

ANALYSIS

"The Old Manse" (1846)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in a household of women, was very close to his mother and enjoyed an ideal Victorian marriage. The opposite of Poe in many ways, Hawthorne was Romantic in being conventional. As a Victorian feminist, he believed that women are superior to men in morality and spirituality. He thought ministers should be women. More than any other writer, he emphasizes the psychological need for a cooperative *balance* of the head and heart, in the individual and in society. He believed that salvation depended on it, individual and social. In the ideal Victorian marriage, the husband (head) and the wife (heart) deferred to each other in their respective areas of responsibility and expertise--he outside and she inside the home, except that the realm of women also included the church and education up to college. The ideal Victorian marriage, balancing the head and the heart, was a metaphor of ideal individual psychology. People who never married were considered incomplete.

The iconic Victorian "angel in the house" is one of the most conspicuous motifs in Hawthorne's fiction, the redemptive fair lady who embodies the ideals of the heart, the genteel Christian values that prevailed among the women in his family and his New England culture--faith, love and salvation: Faith, Beatrice, Edith, Georgiana, Elizabeth, Priscilla, Hilda and Phoebe, his pet name for his wife. Over and over, the angel represents salvation and potential happiness to a male protagonist. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Phoebe turns her man from a radical into a conservative democrat, like Hawthorne. The angel in the house is associated with other domestic icons and motifs in Hawthorne, most notably the hearth in the heart of the home, where the family gathered around together in warmth, an equivalent to heaven in this life. Up in Maine, where he spent time as a boy, his name was pronounced *Hearth-orne*.

Hawthorne is at his most Romantic in "The Old Manse," a preface to tales he wrote while living in the historic Concord house where Emerson wrote *Nature*. After leaving the Transcendental communal experiment at Brook Farm, he married in 1842, moved into the Manse with his wife Sophia, sat with her each night at the hearth and enjoyed the happiest years of his life. He tends the garden, compares himself to Adam in Eden and sees Nature as the allegorical art of God. "The Old Manse" is more platonic and idealistic than he is elsewhere, except in his credo "The Artist of the Beautiful." Looking into the Concord River, he sees "ideal beauty" in reflections, the "apotheosis" of matter, "like heavenly *thoughts* through a peaceful *heart*...The earthliest human soul has an infinite spiritual capacity and may contain the better world within its depths." Thinking in the heart is evidence of psychological synthesis, holistic consciousness and transcendence, recalling Anne Bradstreet. Hawthorne is closer to Emerson here than anywhere else, but a Christian rather than a pantheist.

He has been individuating all his life, as dramatized in "The Artist of the Beautiful," and his transcendental mode of consciousness is evident in his abundant Sky imagery. His descriptions of Nature are Victorian, deliberately conventional and iconic: "Heaven smiled at the earth, so long unseen, from beneath its heavy eyelid." "Our Creator would never have made such lovely days and have given us the deep hearts to enjoy them, above and beyond all thought, unless we were meant to be immortal. This sunshine is the golden pledge thereof. It beams through the gates of paradise and shows us glimpses far inward." The opposite of Parson Hooper, he is clearly no Calvinist. He makes excursions into the Wilderness, like Thoreau, but prefers civilization: "How sweet it was to return within the system of human society."

Aesthetically, in one preface he describes himself as "burrowing, to his utmost ability, into the depths of our common nature, for the purposes of psychological romance..." Likewise, in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, he says he is trying to express the "truth of the human heart" and defines his long works as Romances, differentiating them from the Novel. Though many of his themes are Romantic in affirming the heart against the head, the prose style of Hawthorne is not Romantic but Neoclassical, reflecting his classical education at Bowdoin College. The puritanism in his character, as distinct from his mind, also

disposed him to classicism and the discipline of allegory, aesthetics influenced by his study of allegorists such as Spenser and Bunyan and his assimilation of everything by and about the Puritans of New England. His fictions are comparable to allegorical stained glass windows depicting historical scenes with moral and spiritual import, featuring his angels, far more complex than the picture show in his sketch "Main Street."

Michael Hollister (2015)