

ANALYSIS

“The Gentle Boy” (1832)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

“The Gentle Boy” dramatizes the historical persecution of the early Quakers, who began to appear in New England in 1656. It displays most clearly two of Hawthorne’s main themes: (1) the need to balance the head and the heart; and (2) the evil of “pernicious principles” in ideologies such as Calvinism and early Quakerism that imbalance and divide the soul, leading to inhumanity and perhaps to damnation, which is “eternal alienation from the good and the true,” as exemplified by the Calvinists Young Goodman Brown, Parson Hooper and “The Man of Adamant.” The fanatical Quaker mother, Catherine, is comparable to Anne Hutchinson, who was exiled for heresy in 1637, and to Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Illustrated with drawings by Sophia Hawthorne, “The Gentle Boy” is the sentimental and ironic story of Ibrahim, Quaker child of a martyred father and a banished mother. He is not more than six years old, the innocent victim of Quaker fanaticism on the one hand and of Puritan brutality on the other. He is found weeping on his father’s fresh grave by Tobias Pearson, an exceptional Puritan who “possessed a comprehensive heart, which not even religious prejudice could harden into stone.” The heart of Tobias “prompted him, like the speaking of an inward voice, to take the little outcast home, and be kind unto him.”

Tobias and Dorothy take in the boy, a “sweet infant of the skies,” “a domesticated sunbeam” and a “victim of his own heavenly nature,” who tells tales--romances in fact. Ibrahim was born in “pagan” Turkey and “his oriental name was a mark of gratitude for the good deeds of an unbeliever.” Hawthorne transcends his Christianity with the ironic contrast between the kindness of some Muslims and the cruelty of these Puritans, who persecute the boy. Puritan children even pelt him with stones. “The heathen savage would have given him to eat of his scanty morsel, and to drink of his birchen cup; but Christian men, alas! had cast him out to die.” The Puritans have iron hearts and turn their children into “baby-fiends” who almost beat the Christ-evoking child to death.

Dorothy is outside the iron cage of Puritan dogma--Calvinism--and “like a verse of fireside poetry.” The hearth is an iconic image identifying her as a prefigured Victorian angel in the house: “Her very aspect proved that she was blameless.” Her opposite is Catherine the fanatical Quaker mother, a Dark Lady with “raven hair” and “mighty passions” who rises in the Puritan meetinghouse and denounces the Governor and all those present, “giving evidence of an imagination hopelessly entangled with her reason... Hatred and revenge now wrapped themselves in the garb of piety...and her denunciations had an almost hellish bitterness.” The wild rebel is banished into the wilderness and Ibrahim wants to go with his mother, who has neglected him. “My heart was withered,” she says, “yea, dead with thee...” Her mind has a “momentary sense of its errors, and made her know how far she had strayed from duty in following the dictates of a wild fanaticism.” Dorothy takes the boy’s hand and offers to be his mother. “The two females, as they held each a hand of Ibrahim, formed a practical allegory; it was rational piety and unbridled fanaticism contending for the empire of a young heart.”

Catherine hears a voice within that tells her to “break the bonds of natural affection” and abandon her child--a high crime to Victorians. She leaves “poor Ibrahim to pine and droop like a cankered rosebud; his mother to wander on a mistaken errand, neglectful of the holiest trust which can be committed to a woman.” Years later she returns one stormy night to the Pearson cottage, just in time for the death of Ibrahim from pining for her. Covered with snow, cold-hearted Catherine ironically accuses Pearson of being a man of cold heart, blames him for Ibrahim’s condition and demands custody--too late. As soon as her child dies in her arms, the self-destructive victim is off again in pursuit of persecution. Her fanaticism becomes still “wilder by the sundering of all human ties.”

When she finally returns and settles down, it is as if the spirit of Ibrahim “came down from heaven to teach his parent a true religion; her fierce and vindictive nature was softened.” Like the mellowed Hester Prynne, she returns to the scene of her shame, is pitied by those who once had persecuted her, and is eventually buried beside the gentle boy. Her conciliation with the Pearsons implies an ultimate acceptance of their tolerant spirit and rational Christianity, balancing head and heart. Only the sacrifice of an innocent too heavenly for this world is enough to teach the wayward fanatic a “true religion.” In their behavior depicted here, the Puritans and the early Quakers are both evil in their opposite excesses of head and heart--out of balance in a sadistic/masochistic relationship. Hawthorne saw early Quakerism as inherently fanatical, whereas the occasional fanaticism of the Puritans was a perversion of their principles, in which zeal and fear overcame reason and sympathy, as in the witch trials of 1692.

Michael Hollister (2015)