

The Theme of Fear in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Romances

Anda Ștefanovici

“Petru Maior” University of Târgu-Mureș, Romania

MOTTO: “Fear grows in darkness; if you think there’s a bogeyman around, turn on the light”. (Dorothy Thompson)

Nathaniel Hawthorne uses different themes in his romances. He uses the themes to develop the plot, and analyze the characters. One of the most dominant themes throughout his main romances is the theme of fear.

Hawthorne's belief was that at the core of every individual's soul there is some innate evil, some deep rottenness that prevents any person from achieving absolute, genuine goodness. This perception of the nature of humanity is rooted in the Puritan heritage. The evil manifests itself in the form of selfish self-interest, passion, obsession, etc., all of them leading to isolation. Characters are forced to live in isolation, darkness and fear of the outside world and of their past. They are not being isolated by society but they are isolating themselves from society. The main reason for their self-imposed isolation is fear of being ostracized.

However, the state of sinfulness is differently presented by Hawthorne. While Puritan society is stagnant, Hawthorne's characters experience the fear and reality of isolation in a positive way. They believe sin can lead to personal growth, sympathy, understanding of others and to the loss of fear, implicitly. Thus, sin and fear are not a burden anymore; they become a symbol of courage, freedom, elevation, completeness, or integration into society. Characters achieve psychological maturity once they have become aware of their own sinfulness as well as of the sinfulness inherent in others. The darkness and shadows surrounding characters like

Hester, Hepzibah, Clifford, or Miriam, are backed up, according to Hawthorne's ambivalent attitude towards life, by counter-characters bringing light into the romances, such as Pearl, Phoebe, Hilda, etc., thus foreshadowing that all of their fears will one day be banished. By contrasting past and present, the way things have been and how they are now, characters manage to overcome isolation, darkness and fear.

1. Fear of the past (of their ancestors' deeds)

Isolation is a major aspect in the lives of the characters in *The House of the Seven Gables* because of the actions of their ancestors 200 years earlier. The narrator gives many clues that lead the reader into believing that Hepzibah and Clifford have been living isolated from the rest of the community. Near the beginning of the romance, Hepzibah removes the bar from the door to the shop she feels "*as if the only barrier betwixt herself and the world had been thrown down and a flood of evil consequences would come tumbling through the gap ...*" (42). One learns of the isolation that both Clifford and Hepzibah are feeling later in the novel when they are trying to decide whether to follow Phoebe on to church. The narrator reveals Hepzibah's feelings of isolation. Hepzibah and Clifford have been isolated from the outside world for such a long time that they have become isolated spiritually as well. Clifford tells Hepzibah: "*We are ghosts! We have no right among human beings – no right anywhere but in this old house*" (150) This shows that Clifford and Hepzibah's isolation is rather self-imposed than imposed by society. They prefer to stay in the "*old house*" for fear they might be ostracized by the Puritan society. The two, however, begin to reconcile with their loneliness and isolation when Phoebe comes to bring light into their lives. She is the factor that will contribute essentially to their reintegration into society and implicitly, to the dissipation of their fears.

The setting, i.e. the house, is in accordance to the characters' feelings of fear as well. A sense of darkness and shadows is prevalent. In the first paragraph of the novel, the narrator says that he "*seldom failed to turn down Pyncheon Street, for the sake of passing through the shadow of these two antiquities – the great elm tree and the weather-beaten edifice*" (*The House of the Seven Gables*: 11) The lower rooms of the house are where Hepzibah and Clifford spend most of their time, and this is why throughout the entire novel, there is a constant state of darkness in the physical sense. Another cause for darkness in the house is the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon. The portrait seems to be there whenever Clifford and Hepzibah turn around, reminding them of the darkness (i.e. the shame) that was brought upon the family name by the Colonel. The Colonel brought shame upon the family name when he had Matthew Maule hanged for no reason, causing the curse to be forever placed upon the family and the house. The darkness dissipates the moment Phoebe comes into the house. She arrives "*as a ray of sunshine, fallen into what dismal place it may ...*" (66). As soon as Phoebe arrives, there is an instant change in the atmosphere of the house. She seems to have belonged here from the very beginning. The fact that Phoebe brings light into the house foreshadows that all of Hepzibah's fears will one day be gone.

There are many fears that are prevalent in several characters in the romance, but Hepzibah's fears are easiest to see and feel. Hepzibah's fears relate directly to the past and her knowledge of what has happened to the other men in her family. Hepzibah fears that both she and her brother, Clifford, will one day fall victim to the curse that has been placed on the house by Matthew Maule. She also fears Phoebe will steal the affection that Clifford once had for her and then leave her completely alone. Another fear of Hepzibah's is that Judge Jaffrey will harm Clifford by possibly throwing him in prison or even causing him to die, just as many of the other Pyncheon men have.

There are many instances, however, when Hepzibah is able to overcome her fears and fight back against her past, especially the Judge. After Phoebe has left, Hepzibah, once again, has to stand up against the Judge and not allow him to see Clifford. She is lucky though, because “*for once Hepzibah’s wrath had given her courage. She had spoken*” (*The House of the Seven Gables*: 200). Hepzibah is finally able to defend herself and Clifford against the threatening hand of the Judge. This is the first step toward success, reclaiming her family name back and thus, regaining her confidence in the future. Once she has overcome her isolation, fear and darkness, she can look confidently ahead, with no fear of the past haunting her anymore.

Fear of the past is also present in *The Marble Faun*. Miriam is chased by the Model who is a living embodiment and reminiscence of her past deeds. Hawthorne introduces the character of Miriam as the one that refuses representation. The source of her mystery is her refusal to reveal her origins, nationality and family ties. She remains a puzzle: “*She resembled one of those images of light which conjurers evoke and cause to shine before us, in apparent tangibility, only an arm’s length beyond our grasp: we make a step in advance, expecting to seize the illusion, but find it still so precisely out of reach*” (23). The text can neither provide many details of Miriam’s history, nor describe her appearance directly. Donatello, Miriam’s admirer, comes across her self-portrait in the studio. Besides that, we learn that “*Miriam was the daughter and heiress of a great Jewish banker*” (24); later, she reveals that her English mother possessed “*a vein ... of Jewish blood*” (30). She is linked to the Model by some horrible past crime about which we are provided no clues whatsoever. That is why she hates and fears the Model so much, as the only witness and accomplice to her past deed: “*I am lonely, lonely! There is a secret in my heart that burns me – that tortures me*” (106).

We can notice the same attitude in the case of Hester and Miriam. They both try to escape their past. At some point in the story, Hester throws away the scarlet letter, while Miriam

confesses to the Model that she has escaped from all the past, and now she has new friends, hopes and enjoyments. But just like Dimmesdale, the Model is well aware of the fact that they will never be able to get rid of their past.

2. Fear of stepping out of the order, of keeping free of the imprisoning past and of conventional society, which embodies the past.

Hawthorne believed in the transcendental doctrine of self-reliance so clearly expressed by R.W.Emerson in his essay on "Circles". A man should live according to his own nature, entirely free of the past. Such a man might indeed possess his soul, but he might also miss the essence of culture that eventually would result in isolation from one's fellows. We are responsible for our own actions. According to *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907-21)*, this danger of stepping out of order results in the doctrine of compensation. Every action carries its reward or punishment with it: "*The thief is punished, though the police never find him, for the price of theft is loss of innocence, fear of arrest, suspicion of other men*". (Volume XVI: *Early National Literature, Part I; Later National Literature, Part II*). However, here springs the paradox of experience. According to Hawthorne, experiencing sin and evil leads to the regeneration of a soul – not through repentance, but through sincere adherence to the sin.

A good example in this sense is provided by Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. Since she really loved Dimmesdale, one might accuse her of stepping out of the moral order, and implicitly of conventional judgements. However, nowhere in the romance are we suggested condemnation of her or of the minister in their sin; the only blame Hawthorne attaches is to Dimmesdale and his cowardice, his lack of self-reliance, his unreadiness to make public acknowledgement of his love. Their passion was sacred; so never did they think of repentance.

Hester illustrates the optimism of “Circles”. She has sinned, but the sin leads her straightway to a larger life. She finds she has a career at last. Social ostracism first gives her leisure for meditation and a just angle from which to attack social problems, and then it allows her to enter upon a life of mercy and good works which would have been closed to a conventional woman. She becomes more loving, more sympathetic, more tender; and even intellectually, she becomes more emancipated if we were to compare her to the narrowness of her age.

The same doctrine of Circles, the evolution of good out of sin, not out of repentance for sin is found in *The Marble Faun*. Donatello, begins life with the innocence-like innocence only to develop an immortal soul by committing an impulsive murder.

3. Fear of conformity; the cry of the individualist

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hollingsworth illustrates his fear of tampering with the natural order of things, especially by organized reform. Hollingsworth was a determined social reformer; he wished to reform criminals through an appeal to their higher instinct. In the selfish pursuit of his philanthropic ideal, he ruins two lives, Zenobia’s and Priscilla’s. He should have furnished the state of his own heart for examination, Hawthorne suggests. Hawthorne comments again, making his point clear again, that a good ideal brings a man to a good end only if it does not lead him out of the natural sympathies of life: *“The moral which presents itself to my reflections, as drawn from Hollingsworth’s character and errors, is simply this – that, admitting what is called philanthropy, when adopted as a profession, to be often useful by its energetic impulse to society at large, it is perilous to the individual whose ruling passion, in one exclusive channel, it thus becomes. It ruins, or is fearfully apt to ruin, the heart, the rich juices of which God never meant should be pressed violently out and distilled into alcoholic liquor by an*

unnatural process, but should render life sweet, bland, and gently beneficent, and insensibly influence other hearts and other lives to the same blessed end.” (279)

4. Fear of passion and women in general

William Heath in his article “The Power of Passion: Hawthorne’s Tales of Thwarted Desire” analyzes the sexual element in Hawthorne’s writings, finding a “*profound ambivalence towards women*” in many of his works. He discusses his sexual anxieties, such as his fear of passion with his wife and women in general and how it surfaces in his books. He touches upon Hawthorne’s morbid themes: the illicit wishes, lacerating guilts, tainted desires, and monstrous crimes that his haunted mind dreamt and dramatized. Hawthorne found an explanation of these horrors in the Puritan doctrine of Innate Depravity that “*in Adam’s fall we sinneth all*”. He branded passion as evil; still, he knew that it was not the whole truth. The image that Hawthorne compulsively returns to in his fiction, the bloodstain, suggests both loss of virginity and the shedding of blood. Hawthorne, according to W. Heath, feared sensual experience.

His fear of passion and accordingly of women in general, resulted in his profound ambivalence about this world in general and women in particular. Women are no longer idealized as angels of worship, embodiments of purity and innocence. What Hawthorne was ready to accept was a sense of female imperfection. The puzzlement at the heart of Hawthorne’s artistic dilemma is that he simply cannot decide what to make of women: demons or angels. He tries to rely on the polarities of fair maid and dark lady: the sexless, pure, innocent and saved versus the sensual, guilty, and damned. Living in a Puritan age, his “*ambiguous*” message might be understood as follows: matter does not matter, spirit is all, the body is mere clay and passion is poison. Fortunately, he is too complete an artist not to include a deeper contrary current that acknowledges the complexity of women and the legitimate claims of desire.

A good example is provided, in this sense, by *The Marble Faun*. Most of the specific paintings and sculptures alluded to in *The Marble Faun* (over 30) concern *lost innocence* or the conflict of good and evil. To this list, certain imaginary works might be added: Miriam's sketches of a rustic dance and of episodes which convey "*the idea of woman, acting the part of a revengeful mischief towards man*" (34). (E.g. Jael driving the nail through Sisnera's temple, Judith holding the head of Holofernes, Salome with that of John the Baptist). Also in this category are the supposed drawing by Guido for his painting of St. Michael overcoming Satan (in which Satan resembles the model), the nymph at the Monte Beni Fountain, Panini's portrait (entitled "Innocence, Dying of a Bloodstain") which depicts Hilda looking at Leonardo's painting of Joanna of Aragon, and Kenyon's bust of Donatello.

5. Fear to be a woman in a Puritan society. Woman, a source of fear to man.

Social Puritan conventions are severely criticized by Hawthorne in his women characters like Hester, Zenobia and Miriam. They are all represented as physically beautiful. They are in some way estranged from life and we keep wondering whether it was not their beauty rather than their conduct that alienated them from society. What career has a beautiful woman in New England? Beauty was likely to be considered a handicap in Puritan society. Hester, Zenobia, and probably Miriam, were all married for their beauty, when they were very young, to men who could not appreciate their greatness of soul, and whom therefore they were forced to divorce or to desert.

In Hawthorne we find the beginnings of this strangely repressed life. Hepzibah Pyncheon, struggling in an agony of shame and impotence to submit to the rude contact of the world, is the true parent of all those stiffened, lonely women that haunt the scenes of Hawthorne's romances.

However, such women have their counterparts (Hester, Zenobia, Miriam), and these are the women Hawthorne and men in general fear. Zenobia is a modern and conscious Hester. – or rather, her experience is the reverse of Hester’s, for she is a woman naturally emancipated who is ruined by disappointed love. It is this difference in their problems that makes her seem less noble than Hester, less tragic than pitiful. But in portraying her, Hawthorne raises the same question he has suggested in *The Scarlet Letter*: is not such a woman, so beautiful and so intellectual, an exotic creature in the American society of those times? Here is the modern woman whom Hester dreamed of, but the old misfortune still overtakes her; like Hester, she has married one who could not appreciate her, but she has never found the lover who should have been her mate, and she has no true companionship with other women. She seems to be a foreigner, and Hawthorne seems to tell us that in the New England of his time foreigners had the right to be, like Zenobia, physically beautiful.

Barbara Ellis in her article “Some Observations about Hawthorne’s Women” gives Hawthorne good marks on his treatment of women. She claims how the author’s female-dominated life gave him a respect towards women that filters into his work; his depiction of Hester Prynne as internally complex and a source of fear to men is ahead of his time. While other writers could only create stereotypical women, this critic feels Hawthorne has painted a more honest, more profound picture of a female.

6. Fear of the unknown. Fascination with the super(un)natural.

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (anonymous). Children will always be afraid of the dark and men will always shudder at what they do not understand, yet everyone will continue to seek it. Perhaps it is because society, particularly American society, because of its history, believes the

final horrors are ghosts and demons, when truly it is the hidden aspects of its own soul. As reflected by its literature, American society has always held a deep fascination with the supernatural. Evidence of this is seen throughout American history, from the Puritan era onward. The Puritans of America did not understand much about their universe; hence, their fascination with the unnatural. They assigned personifications and marvelous interpretations to natural phenomena they could not understand, and, as such, feared (e.g. the Devil, the witch, the meteor, etc.).

For instance, the forest (representing the area of the unknown) was feared as the abode of the Evil, the Black Man, which was a traditional name for **Devil**.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Roger Chillingworth becomes an almost supernatural being, part devil, part medieval alchemist, and part evil scientist. Hester's daughter, Pearl, is described as a "*demon child*" who constantly taunts her mother. She is also another unnatural link to this story. It is of common belief that Mistress Hibbins, the town witch, often dances in the forest with the Devil. One day, she calls to Hester, saying, "*there will be merry company in the forest; and I well-nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Pynne would be there*" (138). To this Hester answers no, but this situation presents the stereotypical **witch** that many Puritans feared, but that probably did not exist.

The next occurrence is the **meteor** in the sky. As revealed in the book, (174), nothing was more common in those days than to interpret all meteoric appearances and other natural phenomena as supernatural revelations. When Dimmesdale, in all of his guilt, sees the meteor streak across the sky, he imagines it is "*an immense letter ... A marked out in line of dull red light*" (175). Many other people of the town see it as well, but each interprets it to his own liking, never once suggesting that it may just simply be a meteor.

In conclusion, Hawthorne was a writer who came against his age. However, this was not clearly expressed by him. He was a Puritan with Anti-Puritan views. Throughout his life, he struggled to arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of the nature of women and the power of passion in an age when woman's sole role was to be man's shadow. Hence, his ambivalence towards the human nature in general, and women in particular. Man is a combination of both good and evil. Evil is inherent and cannot be defeated unless its reality is acknowledged. The message Hawthorne seems to give us, as readers, is the following: we, as human beings are afraid of the unknown, of our secrets, of our imperfection; in a word, of our evil side. Consequently, we put on a mask of fear that seems to accompany us throughout our life. Nevertheless, this is not our true self that gives us independence from the past and all the fears along with it. All we have to do is recognize our sinful nature and implicitly, the duplicity of being (both good and evil). From that moment on, we can see the world with different eyes, the eyes of truth; then, we can remove our mask of hypocrisy, become good through evil; it is the beginning of a new way of perceiving the world around us, a sense of belonging and being part of it; it is a "re-birth", a building up of a sense of having a true self. The result will be loss of our fears, personal growth, self-reliance, and implicitly a link (through sympathy) to the rest of community in the common "*chain of humanity*".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907-21)*, by Sacvan Bercovitch (Editor), Cambridge: CUP, 1995.

[2] **Ellis, Barbara.** "Some Observations about Hawthorne's Women". *Willa*, Volume II, 13-18, 1993.

[3] **Emerson, W.** "Circles". *Selected Essays by R.W.Emerson*. Larzer, Ziff (Edition). Penguin Classics: 1982.

[4] **Hawthorne, N.** *The Scarlet Letter. A Romance*. Ohio State University Press, Penguin Books, 1986.

[5] **Hawthorne, N.** *The House of the Seven Gables*. New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1965.

[6] **Hawthorne, N.** *The Blithedale Romance*. Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852. London: Chapman and Hall, 1852.

[7] **Hawthorne, N.** *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni*. London: J.M.Dent & Sons, Ltd. New York: E.P.Dutton & Co., 1859.

[8] **Heath, William.** "The Power of Passion: Hawthorne's Thwarted Tales". *The Cortland Review*, Issue 3, May 1998.