

# A Critical Study of the “Sin” in Hawthorne’s Short Stories

Shuna Xing

Foreign Languages’ School Linyi University, Shandong Province, China  
ruthxing@163.com

**Abstract** - Deeply influenced by the family life and the Puritan belief of Depravity, Hawthorne held that every ego had the nature of Devil. As the first American psycho-analytical writer, Hawthorne used to probe the nature of human heart in his works. This paper, by studying the theme and the artistic features of his famous short stories, is meant to reveal Hawthorne’s common theme—probing into the essence of sin

**Index Terms** - Hawthorne; short story; evil; sin

## I. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), the greatest romantic novelist of the nineteenth century in American literature, is regarded as one of the pioneers of short stories. His tales “belong to the highest region of art.” Like Poe, in his over one hundred short stories, Hawthorne usually explored the dark recesses of the human heart, as Herman Melville’s remark of his greatest achievement which is the best description of darkness. *The Minister’s Black Veil*, *Young Goodman Brown*, *Rappaccini’s Daughter*, *The Birthmark* are four of his famous short stories, and also are the good examples of Hawthorne’s common theme-probing into the essence of the sin.

*The Minister’s Black Veil* and *Young Goodman Brown* belong to the kind of Hawthorne’s works, which insists that one must recognize and courageously combat the evil possibilities in every human heart. In these works, Hawthorne strongly condemned the Puritan belief that men were more evil than good, and that most men were truly damned and that man should be suspicious of everyone, dwelling on the livelihood of evil everywhere. These two powerful stories develop different aspects of this condemnation.

Another kind of tales are about diabolical intellects—*Rappaccini’s Daughter* and *Birthmark*—which, in the name of some insane abstraction, destroy the life that they have ceased to feel.

*Rappaccini’s Daughter* is the story of “a mad scientist” working in isolation on a completely unethical experiment involving poisonous plants; the hero in *Birthmark*, Aylmer is also a much knowledgeable scientist. He tries to demolish his wife’s birthmark that is a small crimson hand on her face. But what he has done makes his wife die.

From any one of the four tales, we can find Hawthorne’s creation thought—the abstract sin. The former two imply that evil exists in everyone’s heart. While the latter two shows the evil of science. In a sense, the darkness enshrouds all joys in Hawthorne’s works. In this article, I will discuss Hawthorne’s exploration in abstract sin though studying Hawthorne’s life and through analyzing his short stories.

## II. The Source of Hawthorne’s Thought

Hawthorne’s works are famous of ambiguity, which always examples the complication of the author’s thinking, based on his complicated life.

### A. Hawthorne’s life

Bore in Salem, a declining town of Massachusetts, on July 4, 1804, Hawthorne was himself the descendent of Puritan worthies, two of his ancestors won notoriety in the Puritan theocracy of seventeenth century New England, which he took shame upon himself.

When he was four years old, his father died, leaving the widow and the children behind shifting for themselves. His mother in deep mourning spent almost all the rest of her lifetime in seclusion. The members of family even did not have a dinner together. They lived in their private bedroom. Hawthorne never commented directly on the strange lonely life instituted by his mother’s withdrawal, but it had influenced the author’s spirit and formed his lonely habit, which proved his psychological analysis in his works.

He spent his collage life (1821-1825) in Bowdon, where he made friends with Franklin Pierce, the later president of America. He described himself of this period as “an idle student”. This “Oberon” student, his nickname for his shy, elusive ways, often joined the friend’s organization. But his friend did not feel he was quite one of them. Cilley, a classmate of his wrote: “I love Hawthorne, I admire him, but I do not know him, he lives in a mysterious word of thought and imagination, which he never permits me to enter.”

After graduation, he returned to Salem and lived a life of isolation and seclusion that lasted twelve years. During these years, he read widely, because further acquainted with local history, and prepared him to be the spiritual temper of colonial New England. His *Twice-Told Tales* (1837) gave him fame, and this success encouraged him to explore in literature just as he wrote to Longfellow: “I have carried apart from the main current of life... I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon, and now I come to find the key to let me out...”

In the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, transcendentalism appeared. But transcendentalism did not touch him so much. It could not arouse him, for enthusiasm and optimism were both foreign to his nature. Hawthorne did feel that Puritans’ understanding of human nature was far deeper than the shallow optimism of the transcendentalism, even though transcendentalism also influenced his creation very much, especially the usage of symbol. Then he returned to Puritanism.

## B. Puritanism

Hawthorne is both an inheritor and critic of New England Puritanism. He was born in the old Puritan family and haunted by the spell of his ancestors' misdeeds. He was in lifelong opposition against Puritanism, as a theology and a system of ethics. He had thrown over its Calvinism and he gave his best imagination to depicting the terrible results of its austerities. He showed mercy on the person persecuted by Calvinism. *The Gentle Boy* aptly reminds us that the notoriously puritanical theme of "weaned affections" contains a powerful theological prejudice against what rationalists and romanticists called nature!

Yet, though Hawthorne freed himself from its precepts, he never escaped from the brooding upon sin and the moral life that was the cause of Puritanism and its legacy. The doctrine of original "sin" and entire degenerate rooted in Hawthorne's thought. Puritanism, for him, was a "fortress from which he had escaped and was glad to be gone". The Puritan age and its sure morality was an obsession in his life. Spiritual failures, moral failures, were for him; as for the Puritans, the great theme, and all of his great characters can be described in no other terms.

Hawthorne lived in an age when the dynamic influence of Puritanism was gone and the impact of Romanticism and Transcendentalism was largely felt among the intellectuals. He took sceptical attitude to the new thoughts, but they influenced him. Mixed with the deep-rooted Puritan doctrines, he shaped his own understanding of the root of all kinds of social evils, which he believed is the abstract "sin" in the depth of human heart.

## III. Analysis the "Sin" in Hawthorne's Tales

For long, Hawthorne has been the writher of fiction to work in the moralistic tradition, which can be traced down through such leading novelists like Henry James and William Faulkner. Different from his contemporary novelist in relation to literary themes, Hawthorne shows a great interest in the problem of guilt, and his major novels generally deal with sensational material, like poisoning, murdering, adultery and crime.

The central subject of Hawthorne's major works is the human soul. His exploration of the soul results from his sceptical attitude toward the social reality that is characterized by a rapid change in almost all aspects of social life, and from his ambition to probe into the nature of man.

### A. Through Symbolism and Allegory

Though quite different from the optimistic Emerson, Hawthorne is influenced by the transcendentalist principle. Transcendentalists believe the universe is composed of Nature and the soul. On the one hand, they put emphasis on the spirit, or the over soul, which is regarded as omnipotent and omnipresent. It exists in Nature and man alike and constitutes the chief element of the Universe. On the other hand, the Transcendentalists offer a new conception of Nature far from being pure matter. Nature is symbolic of the spirit, or God. The physical word is a symbol of the spiritual. Hence the

symbolism and allegory are used effectively in his works. Hawthorne believes that all truth that matters is inner and externalities are inherently deceptive. He tends to apprehend truth through emblems and with his deep ideas in simple and even mysterious symbols.

### 1) Scenes used as Symbols

*Young Goodman Brown* puts the capstone on Hawthorne's literary use of this peculiar Puritan theme of "spectre evidence", as some pitiable yet far too culpably innocent protagonist sees absolutely everyone at a witch meeting that only he has verifiably set out to attend. "Evil is the nature of mankind, evil must be your only happiness," which this tale is to explore.

Rooted deeply in the doctrine of Calvinism—predestination, original sin and total depravity, Hawthorne, in his tale describes many gloomy scenes to show his evil themes. The forest, which is always used as a symbol in Hawthorne's works, is described as "the whole forest was people with frightful sounds, the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts and the yell of Indians; while, sometimes, the wind tolled like a distant church bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the travellers, as if all, nature were laughing him to scorn." The forest is like a hell where witches gather, where souls are sighed away to the devil. It is symbolic of the word of darkness and evil, where darkness and gloom predominate and where one can find his way only by following a narrow twisting path.

The way Brown runs to the meeting is also described as the road to the hell, "a dreary road darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind. It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such solitude, that the traveller knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks, and thick boughs overhead..."

### 2) Characters used as Symbols

Besides the description of atmosphere, the theme also can be found out through the fates of characters. Faith's name clearly indicates something of that quality, but the young wife's misgiving and pink ribbons are also real. Furthermore, her husband's loss of his wife implies his loss of his own faith. "My Faith id gone." Brown cried in the forest. This faith implies nit only his wife, but also the faith f the religion and human. At the beginning of the tale, the author said: "Faith, as the wife was aptly named". This Faith symbolizes Brown's original faith, which becomes collapsed and lost when he meets with Satan and becomes suspicious of the goodness. Brown has been aware of his misbehavior on the way to the meeting, and also wants to turn back. However, He gradually loses himself when he finds more and more respected people get—together in the meeting. The sable from (Satan) shouts the secret deeds to Brown :“how hoary bearded elders of the church have whispered wanton words to the young maids of their households; how many a woman, eager for widow's weds, has given her husband a drink at bedtime, and let him

sleep his last sleep in her bosom; how beardless youths have made haste to inherit their fathers' wealth; and how fair damsels—blush not, sweet ones—have dug little graves in the garden, and bidden me, the sole guest, to an infants funeral.” The author continues to tell the readers in the devil’s voice that the crime has been committed in all the places and evil is the nature of mankind. The pink ribbon on Faith’s hair, which maybe originally acts as the symbol of happy newly marriage, is also at last situated in the forest, which is the symbol of the black word.

Even Goodman (good man), a very kind young man, who symbolizes the common people, could lose his faith and derailed spiritually. From this, everyone will find his own evil in the core of his heart.

Such kind of symbols and allegory can be found in the other stories. The black veil stands for some wickedness of man; a garden of poisonous flowers represents hell; a marble heart symbolizes an individual unpardonable sin.

### B. Through Image of the Devil

In Hawthorne’s works, the heroes are always haunted by some sense of sin and evil, which is expressed through some different kind of devil images. One is the witch (the Devil) in *Bible*, which tempts man and gets man’s soul. The second one appears as devil in spirit, which makes the conflict between heart and head, the good and the bad. The third one is in the field of natural philosophy, which intends to destroy the natural laws.

The famous image of devil is in *Young Goodman Brown*. At the beginning, we have an expression of devil from what Brown’s dreaded inner world “what if the devil himself should be at my every elbow.” Then we see Satan (the Devil) image as an old traveller with a staff like a great black snake. This image reminds us the evil serpent in *Bible*, who tempts Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruits. From Brown’s words “faith kept me back a while.” We know Brown and Satan must have a date before, and Satan attempts to tempt Brown, a simple and faithful young man. The mysterious misbehaviour makes Brown have a strong desire to try. The desire is the great scourge of a Puritan, the temptation of Satan, the expression of original sin. So Brown must not be evil, but this desire becomes bewitched.

Satan and Brown bear a considerable resemblance though Satan perhaps has an indescribable air of a king. We can see some of Brown on Satan (the Devil), which also centres on the evil theme—evil exists everywhere. Attached by the Devil, Brown runs to the mysterious meeting. More familiar people he meets, nearer he reaches to the depravity, and farther away from his faith. At last, Satan reaches his aim, even though Brown dose not sell his soul to the Devil. However, Brown knows well the misbehaviour of the people in his life. All of these make him despaired, and he not himself.

Anther kind of devil in Hawthorne’s works is the devil of intellects. Rappaccini in *Rappaccini’s Daughter* and Aylmer

in *Birthmark* determine to create their own ideal. They are both the evil doctors. Rappaccini makes his daughter all poisonous in order to control and destroy the law of universe. Aylmer tries to demolish the fatal flow of humanity stamped by nature. What they both do are inhumane and must be punished by God. Hawthorne thought their evil action came from the evil science and knowledge, which, in fact, have promoted the development of society.

## IV . Conclusion

As a writer, Hawthorne sets out quite consciously to exploit antiquarian enthusiasm and his understanding of the colonial history of New England. He is absorbed by the enigmas of evil and of moral responsibility, interwoven with man’s destiny in nature and in eternity, but in this interest he has his own way. He draws on Puritan orthodoxy, not to study them, but to examine individual and collective consciousness under the pressure of anguish and suffering. He seeks to dramatize the relation between society and powerful individuals; to probe such themes as the individual’s relation to sin, guilt and retribution; to explore the mysterious human heart; to examine characters caught in the grip of the past; his writing is marked by its introspective depth, by its urge to get inside the character he creates.

As the first American psycho—analytical writer, he has used his own techniques to explore the human heart and to probe the essence of sin. The symbols and good description of scenes serve the theme very well. All of these have a fullest play in *The Minister’s Black Veil*, *Young Goodman Brown* and others.

## References

- [1] Brooks, Van Wych. *The Flowering of New England*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1936.
- [2] Canby, Henry Seidel. *Classic Americans*. New York: Russell & Russell. Inc., 1959.
- [3] Hawthorne, Nathanie. *Selected Tales and Sketches*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- [4] Horton, Rod. W. & Edwards, Herbert W. *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought*. New Jersey: Prentice—Hall, Inc. English Cliffs, 1991.
- [5] Li, Jin & Qin, Yaqin. *American Literature*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press, 1999.
- [6] Maslow, Abraham. H. *Towards a Psychology of Being*. Princeton: Divan Nostrand Company, 1962.
- [7] Mcmichael, Geogre. *A Theology of American Literature*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990.
- [8] Mednick, Fred. *An Introduction to American Literature*. Kaifeng: Henan Nan University Press, 1985.
- [9] Perkins, George. *The American Tradition Literature*. New York: Random House, 1985.
- [10] Rubinstein, Annette. T. *American Literature Root and Flower*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press, 1988.
- [11] Spiller, Robert. E. *The Cycle of American Literature*. New York: Macmillan Punishing Co., Inc., 1955.