

ANALYSIS

“Main Street” (1849)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

The artist in this sketch is a “visionist” who illustrates the past of New England as mythic allegory, just as Hawthorne does with more sophistication in his fiction. Taking judicious liberties with historical fact in order to dramatize spiritual truth, like Hawthorne, he presents a panorama focused on Main Street in Salem. Main Street is Hawthorne’s icon of social progress.

Throughout his presentation the artist is subjected to boorish critical abuse from a personification of literal-minded materialism, who refuses to suspend disbelief, “an acidulous-looking gentleman in blue glasses, with bows of Berlin steel,” complaining, “The trees look more like weeds in a garden than a primitive forest.” The artist replies, “Human art has its limits, and we must now and then ask a little aid from the spectator’s imagination.” The critic responds, “You will get no such aid from mine. I make it a point to see things precisely as they are.”

The Puritans became cruel and superstitious, but at least they were spiritual enough to have “faith in the invisible.” By the mid-19th century, for the most part that faith had been lost. This critic is so remote from his ancestors he cannot even envision the literal Main Street. Hawthorne laments this loss of imagination likewise in his credo “The Artist of the Beautiful”: “This is the calamity of men whose spiritual part dies out of them and leaves the grosser understanding to assimilate them more and more to the things of which alone it can take cognizance.”

In early New England the pious “democratic” Puritan, apotheosized in Endicott, prevailed over the aristocratic Cavalier typified in Thomas Morton of Merry Mount, as Hawthorne shows in “The Maypole of Merry Mount” (1836). In the present, the overbearing materialist has succeeded the aristocrat as the adversary of the democratic artist. “Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors,” says the artist, “and let each successive generation thank Him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages.” The dissociated materialist in blue-tinted glasses, similar in effect to the minister’s black veil, wants his money back.

The artist symbolizes the beginning of the New England Puritan era with the corpse of a giant tree representing the fallen Indian culture “buried in the new vegetation that is born of its decay.” The displacement of the Indians is both natural and providential. It is Fall, the season of Thanksgiving, and John Endicott, the archetypal Puritan leader in Hawthorne, has arrived in Salem.

The witchcraft “madness” that began in about December 1691 originated in the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, as is dramatized in “Young Goodman Brown.” It caused the collapse of the Puritan theocracy. Yet traditional virtues of the Puritans survived, as in the person of Benjamin Franklin. The end of the Calvinist Puritan era, the seminal phase of New England’s first organic cultural life cycle, is symbolized in “Main Street” by the Great Snow of 1717, famous “for the mountain-drifts in which it buried the whole country.” The burial of Puritan gloom under sunlit winter snow is a grandiose metaphor for the inundation of Calvinist Puritanism by the Enlightenment—bright and cold and glittering. Main Street, the metaphor of American social progress, vanishes under domination by the periwigged British aristocracy. By 1717, the Puritan spirit of independence is ostensibly extinguished.

The Enlightenment displaced gloomy Calvinism and brightened the land with rationalism, but it sanctioned aristocracy and British colonialism. The Puritan spirit of independence was “democratic” to a limited degree and deficient in the natural sympathy essential to a truly democratic spirit, which derived like the rosebush outside Hester’s prison from “the deep heart of Nature.” The rose is an icon of natural sympathy and is also a traditional symbol of Christ. Hawthorne named one of his daughters Rose.

Rationalists like the critic in “Main Street” lack heart and soul. The way through the spiritual winter of rationalist colonialism preceding the American Revolution was through a “cold and desolate expanse” tinged with the “faintest and most ethereal rose-color.”

This 18th-century phase of New England history is allegorized in “Edward Fane’s Rosebud,” where Young Rose, living in colonial times, embodies democratic promise, sympathy and piety, as opposed to aristocratic decadence, prejudice and pride. The burial of the past is an illusion. The Puritan spirit survives beneath the “frozen crust.” In the Spring of New England history, Main Street will emerge again and the American Revolution will flower: “One turn of the crank shall melt away the snow from the Main Street, and show the trees in their full foliage, the rose-bushes in bloom.” All four of Hawthorne’s romances end likewise with a mythic prefiguration of progress to come.

The sketch does not extend any further in time. The showman’s panorama machine breaks down as if from the increasing strain of the allegory. The artist wanted most of all to show his audience Main Street in the present and the future: “The scenes to come were far better than the past.” Progress continues in “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle.” Then in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and “Howe’s Masquerade” the spirit of independence that leads to the American Revolution is represented by Puritans.

Michael Hollister (2015)