

ANALYSIS

The Marble Faun (1860)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

The Marble Faun is set in Italy, yet is a nationalistic allegory of history culminating in America, the vanguard of democratic progress. Compared to Hawthorne's economical previous works, this Romance at times is like a leisurely travelogue with local color from his Italian notebooks, interesting in particular for what it reveals of Hawthorne.

The status of America in the grand design of God is portrayed in the wholesome relationship of Kenyon and Hilda as contrasted to the affair of Donatello and Miriam. Like the Pyncheon house, Rome is the corrupt Old World, the ruin of ancient mythologies, a global symbol of decadence. By now the eternal city is poisonous like Rappaccini's garden. Hawthorne's family caught malaria. Aromatic of ancient evils, Rome mocks Utopian Blithedale but not progressive America. The dirty streets of Rome are dark, whereas the Main Street of America is gradually brightening.

Hilda is an independent woman, an artist studying abroad. She is "a daughter of the Puritans" with both the strength of Phoebe and the aesthetic sensibility of Alice Pyncheon; hence, she is the synthesis implied as ideal in the mythic allegory of *The House of the Seven Gables*. The relation between democratic American promise and aristocratic European decadence is defined by the image of a New England girl copying only the best of the Old World in her tower above the streets of Rome.

Young America also looks down on Old Europe in the allegorical tableau in Chapters IX-XII. From high upon the Pincian Hill in Rome, the refined Kenyon and the virginal Hilda look down into the Borghese Grove where furry Donatello and dark Miriam—"the faun and the nymph"--have just finished a dance that turned the grove into a pagan Arcadia. Then down in the piazza the Americans see Miriam kneeling at the feet of her dark model, a corrupt Catholic. In contrast, Hilda embodies the independence, optimism, innocence, puritan simplicity, moral virtues and manifest destiny of the United States in female form, such as the "America" sculpted by Hiram Powers--an icon like the Statue of Liberty. As a spiritual ideal such as the Greeks sculpted, Hilda is a Victorian angel who becomes human only by falling into contact with sin as if falling from the sky into the sinful world without losing her innocence.

Donatello becomes human by falling from the wilderness into knowledge of good and evil, from primitive Edenic ignorance into the sinful world epitomized by Rome. The "faun" is an Adamic archetype, a primitive throwback--mythological rather than Darwinian. Donatello is man repeating the Fall as an eternal, archetypal pattern of exile from childhood, possibly leading to individuation. Tuscany was his Arcadia, Rome is his "Eden of the present world," a decadent city dissociated from the garden of the heart, where he obeys his dark lover rather than God. His apple is blood: "Signorina, what you drink, I drink."

Hawthorne viewed the Biblical myth of the Fall of Man as a triple allegory: (1) Mankind's historical transition from the pagan Golden Age of wild, animal innocence and moral ignorance, as represented by Donatello and by wild Pearl—"the pure childhood of the world"--to the Christian Age, from Arcadia through the advent of Christ, a pattern enacted by Edith and Edgar in "The Maypole of Merry Mount"; (2) an individual's maturation from childish egocentricity into true humanity and maturity, again like Pearl, Edith and Edgar; (3) a civilized person's initiation into evil, loss of innocence in sin, with or without a progressive transformation, as exemplified by Goodman Brown, Reuben Bourne, Robin Molineux, Giovanni Guasconti, Hester Prynne and Hollingsworth.

Hawthorne believed that one could achieve the knowledge and mature humanity that might ensue as a consequence of the Fall without sinning as Donatello does. Edith, Edgar, Pearl, Phoebe and Priscilla are transformed into mature exemplars without sinning. Hilda is transformed by contact with the sin of others.

Sometimes “the instruction comes without the sorrow.” Hawthorne would have agreed with his son Julian’s evaluation of his mother Sophia, their model of morality: “She was disciplined and instructed by pain, as others are by sin and its consequences; and thus she could become strong and yet remain without stain.”

The Fall myth dramatizes (1) the freedom of human will; (2) the divine origin of a moral sense in the heart that is independent of the head; (3) the tension between duty and desire inherent in the human soul; and (4) the ultimate source of all sin in pride or selfish impulse. The original sin was the disobedience of the moral sense, conscience or heart, through which God and moral truth are intuitively known. This is the primary sin of Hester and Dimmesdale, as he defines it while dying on the scaffold: “We violated our reverence each for the other’s soul.”

Adam and Eve ate the apple thinking to become gods, and became human. Like Donatello, they did evil and thereby became capable of doing good. Hawthorne clearly believed in the Fall of Man and used it repeatedly as a metaphor, but he did not accept the classic doctrine of the paradoxical “Fortunate Fall,” which Kenyon summarizes, paraphrasing Miriam: “Sin has educated Donatello, and elevated him. Is sin, then,—which we deem such a dreadful blackness in the universe,—is it, like sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained? Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier paradise than this?”

To Hawthorne, this was simply a rationalization for sin: “‘Do you not perceive what a mockery your creed makes,’ said Hilda, ‘not only of all religious sentiments, but of moral law?’” Inasmuch as sin is (1) not necessary to personal development or salvation; (2) breaks the “magnetic chain of humanity,” leads to isolation and possibly damnation; and (3) usually harms others, it is much to be avoided, even in thought. Miriam and Kenyon mistakenly equate the fall of one man with the Fall of Man. Furthermore, falling is not always educational: “Oftener the sorrow teaches no lesson that abides with us.” Hester’s suffering for her sin makes her strong “but taught her much amiss.” Even by the end, “here was yet to be her penitence.”

At the end, Donatello is paganism, banished from the civilized world. Miriam kneels in prayer beneath the open eye of God in the roof of the Pantheon, symbol of Old World mythologies, near the center of Rome. As a conventional type, this European Dark Lady is much worse than the American Dark Lady Hester Prynne. Her passionate nature marks her as a primitive racial type from the Victorian perspective, while her Catholicism and connection with the Papal government identify her with the decadent religion prevailing in aristocratic Europe. She is last seen standing as if “on the other side of a fathomless abyss” from the young Americans. Kenyon is misled by the dark Miriam, but fair Hilda, whose Old English name means battle, guards the traditional verities with the “swordlike innocence” of a Victorian Minerva. The prospective union of Hilda and Kenyon, like that of Phoebe and Holgrave, promises national as well as personal fulfillment. They resolve to “go back to their own land.” Once again in the end, as in Hawthorne’s three previous Romances, the Americans go west.

Michael Hollister (2015)