Tennessee Tech University

Creation and Community

Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" and Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

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19th Century American Literature (ENGL 4320)

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Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe created many works depicting the role of the artist and the nature of creation. Considered in combination with each other, Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" and Poe's "The Oval Portrait" present the duality of the artist figure: Owen Warland represents the ideal artist who celebrates and pays tributes to Beauty, while the painter of the oval portrait embodies the demonic artist who seeks only to glorify himself through art. These stories address not only the tension between the artist and his work of art, but the tension between the artist and the outside world.

An exquisitely beautiful and meaningful tale that critic Mary Sue Schriber calls "Hawthorne's butterfly, or his creative imagination in tangible form" (616), "The Artist of the Beautiful" contains Hawthorne's "most definitive statements about the position of the artist in the modern world" (Moyer 295). An artist's role encompasses his relationship with his community, and the importance of community as a theme in Hawthorne's fiction

cannot be overstated. Millicent Bell writes:

> Like all great writers, Hawthorne was interested in human problems; even his studies of artists are, ultimately, but examples of his convictions concerning sin and redemption, tragedy and happiness. The artist was, to Hawthorne, primarily a man, susceptible to certain temptations and a certain fate common to many men. (Bell ix-x)

Hawthorne believed that the artist, like any other human, needs kinship with his community to remain spiritually fulfilled, morally righteous, and emotionally satisfied. Artistic success, however, depends on isolation. Owen Warland reconciles this tension by retreating from the outside world during the creative process but returning to it when the time comes to present his art.

Notably, Owen reaches peak artistic fulfillment not at the moment of completing his mechanical butterfly but upon showcasing this masterpiece to his community. By no coincidence does Hawthorne neglect narration of the artist's culmination of his project and instead transports the reader to "the artist, on a winter evening, seeking admittance to Robert Danforth's fireside circle" (Hawthorne 377). During this fireside meeting, the Danforth baby crushes Owen's butterfly, drawing attention to its fragility and enervation as a physical entity: "Set beside the 'apparition of a young child of strength,'

whose strength at last destroys it [Owen's butterfly], it cuts, as the result of a long life of devotion, only a poor figure" (von Abele 40).

Despite the realistic appearance and behaviors of Owen's butterfly, compared to a human baby, Owen's pet project seems frail and lifeless. Owen acknowledges his butterfly's deficiencies. He perceives his work as an admirable but incomplete replication of nature's butterfly, one of God's most delicate and marvelous creatures. Owen seeks to create a work that mirrors life as much as possible, but he has no pretensions of equaling or surpassing the majesty of heaven's creations. Hawthorne writes that "[t]he poet leaves his song half sung, or finishes it, beyond the scope of mortal ears, in a celestial choir" (377); Owen learns to accept not only this reality but the transience of his mechanical butterfly. He knows that all earthly creatures must die, but "as an apprehension of eternity it [his butterfly] cannot be destroyed" (von Abele 37).

The dual purposes of Owen's artistic pursuit are to pay tribute to Annie and to satisfy his own soul's creative yearnings. Thus, when the Danforth baby destroys Owen's masterpiece, the artist does not mourn its loss. He knows that he has already achieved both purposes: Annie (along with Owen) has felt the glow of reconciliation, and Owen has made his vision a reality.

Of course, along the path to realizing his vision, Owen discovers that isolation constitutes the ideal environment for creation. Hawthorne "viewed isolation and a divorce

from the brotherhood of affection as the price of a too exclusive attention to abstract ends" (Bell 109), and Owen learns the high price paid for artistic obsession. Von Abele describes loneliness as "the great Hawthornian catastrophe" (41), and thankfully Owen manages to avert this catastrophe—as well as the catastrophe of an unfulfilled dream. He achieves balance by reintegrating into the community, but only after finishing his solitary work as an artist. The world continues its patterns in his absence, and he finds himself alone, but the community warmly and immediately welcomes him back into the fold.

Owen reaches out to the Danforths and Hovendens, marking the first occasion when the artist has paid a visit rather than received a visit: "Owen moves, in this final scene [by the Danforths' fireside], towards community, towards the natural warmth needed by every human being" (Wohlpart 252). He does so by "[mitigating] his prolonged absence of at least nine months through true sensitivity and warmth" (Wohlpart 252). Making his butterfly a tribute to Annie, the woman he once loved as much as his art, firmly reestablishes his connection with her and the rest of their community.

The community bears no resentment for Owen; it greets him as a friend (perhaps except for the bitter critic, Peter Hovenden). No matter how lonely Owen felt, the community remembered him: "Warland is never completely ignored by his world; in the final scene at Danforth's fireside he is in fact the center of attention, and even during his long years of lonely toil the village watchman at least is aware of his existence"

(Moyer 296). Owen's recognition of his human limitations as an artist, along with the bond he rekindles with humanity, fulfill him.

Far darker than Hawthorne's tale, "The Oval Portrait" is "a moral, even a cautionary, fable about the tragic and dehumanizing effects of artistic obsession" (Freedman 7). Unlike the moral artist Owen Warland, who understands his limitations, the painter of the oval portrait attempts to create life itself. The painter aspires to replicate the beauty and vitality of his wife, one of God's creations who, while fallible and imperfect, was crafted in God's own image. By attempting to immortalize an evanescent being through his art, the painter tries to transcend God's creative power, but the mortal artist's act of creation surrenders human life to its ruinous ends.

Undeniably, the painter knowingly murders his wife in pursuit of artistic achievement. The artist can see the lethal forces of his art; he simply chooses to ignore them.

As Freedman explains:

> The element of refusal is critical here. The artist of the portrait does not simply fail to see the deteriorating condition of his bride or his own responsibility for her decline. Rather, as the narration twice italicizes, "'he *would* not see'" the effects of either the ghastly turret lights or his theft of color from her cheeks (*Complete Works*, 4:248). The very notion of refusal includes an unspoken element of

> recognition that marks the entry place of the work's unconscious or unsaid. Refusal, by definition, acknowledges what it denies. (Freedman 11)

The painter embodies the destructive power of art, and, ironically, he destroys his own muse—the wife whom he should love: "Greatness in art, the tale suggests—the appalling yet awesome lifelikeness of the painting—comes at a mortal cost to the human subjects the artist reduces to the disposable raw materials of an alchemical art" (Freedman 8). In his vampiric thirst for artistic ascension, the painter drains his wife's lifeblood and injects it into his work of art. He lacks human empathy, finding beauty and value in his wife only as a source of inspiration for the art that fuels him.

The painter arrogantly perceives his work of art as "*Life* itself!" (Poe 299), but the voices of the community—his audience—prove otherwise. Community features less prominently as a theme in Poe's works than in Hawthorne's fiction, but three direct references to a community appear in "The Oval Portrait." Just as the portraitist witnesses his wife's deterioration, his community (a group of people that he permits to enter the tower and observe his work) also sees her weakened condition—and does nothing. They do not blame the artist, whose work they admire, but assume that his obsessive replication of her image can only constitute an act of love. In Poe's tale, the community becomes, through its negligence, an accessory to the artist's murder of his wife. Because

the artist's goal requires total immersion in his artistic machinations, it seems unusual that he would invite the community to witness his endeavors, but his vanity demands a discipleship to behold the metamorphosis he invokes.

The painter's community also consists of the remainder of his audience: the narrator of “The Oval Portrait,” “a desperately wounded man who seeks refuge in an unoccupied chateau” (Quinn 331) where he finds the painting, and the unknown author of the book containing the story of the oval portrait, who not only has viewed the painting but appears to have intimate knowledge of the tale of the painter and his wife. Poe’s narrator's judgment of the painting informs readers of the disturbing, sublime, but ultimately lifeless quality of the painting; Poe prefaces the reader's encounter with the portraitist’s tale with this account of his painting to establish its hollow nature before the painter himself can claim that it lives. The writer of the guidebook exists to prove that the actions of the painter were in fact evil and intentional.

Both Owen and Poe’s painter need solitude to accomplish their artistic ambitions, but both artists become involved with their communities at some stage in their artistic processes. Owen completes his project in isolation, shielding his artistic genius and spirit from the hindrances, criticisms, condescension, and outright attacks that assail it so many times throughout the story. Then, content with the comprehensiveness of his artwork,

Owen emerges from hiding to find solace in a loving community.

Hawthorne declares that, “To persons whose pursuits are insulated from the common business of life—who are either in advance of mankind or apart from it—there often comes a sensation of moral cold that makes the spirit shiver as if it had reached the frozen solitudes around the pole” (369). The “moral cold” and separation from humanity that Hawthorne describes accurately represent the artist in “The Oval Portrait” and the deadly art he conceives. He admits visitors into the tower as he creates his artwork, proving that he creates not just to please himself or for a love of Beauty but to garner accolades from his audience. He does not interact with his community or, of course, the wife that he discards; he only requests that his community members watch him and marvel at his genius. The community’s failure to intervene as they watch the decay of the painter’s wife, however, suggests moral weakness and physical powerlessness in all of humanity. Poe paints a vastly more negative picture of communities than Hawthorne does.

The two authors’ portrayals of the artist figure prove equally disparate. Owen Warland represents an ideal artist who creates to satisfy his own creative impulses but remains connected to humanity. Presumably, Owen will continue the healthy cycle of creation and community involvement that he has just established. The painter of the oval

portrait, conversely, represents a dark, destructive incarnation of the artist. This artist creates to achieve greatness and even to replicate life itself, an impossible and fatal endeavor for a mere mortal. Poe does not unequivocally indicate what awaits the portraitist, but his emphasis on the wickedness of the artist's actions implies an incorrigible villainy that a single murder cannot satisfy. Just as Owen Warland's creative drive will propel him to new expressions of his artistic vision, the painter's destructive desires will lead him to future acts of human sacrifice for artistic gain.

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