arts. There have been many respected American architects, painters, and poets to be sure, but their total achievement,

regarded from the conventional critical and historical points of view, has appeared to be only a somewhat crude dispersal of the western European tradition. There are, for example, still a good many institutions in our educational system where American art and literature are regarded as mere appendages to other-and, on the whole, weightier- matters. (Kirk¹).

The hopes of American artists who venture their debut works are encouraged by the European models which already gained acclamation in their land. It was obvious for them to carry the same conventions in the art as dictated by the models endorsed by European nations. European countries have marked their progress in the matters of education and exhibited the erudition needed to take the humanity into the higher echelons in matters of culture and civilization. H.W Longfellow, the nineteenth century American poet feels this to be an inevitable fate of a society which is still in the shade of mighty civilizations and unable to express itself independently. "Americans were really only "English under another sky" our literature needn't be expected to differ much from theirs. Of course, he added, the English stock in America was being mixed with other nationalities, and our English thoughts and feelings would therefore be tempered by German "tenderness," Spanish "passion," and French "vivacity." But he obviously assumed that we would remain essentially English, and that all that the writer and artist need do was carry on the old traditions. After all, he concluded, "all literature, as well as all art, is the result of culture and intellectual refinement."(Jackson³)

Hawthorne feels that art is sacred and can be equated to God. Any artist is a true priest who transforms his creations into a prayer. To defy God and practice priesthood is the blasphemy of extreme kind. Consecration is the highest reward an artist can bestow to art. It should strive to bring peace and concord in the lives of the people. The next step in the process is the ecstasy which elevates the self from the mundane experiences to a supreme state, where the self dissolves and finds the expression in sublimity. The idea of inducing spirituality should be the aim of any art. If an artist indulges in his work without thorough sentiment towards attaining the spiritual contentment, his work proves to be of inferior quality This will be considered as an act of heresy committed by the artist. It is here Hawthorne takes a different stand by putting the art in the mould of moral code of conduct and through moral awakening. Hawthorne aspires for spiritual enlightenment through art. This he believes to be the real purpose of art. "he feels within himself a certain consecration and a priesthood," the only evidence of his possessing this feeling comes from his art itself which must "be "the high treatment of heroic subjects, or the delicate evolution of spiritual, through material beauty."— Besides beauty in art.

Hawthorne insisted on the use of the moral element. That, of course, comes automatically with the artist's feeling of consecration and priesthood. On the moral element and on the evolution of spiritual values, he generally placed his emphasis" (Stewart ⁸). The stories taken for the study are explored keeping in view the perspectives of Hawthorne on art.

In his short story **The Prophetic Pictures**, Hawthorne elevates the artist to the rank of a creator and defines art tantamount to creation, the actual sport of almighty. He even glorifies the art to an extent of attributing permanence and escalating it to the heights of spiritual reality. The excerpt from the short story Prophetic Pictures helps to us to understand the definition of art as perceived by Hawthorne. "[...] the image of the Creator's own," because of its power to bring into being " Those forms are lifted into a spiritual life which they never could have possessed, and art is the force which elevates them into that atmosphere of lasting permanence. (Hawthorne 220)

Spiritual sublimity is identified as the important factor in some of Hawthorne's short stories. His perspective of the art is rather a means to achieve spirituality. Sublime is the emotional state caused due to fear and astonishment. It is an emotion opposite to the natural state of man. Pleasure is the natural state of a man as he aspires for it. Sublime is the state that removes him from his natural state and transports him into a strange dilemma. "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other." (Burke ⁹). The idea of sublime is linked with the aesthetic sensibility. Beauty moves the spirit to a state of amazement. The appalling effect caused by amazement benumbs the senses with fear. Beauty is in a way induces this feeling by taking the soul to this state of surprise and incredulity. The romantic writers in general strive to produce this state of sublimity. Hawthorne displayed the romantic and Gothic elements in his fiction, his respect to the traditions, interest in psychological portrayal of characters, affinity towards symbolism and uncompromising candour make him march stealthily towards the desired goal, sublimity. It is the marked feature of his works that he aims to create this effect by making it submissive to spirituality alacrity.

In Hawthorne's short stories the lofty artefacts like God and heaven appear as the manifestations of nature. Nature which can stimulate the feelings of spiritual sublimity with its awesome beauty is elevated to supreme reality . The character like Owen Worland, in *The Artist of Beautiful*, experiences this kind of infatuation towards nature. The tokens of material

wealth which often tempt the normal mortals, do not claim their share in his estimation. Beauty for Hawthorne is indefinable and indescribable. It is the supreme quality of nature and is akin to God, heaven. In a secular sense beauty is nature and nature is God. The beholder by a particular perspective acknowledges beauty that is hidden in the form and shape whether it is the creation of the nature or by a man inspired from his natural state of being, innocent and blissful state, which is unpolluted by the artificial gorgeousness. Reflecting about St. Peter's in Rome, Hawthorne wrote: "Then I strolled round the great church and find that it continues to grow upon me both in magnitude and beauty by comparison with the many interiors of sacred edifices which I have lately seen"(Stewart) .

Hawthorne's aesthetic sensitivity is not particularly unusual. In the story *The Artist of the Beautiful*, Hawthorne invests the protagonist with the same feelings. At the same time, Owen's limitations reflect Hawthorne's own, Owen reaches to a state in the story where he grows immune to the temptations "which grow up within the imagination appear so lovely and of a value beyond whatever men call valuable" (Hawthorne 911). He feels the very purpose of art is to project the concreteness of beauty that is embedded in the true moral and human spirit. Any art form, for that matter, has this as the guiding principle navigating every trail towards this esteemed end. One important factor to be seriously considered is the zeal to understand the nature of truth. This should always tally with the right perception and should not be guided by faulty ethics. The artists in his short stories strive to achieve the aim by trying to copy the invincible hand of nature that gives the real grandeur to creation. Unfortunately, these remain as aborted fancies and demigods missing that final touch, the unique claim of nature. Hawthorne feels the life-giving touch is impossible to be imitated without properly transcribing the truth hidden in nature. This hidden truth is the true spirit of nature; an artist should aspire to bring this spirit into his work to achieve the sublimity in art. It is not an impossible task if the artist lives true to the standards of human dignity. His life should hum the rhythm of truth; he himself must have the lofty stream of piety flowing in his veins. This fact is brought to life by the character in his short story *The Great Stone Face*. Earnest, the protagonist of the story, dedicates himself to the true standards of life by living in harmony with nature. He turns into a real artist who paints the life with rainbow of colours catching the glimpse of its natural hues. In the story Hawthorne takes this simple husbandman above the stalwarts and even above the poet who is noble and creative. "of the finest imagination, the most delicate taste, the sweetest feeling, and the rarest artistic skill;" he must possess "force of character hardly compatible with

its delicacy;" he must be able to symbolize a lofty moral," converting what was earthly to spiritual gold;" he must have simplicity of vision and a profound insight into the human heart; he must possess in his character a nobler strain of poetry than he can write; he must place the artistic truth above fact; he must "feel a power higher and wiser than himself making him its instrument" (Hawthorne 1078).

Love of life and the admiration for nature, the two indispensable factors, keep the art form ever juvenile and enchanting. The nature and life are permanent elements which may undergo changes externally, but the spirit remains unaltered. Hawthorne strives to preserve the sanctity of facts by sticking to the idea of spiritualizing it with his thought. "Hawthorne's words, like "the glimmering shadows that lay half asleep between the door [of the Manse] and the public highway," are "a kind of spiritual medium, seen through which" his edifice has "not quite the aspect of belonging to the material world." They both idealize the real and realize the ideal, and thus exist in "a neutral territory . . . where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." (Porte¹¹).

The art flirts with its suitors, artists, coaxing them with feminine charm, the thought. This conjugal bliss enjoyed by the artist elevates him to a state of spiritual sublimity. At times it takes up the role of a preceptor commanding the obedience. The protagonists in these stories subordinate themselves to the ultimate power of art. Hawthorne emphasizes the necessity of spiritualizing fact into universal truth. He surrenders fact to truth, but he still preserves fact as the foundation on which the truth can retain the impression essential to spiritualize the art. The method he considers most worthy is one which gives an improved effect, with an atmosphere of strange enchantment, in which the characters could have propriety of their own. Hawthorne terms this as "poetic interpretation". Facts can never be seen in their most delicate colors until they have been steeped "in a powerful menstrum of thought. Belief in this spiritualizing method led Hawthorne to cast aside all faith in the direct portrayal of nature. Attempts at such portrayal were sheer nonsense, he felt; the thing for the artist to do was to substitute something to suggest the truth. He says the highest merit of art is suggestiveness" (Millington¹²).

Hawthorne considers, giving a touch of spirituality as the prime concern of an artist. This is possible to the artist by making his art imbibing in it the quality of instruction. This is different from being didactic. Instruction is concerned with the suspension of the rationale thought process, which lays stumbling blocks in the way of sublimity that leads the reader into a world of imagination. If the reader reaches this state, facts are not of much importance to such a mind.

The fact becomes subordinate to nature as it is dissolved in the nature. Such a harmonious blend naturally takes the reader to the state aesthetic sensibility, a paramount state in the enjoyment of art and the pinnacle of artistic grandeur. Hawthorne considers this to be the actual state of sublimity which an art is supposed to impress upon the audience. Artist's dedication and sincerity lead him towards the destined end. The artist now rises from the state of a priest to a prophet bestowing his art with perennial endurance. The great pieces of art are successful in producing this effect; hence retain the uniqueness even after centuries. The painting of Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci produces such an effect, so it remains, as a piece of high artistic value. The most beautiful lady's beauty may fade away, but the portrait of Mona Lisa remains ever charming. Beauty no more remains a point of endurance when it is taken to state of sublimity the artist imitates nature so dextrously elevating it to an extra mundane perception. In this state of ecstasy there lies no scope for matters that are restricted by temporal demands. Hawthorne feels that art should embed in it the quality of suggestiveness which instead of merely entertaining with its beauty. "He says the highest merit of art is suggestiveness." In the ideal method," states of mind" produced by contact with life and nature replace facts; they "work a genuine effect and go further toward representing the actual scene than any direct effort to paint it."— The use of this method, Hawthorne thought, is what makes the great artist rise far above his arterial; by his spiritualization of the stuff of his art he becomes a prophet and gives his production everlasting life"(Gollin¹³).

In the short story Edward Randolph's Portrait, Hawthorne invests art with mesmerizing power to induce fear. The story revolves round the portrait of Edward Randolph, hung in the province-house of British lieutenant governor. This portrait depicts the autocracy of the governor and has been an heirloom to the family. Nature cherishes only the qualities of tolerance and mercy as its traits, The cruelty of Randolph is against the nature, inharmonious with the gospel of humanity. The greatness of the painter lies in colouring the very aspect of evil on the face of Randolph trying to mimic the true nature of Edward. Nature is so curious to put its stroke to the sketch by making it appear as grave as the person. The artist who paints the portrait must satisfy the demands of the viewer who has preconceived notions on Edward Randolph. The greatness of the artist in the story lies in bringing these qualities to life with his brush. At this scenario the disabled common sense, lands the individual into a state of trance. The visage of the portrait has the likeness to nature, hence producing the desired effect. The greatness of the artist, in painting the portrait, lies in bringing to life the very effect of evil which his

countenance possesses. "[...] that the curse of the people followed this Randolph where he went and wrought evil in all the subsequent events of his life, and that its effect was seen, likewise, in the manner of his death. They say, too, that the inward misery of that curse worked itself outward and was visible on the wretched man's countenance, making it too horrible to be looked upon. If so, and if this picture truly represented his aspect, it was in mercy that the cloud of blackness has gathered over it." (ERP 41).

The feature of sublime according to Edmund Burke must arouse the feeling of fear. Pleasure is the natural state of a man, the feeling of sublime is contrary to the normal state. The purpose of a painting is to derive pleasure. The portrait of Randolph evokes fear making the scene run against the natural state. In the story Alice Vane's, the niece of Lieutenant-governor Hutchinson, touch up to the portrait brings back the glory to it. Her artistic genius brings to life the old governor's accursed fate making his portrait an oeuvre of evil incarnate. This runs in perfect harmony with nature that is, his true demeanour. "The expression of the face, if any words can convey an idea of it, was that of a wretch detected in some hideous guilt and exposed to the bitter hatred and laughter and withering scorn of a vast surrounding multitude" (Hawthorne 43). The artistic excellence of Alice Vane takes the character of the governor above the boundaries of time. Her brush adds freshness to the portrait making Randolph alive in the fears of the lieutenant governor Hutchinson. Alice' attempts to threaten the bureaucrats by invoking the ghost of Randolph. Her artistic contrivance borrows evil demeanour true to his character that mesmerises the Lieutenant-governor. Though it is a phantasmagoria it produces the desired effect by revoking the orders regarding the installing the battalion in the forte of Castle William. The art creates a sublime state that spoils the rationale of the observers. The true purpose of the art is to liberate the emotions from the fences of mundane constrains. In the story Alice could paint the portrait borrowing the dexterity of nature, a true artist, in every sense. "An exclamation of surprise burst from every beholder, but the lieutenant governor's reaction sounds the actual sense of sublimity evoked by the potrait. "By Heaven!" said he, in a low inward murmur, speaking rather to himself than to those around him; "if the spirit of Edward Randolph were to appear among us from the place of torment, he could not wear more of the terrors of hell upon his face" (Hawthorne 45).

Art blesses the artist with all the power of virtual creation save one final touch which manoeuvres towards true genius of creation. This one stroke keeps the art below nature. In the short story Drowne's Wooden Image, art spares this final touch to Drowne's work which

otherwise would have made the wooden images walk hand in hand with the humans. This is the actual touch that makes all the difference. The artist can only be credited with skill not the genius if his creation lacks the vivacity, the unique character of nature.

Hawthorne reiterates the importance of spiritualizing the art in many of his short stories. In bringing this idea he also puts light on the suggestiveness of literature. The suggestiveness as per his opinion is mandatory to preserve the artistic excellence in any art form as it gives scope to richness and magnificence to the artistic creation. He tries to demonstrate that artist of any form need not try for the accuracy but must preserve the spiritual element that vests in the original. “[...] to him, however the greatest artistic value is not in the accuracy of achieving the actual but in the suggestiveness and the spiritual element which that accuracy has created. This is the same attitude he took toward literature - the insistence that fact be used as a foundation on which to erect a structure of spiritualized effect.” (Smith¹⁵).

Hawthorne prefers romantic fiction as it gives him freedom in fully using the symbolism. An artist who dwells much on his imagination and observation can transform the fact into a symbol. Instead of serving dry details he elevates the status of truth by transforming them into symbols. This helps the artist to create an impression that sustains in the mind of the audience for a longer time. This is not unacceptable so long as the artist does not deviate from reality. The truth propounded by artist must match with the ultimate truth of human nature. An artist will be able to obtain this genius by the close observation of the society and complete dedication to art, not yielding to external influences that tempt him. The romantic artist creates by transforming fact into symbol — that is, by transforming it into meaningful fact. Facts which he cannot see as meaningful may be discarded. He is at liberty to manipulate his materials, to shape them freely into meaningful patterns, so long as he does not violate the "truth of the human heart." Hawthorne felt that he himself could best pursue his desired truth by looking within and exercising a kind of imaginative sympathy in both his subject and his method. In a very suggestive metaphor in another of his prefaces — that to *The Snow-Image and Other Twice-Told Tales* in 1851 — he defined his role as an artist as that of a person who has been burrowing into the depths of human nature by the light of observation. (Stewart).

The purpose of art is to teach man the true spirit of life. Any art form must satisfy the basic requirement of moulding itself in tune with the real life. Any reality appears to take a grand shape when it is exposed through an artistic endeavour. Hawthorne's sentiment towards art is one of the kinds which tries to preserve the quality of sublimity. The art he believes must make

the man feel rather than think. Thinking helps in invention and feeling drives him towards realization. Realization is important to man as it helps in reformation. Thinking gives scope to doubts and realization helps to understand. Art according to Hawthorne should help man to realize his responsibilities as a human being. The capability of thinking has been brought on to the earth due to man's disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit, or the vice versa that is thinking made him to eat the forbidden fruit. This mistake can be rectified by sticking faithfully to the commands of art, as it is the means to propel man towards spiritualism.

Hawthorne feels romanticism to be a better choice for achieving artistic excellence. An artist to maintain grandeur to some degree must sometimes move away from facts, but at the same time a thorough compliance with romanticism might also spoil the chances of gaining readers' confidence who are already familiar with the facts and have their choices in interpreting them. This sentiment he preserves in all most all his works. "Unless art, to some degree, is "an emblem of the human heart," touched by "the tender and familiar influences which soften almost every scene of nature and real life" it fails." in this failure, art strays away from its legitimate paths and aims,- the aims especially of softening and sweetening "the lives of its worshippers, in even a more exquisite degree than the contemplation of natural objects."— It was to avoid such failure in his own writing that Hawthorne retained the basis of actuality on which to build up his atmosphere of romance" (Hawthorne¹⁶).

In 1817 a famous English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, proposed the theory of willing suspension of disbelief as one of the important features of romantic poetry. He expects the readers to deliberately shun the feelings of disbelief and show their readiness to believe the poet at the risk of sacrificing the reality. Coleridge feels that this would help the reader to experience the ultimate pleasure. He believes that transporting the reader into such a state, is a self-proclaimed right of a poet. Hawthorne differs from this view of Coleridge by bringing romanticism with a realistic mould by making it intimate with life. This gives wider scope to art and makes it eligible to receive due appreciation from people of all walks of life. He terms this as the true spirit of democracy in the matters of art. "I have sometimes produced a singular and not unpleasing effect, so far as my own mind was concerned, by imagining a train of incidents in which the spirit and mechanism of the fairyland should be combined with the characters and manners of familiar life." (Hawthorne)

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