

# Individuality as a Force for Destruction in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Ambitious Guest"

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**Abstract-** Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Ambitious Guest" has been regarded by various readers as a tale of natural sublimity and a defeat of humankind under crushing forces of Nature. However, Hawthorne's captivating writing leaves space for multiple interpretations, and bearing in mind that Hawthorne belongs to Dark Romanticism this short story can be regarded as a defeat of individual heart against collective mind. In this story, Hawthorne, a great symbolist of his time, carefully developed the plot and the characters in order to portray how individual striving for progress and betterment can destroy a harmonious family that is in peace with natural order. Hawthorne uses a complete stranger and turns him into a force for destruction, as the character deeply disturbs the philosophy of each family member and changes the close-knit structure of the family into a scattered group of unsatisfied individuals who yearn for change, which results in a natural catastrophe. "The Ambitious Guest" represents Hawthorne's warning against individualism and yearning for progress, and it praises the institution of family as a building block upon which humankind is built.

**Keywords-** Dark Romanticism, Individualism, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Natural destruction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a nineteenth century American writer, is regarded as one of the most prominent authors of the time, gaining literary fame and appreciation by his short tales and romances, The Scarlet Letter being the most recognisable. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, in a Puritan family, Hawthorne's writing often addresses the religious zeal of his ancestors (Eisenman, 2011)[4], and in his stories he portrays what he believes is the core of human nature – frailty and limitation, which represent insurmountable obstacles to social and moral reforms (White, 1999)[16]. In Hawthorne's mind, the most distinguished feature of human nature is darkness, which leaves him very cautious about human reform and capabilities of man to achieve meaningful progress (Georgieva, 2009)[5]. Hawthorne forms this view on human nature based on the idealism of the Puritans, which makes him a moral historian, unwilling to idealise about human soul (White, 1999)[16]. In Young Goodman Brown, for instance, Hawthorne clearly denounces optimistic hopes of men to rely on each other: "Depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream. Now are ye undeceived! Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness!" Religious hypocrisy of the Puritans is also present in "The May Pole of Merry Mount", in which Hawthorne portrays a dark world of Puritan jurisdiction, in which his ancestors did not have a flexible mind towards other people, and thus spread corruption on earth (White, 1999)[16]. Hawthorne describes them in a most unfavourable manner: "Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, most

dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the cornfield, till evening made it prayer time again. Their weapons were always at hand, to shoot down the straggling savage."

This religious intolerance is also presence in Endicott, providing to Hawthorne the firmest foundation for his belief in the evil of man: "Come, my stout hearts!" quoth he, drawing his sword. "Let us show these poor heathen that we can handle our weapons like men of might. Well for them, if they put us not to prove it in earnest!"

Furthermore, the most obvious condemnation of the Puritan community can be observed in The Scarlet Letter, "which, probably more than anything or anyone else, has perpetuated the less than favourable image of the Puritans as grim, narrowminded killjoys (White, 1999)[16]."

Apart from his Puritan background, which presented before him the grim side of human kind, Hawthorne was also influenced by the Transcendentalist movement in America, which was led by Emerson (Eisenman, 2011)[4]. The Transcendentalists believed in inherent human goodness, which represents a powerful force for moral laws: in abandonment of tradition and customs, by seeking for the whole of morality and epistemology inside the human soul lies the salvation of humanity (Manzari, 2012)[12]. Therefore, this aching for progress and novelty is the core belief of American Transcendentalism, because for a man to unveil the mystery of existence, it is necessary to "live through his own experience and interaction with the world", and "new poetry, new art and philosophy and religious theories" ought to be invented (Eisenman, 2011)[4]. Therefore, the Transcendentalists held a

pantheist point of view, seeking the divine inside a human soul (Manzari, 2012)[12]. Hawthorne was evidently influenced by this philosophy when he wrote “Earth’s Holocaust”, “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, and “The Artist of the Beautiful”, as the stories show a potential for the divine in human soul to shape the world in the right way (Eisenman, 2011)[4]. In *Earth’s Holocaust*, Hawthorne presents the human kind in search of a solution for an all-encompassing human reform, and asserts an essentially transcendental belief in the power of the human heart:

How sad a truth – if true it were – that Man’s age-long endeavor for perfection had served only to render him the mockery of the Evil Principle, from the fatal circumstance of an error at the very root at the matter! The Heart – the Heart – there was the little, boundless sphere, wherein existed the original wrong, of which the crime and misery of this outward world were merely types. Purify that inner sphere; and the many shapes of evil that haunt the outward, and which now seem almost our only realities, will turn to shadowy phantoms, and vanish of their own accord. But, if we go no deeper than the Intellect, and strive, with merely that feeble instrument, to discern and rectify what is wrong, our whole accomplishment will be a dream; so unsubstantial, that it matters little whether the bonfire, which I have so faithfully described, were what we choose to call a real event, and a flame what would scorch the finger – or only a phosphoric radiance, and a parable of my own brain!

He confirms the Transcendentalist ideology of the human heart as the primary force for change, thus deifying Man, presenting a pure Man to be the epistemological authority. However, it is in the late romance, *The Blithedale Romance*, that Hawthorne denounces this belief in inherent human goodness and the potential of human soul for moral change (White, 1999)[16]. He believed that utopian aspirations, an example of which is the Brook Farm which he inhabited for a period of time (Eisenman, 2011)[4], cannot bring about social reform, and the Brook Farm (the attempt of the Transcendentalists to actualise their beliefs) resembles a similar Puritan community that sought to establish man’s regency on Earth, which ultimately failed (White, 1999 I)[16]. Furthermore, even though Hawthorne renounced the Puritan ideology as the epistemological foundation for understanding the world and critiqued its failed ideology, he embraced their sense of human depravity as the main argument against progressive potential of human soul:

By turning to New England history in much of his fiction, Hawthorne not only develops a moral history of that region, but also uses that setting to paint what he believes to be a picture of human nature that is more grounded in earthly experience. Hawthorne also finds something in that history which helps him articulate his view of human nature the Calvinistic doctrine of depravity. (White, 1999)[16]

Hawthorne believed that progress, which is grounded in the individual soul, does not lead to perfection of the heart, and he embraced Puritan cautiousness of the human

authority (Trepanier, 2003)[15]. Therefore, his view on man and nature was rather conservative and pessimistic, despite his early outpourings of Transcendental thought, for he deemed that natural, God’s laws were supreme to those of individual epiphanies of the human heart (Rowshanzamir, 2013)[14]. One other short story can further prove the point of Hawthorne’s cautious approach to individuality and its power for good – *The Ambitious Guest*, in which Hawthorne criticizes the idea of individual strivings towards progress and develops a reformed Puritan idea of humble family as the ideal form of societal organisation that does not transgress natural laws and which realises its limitations and essential depravity.

## 2. FAILED INDIVIDUALISM AND NATURAL HUMILITY IN “THE AMBITIOUS GUEST”

A terrible incident that occurred in the White Mountains of New Hampshire in 1826, in which the Samuel Willey family was destroyed by a landslide, served as inspiration for Hawthorne to write a short story, although altered, and publish it the *New-England Journal*, in 1835 (Belcher-Rankin, 2008)[1]. The story is rather a simple one: a family that is situated beneath a mountain welcomes a stranger during a storm and suffers destruction when a landslide begins to tumble down from the mountain. However, Hawthorne carefully weaved the setting and the characters into a coherent, intertwined unity in order to portray how actions of a progressive, self-thinking man can make disturbance in nature, and thus bring destruction upon his fellow human beings. In contrasting a lonely stranger and a warm, happy family, Hawthorne portrays how individualism destroys the natural harmony that kept the community of the family intact.

Hunnef (2013)[11] makes an interesting claim for the gradual bad influence of the stranger on the family, which is accompanied by foreshadowing in the form of natural events, by stating that the stranger’s character and deeds in the house tear apart the order of the family. The Nature and the characters are closely connected in the story, which is accentuated by Hawthorne from the very beginning. The narrator describes a peaceful, harmonious family which is “gathered round their hearth” (Hawthorne, 1987, p.162)[6], thus forming a uniform community that enjoys its humble life:

The faces of the father and mother had a sober gladness; the children laughed; the eldest daughter was the image of Happiness at seventeen; and the aged grandmother, who sat knitting in the warmest place, was the image of Happiness grow old. They had found the ‘herb, heart’s ease’, in the bleakest spot of all New-England. (Hawthorne, 1987, p.162)[6]

That image of content and safety within the house is contrasted with the romantic, harsh Nature that surrounds them:

They dwelt in a cold spot and a dangerous one; for a mountain towered above their heads, so steep, that the

stones would often rumble down its sides, and startle them at midnight. (Hawthorne, 1987. p. 162)[6]

This juxtaposition of a content family and a harsh mountain above them creates a sense of natural bond between two entities: the close-knit structure of the family, with its humble ways, is at peace with the harsh nature: the natural law is obeyed, and the Nature does not harm them. However, this harmonious bond between the two unities is threatened when a stranger approaches the scene.

Hawthorne uses natural processes and turns them into a character, with its own sense of mind and action. Therefore, the first herald of a catastrophe that threatens to destroy the family is sent by the Nature, as a warning:

The daughter had just uttered some simple jest, that filled them all with mirth, when the wind came through the Notch and seemed to pause before their cottage – rattling at the door, with a sound of wailing and lamentation, before it passed into the valley. (Hawthorne, 1987, p.163)[6]

The stranger's appearance at the door is juxtaposed with the sounds of the dreary blast, as it "wailed as he was entering, and went moaning away from the door" (163). The harmonious bond is about to be severed, and Hawthorne does not conceal the obvious foreshadowing. It is interesting to note that this close-knit community in the house was not distanced from outward contact, as they "held daily converse with the world." (163) However, Hawthorne singles out this particular man as a threat to society, as if his being personifies the catastrophe, and his influence is disastrous to the community, as suggested by Hunnef. Hawthorne describes the stranger as melancholy and despondent, but as he enters the warmth of the community, he attains more positive facial features (163). Here Hawthorne clearly presents a difference of character in two different entities: the simplicity and humility of the family brings natural happiness, which is contrasted with the despondency of the individual.

The natural disturbance is amplified as the stranger begins to penetrate deeper into the family circle, and Hawthorne again uses the Nature as a herald of impending doom:

The frank-hearted stranger had just drawn his chair to the fire, when something like a heavy footstep was heard without, rushing down the steep side of the mountain, as with long and rapid strides, and taking such a leap, in passing the cottage, as to strike the opposite precipice. (Hawthorne, 1987. p.164)[6]

The response of the father is also interesting, as he maintains the awareness of the necessary obedience to natural laws, which ought not to be broken:

'The Old Mountain has thrown a stone at us, for fear we should forget him,' said the landlord, recovering himself. 'He sometimes nods his head, and threatens to come down; but we are old neighbors, and agree together pretty well, upon the whole.' (Hawthorne, 1987. p.164)[6]

The destruction of the family, heralded by the Nature, begins with the outpourings of the stranger's heart to them; as he transcends the conservative, humble ways and seeks to achieve greatness. Hawthorne seems to contrast man's

ambition for greatness to the natural law: as the stranger confirms the Transcendentalist ideal of pureness of the human heart and the yearning for glory, the catastrophe approaching the humble family starts to grow in strength – reform that springs from the individual heart, contrasted to the natural ways of the family group, threatens to destroy human society. This contrast between the two world views is best expressed when, after the stranger talks of high ambition, and building a lasting monument to testify to his greatness, the daughter replies with words of humbleness:

'It is better to sit here, by this fire,' answered the girl, blushing, 'and be comfortable and contented, though nobody thinks about us.' (Hawthorne, 1987. p.166)[6]

However, when the idea of human greatness enters the minds of humble people, that natural piety, so close to that of Puritanism, is threatened, and the family structure begins to fall apart, as its members, by striving towards greatness, begin to feel dissatisfaction with their lives. The first member of the family to be caught by the fever is the father:

'But I was wishing we had a good farm, in Bartlett, or Bethlehem, or Littleton, or some other township round the White Mountains; but not where they could tumble on our heads. I should want to stand well with my neighbors, and be called 'Squire, and sent to General Court, for a term or two; for a plain, honest man may do as much good there as a lawyer.' (Hawthorne, 1987. p.166)[6]

Hawthorne describes this strange talk of human greatness as "infection", leaving no doubt for the reader of its true nature:

One and all seemed to have caught the infection from the fire-side circle, and were outvying each other, in wild wishes, and childish projects of what they would do, when they came to be men and women. (Hawthorne, 1987. p.167)

The last resort of salvation lies in the innocent children, as their reply to this talk of ambition is to flee to Nature and there find peace:

'I'll tell you what I wish, mother,' cried he. 'I want you and father and grandma'm, and all of us, and the stranger too, to start right away, and go and take a drink out of the basin of the Flume!' (Hawthorne, 1987. p.167)[6]

Unpolluted with unnatural thought, their reply is to drink from one of the basins of the Nature, and thus heal themselves of the disease of ambition. However, the family structure has already been shattered, and nothing can stop the impending catastrophe, not even the innocence of the children. It is too late for preserving the family, as the daughter also catches the "infection":

But it happened, that a light cloud passed over the daughter's spirit; she looked gravely into the fire, and drew a breath that was almost a sigh. (Hawthorne, 1987. p.168)[6]

Nothing more can restore the harmony of the family: its members begin to express dissatisfaction with their way of living, which Hawthorne "punishes" by his "character", the Nature, as he repeats the foreshadowing signals of doom:



But, while they spoke softly, and he was watching the happy sadness, the lightsome shadows, the shy yearnings of a maiden's nature, the wind, through the Notch, took a deeper and drearier sound. (...) There was a wail, along the road, as if a funeral were passing. (Hawthorne, 1987. p.168-169)[6]

The last of the family to express the wish for human monument is the grandmother, who talks about nice linen for a grave (169), to which that yearning stranger, the cause of the distress of both the mountain and the family, replies:

'Old and young, we dream of graves and monuments,' murmured the stranger-youth. 'I wonder how mariners feel, when the ship is sinking, and they, unknown and undistinguished, are to be buried together in the ocean – that wide and nameless sepulchre!' (Hawthorne, 1987. p.170)[6]

It is at this point that their fate is sealed: the last foundation of the harmonious family is brought to ground, and the ambition for individual greatness has penetrated into its core – a crime against the Nature, to which she replies in moaning tones:

For a moment, the old woman's ghastly conception so engrossed the minds of her hearers, that a sound, abroad in the night, rising like the roar of a blast, had grown broad, deep, and terrible, before the fated group were conscious of it. (Hawthorne, 1987. p.170)[6]

If the previous heralds were mild and simply warnings, these are terrible and awe-striking signs of rage on the part of the Nature, whom Hawthorne gives an authority to differentiate between good and evil, and the authority winds against individual yearnings in the form of a landslide. It is also interesting that Hawthorne describes the group as "fated", as if nothing else awaited them after their breaking up the harmony that they have enjoined before.

The landslide destroyed the family in its attempt to transcend the mountain, and invent new ways, and Hawthorne, when describing their downfall, writes both literally and figuratively of the reason of their destruction: The victims rushed from their cottage, and sought refuge in what they deemed a safer spot – where, in contemplation of such an emergency, a sort of barrier had been reared. Alas! they had quitted their security, and fled right into the pathway of destruction. (Hawthorne, 1987. p.170)[6]

Hawthorne does not give the characters any monument, as the defeat of individualism leaves them crushed under the mountain, never to be found, thus establishing the sublime authority of the Nature over the yearning individual. He concludes with a powerful message against the transcendental ideal of human divinity, clearly denouncing the idea of human individualism as a source for change, rather deeming it as a source for destruction:

Wo, for the high-souled youth, with his dream of Earthly Immortality! His name and person utterly unknown; his history, his way of life, his plans, a mystery never to be solved; his death and his existence, equally a doubt!

Whose was the agony of that death-moment? (Hawthorne, 1987. p.171)[6]

### 3. REVIVED PURITANISM AND NATURAL LAW

What seems to be the prevalent theme in "The Ambitious Guest" is natural piety and its influence in maintaining order in the family, which is one of the corner stones of Puritan belief in man's depravity and necessity in relying upon higher power. The stranger, with his self-reliance and fantastic yearnings changes the mindset of the family: the family is transformed from a humble community with strong familial ties into a group of dysfunctional individuals who begin to be dissatisfied with life and want to escape from their abode. In the end, all of them are punished severely, and the author makes sure that their bodies are not found, and that no lasting monuments (except the story itself) are built for them. This attitude towards strong individualism is very similar to the Puritan ideas about the role of humility in preserving one's connection with God. In his essay on humility, Romaine (n.d.) praises the role of this character trait in a man's life: "He gives grace to the humble, because the humble give Him all the glory." Similar stance on humility is presented by Hodge (n.d.): "But if there is utter humility, you have the sign of the true spirit.", and also by Edwards (n.d.): "If we then consider ourselves as the followers of the meek and lowly and crucified Jesus, we shall walk humbly before God and man all the days of our life on earth." Being humble is the essential quality of a good Puritan, and as opposed to that, being self-assured is harmful for an individual, because of his inability to comprehend reality, which leads to erring against God's law, as Romaine (n.d.) observes: "Pride lifts up the creature against the Creator, and puts it upon seeking happiness out of God; this is resisting His sovereignty, attacking His providence, and opposing His Law." It is exactly this idea of human depravity and erring against natural law that is present in the story: the foreshadowing of events that is exemplified by response of Nature to the stranger's aspirations confirms the idea that the characters transgress the laws of a Higher Power. It is interesting that Hawthorne uses the adjective "ambitious" for describing the stranger: in the Puritan theology, ambition is not a positive thing, as Edwards (n.d.) notes: "Humility tends to prevent an aspiring and ambitious behaviour amongst men." Therefore, it is evident that Hawthorne employed some Puritan beliefs about man's essential depravity and necessity for being humble in writing the story, which brings him much closer to a reformed Puritan than a transcendentalist, as suggested by Trepanier (2003)[15]. "The Ambitious Guest" demonstrates Hawthorne's reluctance towards social change, and it confirms the claim of Hawthorne's contempt towards progressive ideas, due to man's deprave nature and natural laws that need to be obeyed. For Hawthorne, man's consciousness is not a valid epistemological source of knowledge, and self-reliance

works against the established laws of Nature. Therefore, even though "The Ambitious Guest" is not really propaganda for Puritanism, it does praise the Puritan ideas of humility and man's depravity, and it denounces the Transcendentalist ideal of self-reliance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Nathaniel Hawthorne was torn between his ancestral Puritan ideals and the Transcendentalist movement in America; however, he developed a dark, pessimistic world view, and embraced the belief of human depravity. In "The Ambitious Guest", he protests against progressive ideas of individuals, contrasting them to humble, natural piety of family, which, as a founding block of society, is in danger because of the ever-spreading idea of human individual power. By using symbols, Hawthorne portrayed how individual progress does not always lead to betterment, and that human beings must submit to greater natural laws, rather than regard themselves as the source of divine transformative power.

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