

ANALYSIS

“The Artist of the Beautiful” (1844)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

This is Hawthorne’s spiritual autobiography as an artist, an allegory of his conflicts with society, his psychological individuation and his idealistic faith. The ideal butterfly is a metaphor of his aspiration, his art and his holistic consciousness--his soul. This is the most Platonic of his writings before “The Old Manse” (1846) and the most transcendental of all his stories.

The narrative presents many polarities, opposites that are symbolically reconciled in the butterfly, expressing ultimate transcendence by literal flight. This tale is science fiction, because perfection is unattainable in this life, as Hawthorne emphasizes in “The Birthmark” where Georgiana can only become perfect when she dies. Perhaps this ideal butterfly has an insignificant flaw, a birthmark not worth mentioning because “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.” This imperfect material world is a transitory phase; the spiritual world of the afterlife is the eternal reality. This is Christianity informed by Plato and “high enough” in the Romantic tradition of John Keats to reach the mystical altitude of his line, “Beauty is truth, truth Beauty--that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

The crushing of the physical butterfly is analogous to the eventual death of the body, transcended by the soul. Art is a means and a manifestation of psychological salvation. Hawthorne considered God the artist of Nature and the individual as an artist of himself--Christian existentialism--as in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hester sublimates her passion with the art of her needle, flaunts her sin by embellishing the letter A and does not start to become an artist of the ideal until the end, when she returns and puts on the letter of her own free will, having finally tamed her wild heart and accepted responsibility.

Owen War-land the artist has a last name indicating his conflict with society: “It is requisite for the ideal artist to possess a force of character that seems hardly compatible with its delicacy; he must keep faith in himself while the incredulous world assails him with its utter disbelief; he must stand up against mankind and be his own sole disciple, both as respects his genius and the objects to which it is directed.” The words “faith” and “sole” and “disciple” suggest that the artist must submit to a sacrificial role in society, imitating Christ, while at the same time fighting a battle of values. Owen owes a debt to society for providing his livelihood, but his job reduces him to a practical function like a cog in one of the watches he makes. The watch is a traditional symbol of civilization, temporal limitation and regulation.

The values the ideal artist must combat are personified in his former master, the retired watchmaker old Peter Hovenden, who says, “give me the worker in iron after all is said and done. He spends his labor upon a reality.” Iron is a tag motif in Hawthorne identifying a Puritan. Hovenden is a descendant of the Puritans “whose spiritual part” has died out, leaving “the grosser understanding to assimilate them more and more to the things of which alone it can take cognizance.” He is a materialist like the literal-minded critic in “Main Street,” who has no imagination, sensibility or capacity for idealism. The evil Judge Pyncheon, who represents all social problems in *The House of the Seven Gables*, dies holding a watch that mocks him by continuing to tick. Hawthorne mentions his watch six times while taunting his corpse.

The many polarities in this story are themes: matter vs spirit; utilitarianism vs idealism; understanding vs imagination; utility vs beauty; practical vs artful; mechanism vs organism; masculine vs feminine; Puritan vs Victorian; Neoclassical vs Romantic--Danforth vs Owen. Archetypal puritan values are imaged in iron, anvil, watch and the iron cage of Owen’s job, transcended by his spirit through art, manifest in the butterfly. His individuation process is dramatized through his failures and heartbreaks, as his ideals “are

exposed to be shattered and annihilated by contact with the practical.” His success in regulating the clock in the church steeple elevates him and unites the material with the spiritual.

Old Peter Hovenden with his failing eyesight is “partly a representative” of mankind in his scorn for the idealism of the artist: “‘You are my evil spirit,’ answered Owen, much excited,--‘you and the hard, coarse world!’” Chasing butterflies is “an apt emblem of the ideal pursuit” and the attempt to spiritualize matter is a metaphor of moral development. Owen turns to Annie, old Peter’s daughter, for appreciation, but she crushes him like the butterfly: “If any human spirit could have sufficiently revered the processes so sacred in his eyes, it must have been a woman’s. Even Annie Hovenden, possibly, might not have disappointed him had she been enlightened by the deep intelligence of love.” Contrary to expectation, Annie turns out to be common rather than one of Hawthorne’s many Victorian angels. She is “the representative of the world,” who chooses Robert Danforth the practical blacksmith over the idealist. In this story, the theme of the Self as savior introduced in “Roger Malvin’s Burial” is expressed by Owen saving himself rather than depending on an angel.

Owen responds to the announcement of Annie’s engagement to the blacksmith by smashing the butterfly he is constructing. “Of course he had deceived himself; there were no such attributes in Annie Hovenden as his imagination had endowed her with.” Annie is his anima figure, in Jungian terms, his projection of a specific ideal, as distinct from the universal ideal he is creating within himself. “Had he won Annie to his bosom, and there beheld her fade from angel into ordinary woman,--the disappointment might have driven him back, with concentrated energy, upon his sole remaining object.” Instead, he falls ill, an archetypal phase in the individuation process, leading to rebirth:

It was as if the spirit had gone out of him.... Poor, poor and fallen Owen Warland! These were the symptoms that he had ceased to be an inhabitant of the better sphere that lies unseen around us. He had lost his faith in the invisible, and now prided himself, as such unfortunates invariably do, in the wisdom which rejected much that even his eye could see, and trusted confidently in nothing but what his hand could touch. This is the calamity of men whose spiritual part dies out of them... But in Owen Warland the spirit was not dead nor passed away; it only slept.

His state of mind is comparable to that rendered by T. S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” (1922). His internal wilderness is barren for awhile, then gradually his spirit revives through dedication, through an act of will in a quest: “A long space of intense thought, yearning effort, minute toil, and wasting anxiety.” When he is disillusioned by Annie, she becomes his *shadow* in Jungian terms, representing what he had previously repressed, his knowledge that he has a naive tendency to project--which is the downside of being an imaginative idealist. Paradoxically, his eventual success in attaining the ideal coincides with and depends upon his ability to face his shadow and reconcile himself to reality.

He visits Annie, now a matronly mother, at her home with Robert and old Peter Hovenden. He opens a jewel box with an inlaid picture of a boy chasing a butterfly, which, “elsewhere, had become a winged spirit, and was flying heavenward”--making explicit the traditional Christian symbol of the butterfly as the immortal soul. On the finger of the child, glowing with inner light, Owen’s butterfly grows more radiant. Hawthorne agrees with the Romantics that a child is more imaginative and responsive to the spirit than adults, but that is balanced by his Puritan view of human nature. This child appears to be a little old Peter Hovenden “but partially redeemed from his hard skepticism into childish faith,” until he crushes the butterfly “with his grandsire’s sharp and shrewd expression in his face.”

Hawthorne expresses the archetypal “Model of Metaphors” when Owen explains to Annie that his creation “may well be said to possess life, for it has absorbed my own being into itself; and in the secret of that butterfly...is represented the intellect [City], the imagination [Wilderness], the sensibility [Garden], the soul of an Artist of the Beautiful.” His art as an image of his soul--a synthesis of heart and head, natural and artificial, organism and mechanism, etc.--flies in the Sky with a four-part wing structure.

Michael Hollister (2015)