

The Burden of Secret Sin: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

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The Burden of Secret Sin: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

The fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne has frequently been defined in musical terms on account of the recurring themes it contains. Very much like the leitmotifs of a symphony or an opera, these themes possess “a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor”, yet they frequently carry “some definite moral purpose” (Pearson 243). Sin is one of them. References to sin can be found throughout Hawthorne’s writings, in his earliest as well as in his latest. It is *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)¹ that is the most quoted and the most frequently associated with the thematic of sin. However, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and a great number of Hawthorne’s shorter works address the same problem. His fiction explores the weight of the Puritan conception of sin at a time when the Transcendentalist idea of the goodness of man saw light. Thus, Hawthorne’s writings offer a relatively dark view of human nature, oftentimes alleviated by cautious optimism. A number of critics have agreed that Hawthorne’s fiction shows signs of the disappearance of the doctrine of original sin which was to gradually become “backwater theology” (Barna 325) and which left room for something more positive and hopeful. This is exactly what happens with *The Scarlet Letter* which

ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too (Pearson 240).

Kane Egan in his article *The Adulteress in the Market-Place* (1995) believes that “Hawthorne comes before the public to condemn the sins of his generation” (Egan 1) and then moves on to something more constructive, suggesting future change and evolution. These statements seem to contradict the general impression of gloom which is regularly attributed to Hawthorne’s fictional world. However, most of his works contain elements of novelty that soften the sin-obsessed Puritan world-view. His distinction between ‘knowledge as sin’ and ‘secret sin’ is the key to the problem.

Sin in Hawthorne: Towards a Definition

In 1759, a Puritan minister of a certain influence and eloquence, known by the name of Jonathan Edwards, wrote that humankind was “born into the world with a tendency to sin” (Edwards 228). Humanity was entitled to “misery and ruin for their sin, which actually will be the consequence unless mere grace steps in and prevents it” (Edwards 228). In his defense of original sin, Edwards proposes nothing bright and offers a somber, dismal view of the human character. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s paternal ancestors were all Puritan. A great part of his fiction is indisputably anchored in this heritage and is concerned with the concept of ‘sin’.

But what is the exact meaning to be applied to “sin” in Hawthorne’s fiction? In 2003, in his article *Hawthorne and Sin* D. Donoghue proposed to explain the notion of sin as it is used by Hawthorne. Donoghue attempted a definition but he justly remarked that in Hawthorne, the notion of sin seems “all general and vague” at first, while “none of the characters has a convinced sense of sin” in total accordance with the Biblical canon (Donoghue 1, 2). Donoghue explains that when Hawthorne “referred to sin, he seemed to assume a force of evil so pervasive that it did not need to be embodied in anyone or in any particular action” (Donoghue 3). There is a lot of truth in this remark and it can be applied to the quasi-totality of Hawthorne’s fiction. For example, Hester Prynne’s sin is rarely talked of openly and except the frequent allusions to adulteration, the text of *The Scarlet Letter* is more concerned with “a kind of fetishistic fascination with the ‘nameless’” (Egan 26) which seems to have more universal value than the simple reference to a definable sin. Hawthorne is only slightly more explicit in *The House of the Seven Gables* where the seven gables manifestly stand for the seven capital sins and evoke the principle of their hereditary transmission. Was Hawthorne abiding by the Bible when he wrote of sin? The definition of sin in Genesis 4:7 for example, is not less obscure. “[...] if you do not what is right, sin is crouching at your door [...]”². But what is right? In Hawthorne’s fiction, the word “sin” itself is only sparsely used. A variety of expressions and

synonyms are used (e.g. “evil”, “mischief”, “vice”, “fall”, “disobedience”). For example, the author explains that he has

[...] provided himself with a moral [...] namely, that the *wrong-doing*³ of one generation lives into the successive ones, and [...] becomes a pure and uncontrollable *mischief* [...] (Pearson 243).

This is where the main difficulty of defining sin in Hawthorne arises. “Wrong-doing” and “mischief” seem to replace “sin” here, as if the word itself was not meant to be put down in writing. To define something that is only implicitly referred to and rarely plainly stated may prove a difficult task.

Indeed, there is a certain complexity in the concept of sin as we find it in Hawthorne’s fiction. The reader is confronted with several categories of sin, some more obvious than others. Many of these are fused together into a larger whole, creating an atmosphere, or rather, a pervasive mood of gloom and guilt. In some of Hawthorne’s short stories, the characters’ unconscious awareness of the original sin is transferred to a visible, physical burden. Such is the case in *The Minister’s Black Veil* (1836) and *The Birthmark* (1843) where sin is perceived as unavoidable. The characters’ bodies are maimed. They carry the indelible traces of sin. This is exactly what Chillingworth means when he explains to Rev. Dimmesdale that “he to whom only the outward and physical evil is laid open, knoweth, oftentimes, but half the evil which he is called upon to cure” (Pearson 164). In that case, all attempts to cure (that is, to obtain an absolution) are apparently unpardonable. This is the burden of most sinners in Hawthorne’s fiction. Rev. Hooper covers his face with a black veil to hide his sins and the veil is not to be removed even after his death, while the removal of Georgiana’s birthmark rapidly kills her. The fact that Dimmesdale is “standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation” (Pearson 171) does not help him overthrow the burden. His sin shows on his face and body as a mysterious ailment. Death is his only relief.

On the other hand, sin in Hawthorne is explicitly connected to sexuality. *John Inglefield's Thanksgiving* (1840) for example, tells the story of the fallen Prudence, conscious of her sins but unaware of her sleepwalking attempts to seek forgiveness from her father. Both *The Wedding Knell* (1836) and *The Scarlet Letter* explore the various transformations of sexual sin, stressing its omnipresence regardless of the nature of the relationship. The lawful as well as the adulterous union is condemned as corrupt, the former by a higher power and the latter by society. In addition, in some of Hawthorne's fictions, sin is transmitted to younger generations by sinful parents and/or family members. In some cases, it is further aggravated by cruelty, murder, and witchcraft (e.g. in *The House of the Seven Gables*). In others, it is society that perpetrates sinful practices and these become unpardonable sins. The child in *The Gentle Boy* (1832) dies in expiation of Quaker mass killings and of a host of nameless crimes. The weight of "an indelible stain of blood" and of "a large share of the awful responsibility" (Pearson 890 – 891) is too heavy for him. The gentle boy is a Christ-like figure, unconsciously aware of humanity's evils, of religious "extravagancies, and [...] persecution" (Pearson 890). He is the recipient of both the original and the unpardonable sin. In *Young Goodman Brown* (1835), the eponymous hero does not know if what he has seen is true but nevertheless dies a cynical and disillusioned man. The contact with the darker side of his townsfolk and with their sins is the reason for his death, Hawthorne implicitly suggests.

Another interesting example is *The Scarlet Letter* which is built upon a series of sins. All characters carry their share of the original sin. The adultery committed by Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale aggravates their situation. Chillingworth, on the other hand, is to be held responsible for committing the sin of abandonment. The moral abuse and social ostracizing practiced on Hester Prynne are collective sins. Simultaneously, *The Scarlet Letter* seems to follow the Biblical "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1), meaning that since all humans are sinners, judging on God's place is yet another unpardonable sin. The repetitive violations of the Biblical law indicate that Hawthorne's paramount concern was to actually solve the problem of defining sin.

Knowledge as Sin

Many of the examples we mentioned are obviously related to the concept of knowledge. Much in line with the Biblical canon, Hawthorne's earliest interpretation of the original sin is connected to the sin of forbidden knowledge acquisition. The original sin of the first human beings was knowledge – Adam and Eve conquered their independence by taking the decision to consume the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The first sin they became guilty of was the acquisition of knowledge. In spite of the understanding humanity now possessed, the fratricide committed by Cain demonstrated a conscious predisposition to perpetrating evil. Therefore, evil formed the darker, burdensome, hidden part of humanity's complex identity which was to be revealed only through man's direct relationship with God. This is what happens to both Rev. Hooper and Dimmesdale who deal with sin on their own, thus becoming men "of awful power over souls that were in agony for sin" (Pearson 879). That is also why Dimmesdale whispers of "the great judgment day" (Pearson 175). "Then, and there", says he to Pearl, "before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I must stand together. But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!" (Pearson 175).

According to some Puritan doctrines, the guilt of the first humans was handed down from one generation to another. Hence, every child was to carry the burden of the original sin, the weight of which was more often than not increased by the addition of the sins of his own parents. Indeed, the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* informs the reader that "the past [is] not dead" (Pearson 100). Indeed, it is because of that persistent past that Hawthorne himself had changed his name. Actually, his statement globally refers to the common Puritan past and to its collective guilt. This statement indicates that the story Hawthorne is about to tell explores the characters' desire to discover the hushed secret that lies hidden beneath the complex symbols and taboos of "the Puritan instinct" (Pearson x). The deepest desire of many of these characters is to find out the exact nature of sin. In fact, a close inspection of Hawthorne's texts reveals a recurrent usage of the words "know", "aware", "penetrate", "reveal". In addition, the plots are

based on a succession of repeated sins. Jac Tharpe interprets these repetitions in terms of a relentless search for identity. “[...] the search for identity and individuality is original sin, while the unpardonable sin is tyranny over the identity of another” (Tharpe 80). In Hawthorne, both types of sin are superposed and their accumulation is the greatest imaginable burden to be placed upon the human soul. Many of his characters know or are aware of this impalpable, obscure burden and their “concerns involve knowledge [and] the study of human origins and purpose” (Tharpe 10). Pearl cannot answer when she is asked the question “Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?” (Pearson 149). Her ignorance is revealing and her silence addresses the central issue in Hawthorne’s work. Knowledge of parentage, origins and identity is forbidden. It is one of the fundamental taboos and its purpose is to prevent the revelation of secrets that are not meant for mortal eyes. Goodman Brown becomes the witness of sacrilege and this, in part, leads him to perdition. Goodman Brown possesses a secret. He has discovered and knows the nature of man. He knows himself. This awareness is godlike and it is precisely what God forbade to Adam.

In *Ethan Brand* (1850), Hawthorne remarks that “there was something in the man's face which he was afraid to look at” (Pearson 32). Ethan Brand is actually possessed with a fanatical desire to discover the nature of sin. He possesses knowledge and this is what terrifies those who look at face and into his eyes. Flames dance in Ethan brand’s eyes, reminding the reader of the utmost evil and of the fires of Hell. Upon his return after a long absence, Ethan Brand watches a dog chase its tail, the symbol of the futility of his vain quest of self-knowledge. Hawthorne remarks that Ethan Brand has indulged in the “*sin of intellect* that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims” (Hawthorne 232). In the *Minister’s Black Veil*, most of the characters find it difficult to look at Mr. Hooper’s veil, most probably because it hides his awareness and understanding of a multitude of sins. As a minister, he is the immediate recipient of the sins of an entire congregation. The veil shields them

from the knowledge the minister carries. However, his own existence becomes increasingly dependent on that knowledge and this is also what prevents him from taking off the veil. His burden is heavier not because of the pressure exercised on him to remove the veil but because of the accumulation of knowledge about sin. But does Hawthorne really depict knowledge as sinful? Does he claim that ignorance preserves the soul of his characters from sinking into “blacker depths of sin” (Pearson 151)?

Secret Sin

The plots of the works we cited examine the implications of knowledge on the spiritual life of the individual. Undeniably, Hawthorne’s fiction is mostly about knowing the unknown and many of his characters are obsessed with the idea of discovering a secret. For example, the acquaintances, friends and family of Rev. Hooper want “to penetrate the *mystery* of the black veil” and “to reveal the mystery of so many years” (Pearson 679, 881). Hester Prynne speaks of the “sin here so awfully *revealed*” (Pearson 236) as if ‘sin’ was synonymous to ‘secret’. Much in the same fashion, Rev. Hooper’s congregation “whispers that [he] hide[s] [his] face under the consciousness of secret sin” (Pearson 878). This is one of the few instances when Hawthorne uses both “secret” and “sin” to specify the nature of Rev. Hooper’s sin. The example illustrates what is probably one of the most intriguing particularities of Hawthorne’s conception of sin. In reality, knowledge is a secondary preoccupation to him. What everyone wants to know is the secret. The secret drives the story forward and it is also related to sin. The secret is frequently likened to un-truth and from there, to a lie. In the preface of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne explains that every piece of fiction, “as a work of art”, must “rigidly subject itself to laws, and [...] it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart” (Pearson 243).

All types of sin in Hawthorne involve a secret, a mystery. The black veil of the minister,

that piece of crape, to their [the congregation's] imagination, seemed to hang down before his heart, the symbol of a fearful *secret* between him and them.

(Pearson 877)

When he preaches, the subject of Rev. Hooper's sermon

had reference to *secret sin*, and those sad *mysteries* which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them. (Pearson 874)

This secrecy generates a series of double-binds where Hawthorne's characters have to choose between two unsatisfactory alternatives. On the one hand, they can accept to share the secret and reveal the truth in an attempt to expiate the sin. In that case, however, they are condemned by the community and this is what happens to Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. On the other, they can choose to move on, without an open confession of the secret sin, and are haunted by that knowledge forever. Both *The Minister's Black Veil* and *Young Goodman Brown* are a case in point. At any rate, they will have to bear the burden of their guilt to their death even though they do not seem to believe that what they have done is sin. Rather, it was a "consecration" in Hester's own words. However, Hester Prynne realizes that she will never be delivered of her burden, of the secret she keeps about herself. "Here had been her sin [...] She had returned, therefore, and resumed [...] the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale" (Pearson 239).

Secret sin gradually becomes an *idée fixe* with a large scope of implications. The sinful characters struggle with the inability to communicate effectively and their incapacity to contribute to a collective moral effort bars the way to compassion. They become withdrawn and distant and the fact that they preserve their secret sin damages their body and soul. Accordingly, many of Hawthorne's secret sinners appear as socially ostracized individuals or as solitary wanderers. Hester Prynne lives on the margin of society and the eponymous hero of *Ethan Brand* embarks on a long twenty-year search for the Unpardonable Sin only never to find it.

Hawthorne remarked that “never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained” (Hawthorne 231). His only sin is his own secret obsession with sin. Not focusing on his life outside of sin is his major error.

The plots of Hawthorne’s stories introduce large numbers of prying secondary, background characters. They are inquiring and intrusive. They are intriguing. Most of them are built on the assumption that they could become counterparts of the reader and as such, they are fascinated by secrets and will attempt to solve the mysteries. Critics have remarked that such narratives operate a twist on the prevailing interpretation of sin within the Puritan religious doctrine. In fact, Hawthorne was cautiously “remolding the old Puritan sense of the burden of sin with an artistic delicacy” (Gorman 19). Beyond the first reading and under the surface of the text, lies the idea that knowledge should no longer be considered a sin. To Hawthorne knowing is not a sin but keeping burdensome knowledge for oneself *is* sin. The fact that Rev. Hooper keeps his awareness of sin to himself is sinful towards those who love him and towards the members of his congregation. The fact that Rev. Dimmesdale confesses only partially is sinful too because of the implications the secret has on the lives of Hester and Pearl. In fact, Hawthorne seems to say that the value of the original sin lessens progressively, while the burden of the unpardonable sins grows. This is due to the suffering the sinners inflicts on others. In *Earth’s Holocaust* (1844), Hawthorne tells us that “this wide world had become so overburdened with an accumulation of worn-out trumpery, that the inhabitants determined to rid themselves of it by a general bonfire”. This story epitomizes Hawthorne’s conception of secret sin as a joint responsibility. Contrary to what it appears, the burden of secret sin is not something personal. Actually, secret sin is a shared responsibility. It is a collective burden. The yoke of secret sin is heavier than that of the original sin because our immediate ancestors are to be held accountable for it. There is nothing humanity could have done about expiating the original sin. However,

Hawthorne seems to say, humanity is directly blamable for the wrongs it commits. Hushing the wrongs, dissimulating the sin only aggravates the crime.

Notes

¹ Years in brackets indicate publication dates.

² Also cited by Herbert Gorman in *Hawthorne: A Study in Solitude* (1927).

³ The italics are mine.

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