

Reflections of Freudian Psychoanalysis and Psychological Crisis in the Select Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Abstract

The short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne reflect the moral and psychological crises of American Puritan society through the themes of identity, isolation, moral conflict, and societal judgement. Hawthorne portrays the psychological and moral crises of individuals living within the rigid social structure of the 'newfound land' of America. This paper discusses these crises with reference to Hawthorne's "Feathertop", "Ethan Brand", "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", and "The Artist of the Beautiful". These short stories question the oppressive nature of social norms by highlighting the contradictions between the individual self and society. The paper also explores the use of allegory and imagery, which contribute significantly to the central themes. Hawthorne's use of allegory helps to expose the hypocrisy of many characters, thereby revealing their guilt and sin. It expresses the crisis of a newfound society in America which has social and religious liberty compared to that of Europe which has well-established social and religious institutions for centuries. The dilemma of whether to establish a Puritan society or to create a new, liberal society in America is effectively depicted in Hawthorne's short stories. The quest for a liberal society by common people who escaped religious

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persecution in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe contrasts with the vision of religious and nationalist leaders who sought to build a society strictly based on European values. This contrast encapsulates the crisis of nineteenth-century America and reflects the broader ambition of Europeans in non-European lands overseas. This paper examines whether individuals get adapted to societal expectations or become isolated and estranged due to social pressures.

Keywords: crisis, isolation, morality, psychology and puritanism

Introduction: Psychological Crisis and Puritan Society

In Literary studies, the term 'Psychological Crisis' refers the stages during which the characters undergo intense internal conflicts, emotional disturbances, or the dilemma to choose between two different identities. These crises arise out of traumatic events, moral dilemmas, social pressures, or the clash between personal desires and social institutions. In literature, the reflection of these crises reveals not only the crises of the individual but also the broader crises that exist in the specific culture, society, nation and religion. Literature exposes the crisis through techniques like narration, monologue, or stream of consciousness. Psychological crisis in literature functions as both a narrative technique and a reflection of individual and social turmoil.

Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Psychology of Puritanism

Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the founding fathers of American short story writings, has concentrated more on the portrayal of Puritanism in America and its psychological impact on individuals. His short stories have delved into the conflicts of social identity, morality, and the emotional turmoil of the individual. Hawthorne has used allegory, symbolism, and imagery to picturise the psychological and moral crises of the individuals. As Hawthorne remarks, "When an uninstructed multitude attempted to see with its eyes, it was exceedingly apt to be deceived" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 195). Most prominent psychological crisis common among Hawthorne's characters is the burden of concealed sin. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale's crisis is the conflict between his external role as a religious person; and his private sin and guilt. Some of his characters, like those in "The Birth-Mark", descend into psychological crisis because of their staunch belief in idealism. The contrast between the comfort zone of being innocent and the psychological crisis of having known the truth is well documented, where the characters struggle internally because of their knowledge and intelligence. As Peter Barry famously said, "The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind" (96).

The psychological crises of Hawthorne's characters, expressed through guilt, obsession, repression and identity fragmentation, is one of the connecting factors in

his short stories that sets the stage for thematic development. Jonathan Culler, in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, asserts that theory helps readers to question common assumptions; and the role of language in assessing a society as well as an individual (5). With the help of Freud's psychoanalysis, this article explains the psychological crisis in Hawthorne's short stories.

The early American Puritan society demands unquestionable loyalty to religious and moral values. But the then newfound land gives the physical and psychological space for people to cherish liberal, individual values. This contradiction widens against the backdrop of the rise of the multicultural liberal form of European society in America. The short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne portray this psychological conflict of whether to adhere strictly to Puritan values or to cherish liberty in the then newfound land. The short stories portray psychological aspects like inner conflict, desires, guilt, and alienation of the people. Hawthorne has Puritan ancestors from whom he has inculcated the values. He has both traditional and personal connections to the themes of his short stories, which reflect the psychological landscape of early settlers in America.

Theoretical Framework: Freudian Psychoanalysis and Literary Crisis

As Minderop and Hidayat stated, many critics of Hawthorne concentrated primarily on morality; and the relevance of psychological insights are yet to be explored. Minderop and Hidayat analysed the impact of Thanatos in the Puritan pastor Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Freud's psychoanalysis helps to understand the dominance of superego in Dimmesdale. He explains that "the super-ego is the heir of the Oedipus complex and represents the demands of morality" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 34). Superego refuses to recognise the physical needs of Dimmesdale. He tries to suppress his sexual needs in his mind as well as in society. Freud defines repression as the process in which "ideas that would provoke anxiety are excluded from consciousness" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 297). He tries to conceal his relationship with a doctor's wife, Hester Prynne. The overdominance of superego leading to psychological crisis, and to be obsessed with death, is expressed clearly in the article by Minderop and Hidayat. "the super-ego behaves as though it were watching over the ego and measuring it by an ideal standard" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 64). While analysing *The Scarlet Letter*, Albany and Gulesce discuss the impact of life drive in Hester Prynne that is in contrast to the dominant death drive in Arthur Dimmesdale.

Using Freud's framework of psychoanalysis, Ratnaningsih interprets ego's defense mechanism in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark". Through close reading, the article "investigates on how Georgiana employs various defense mechanisms - such as rationalization and denial - in response to Aylmer's fixation". Freud explains that "the ego protects itself against anxiety by means of defence mechanisms" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 47). Ratnaningsih analyses the role of ego in the removal of the birthmark, a hand imprint, on the left cheek of Georgiana. The said article could be

expanded by inquiring the role of superego and its perfectionism in the removal of the birthmark, symbolic of the destruction of 'imperfection'.

Except a few like those mentioned above, most researches on Hawthorne's works get restricted to his novels; and to its Puritan outlook. So, this paper concentrates exclusively on the dominance of superego on the characters of his short stories.

Illusion and Identity Crisis in "Feathertop"

In "Feathertop", a scarecrow is brought back to life as a gentleman by a witch. The contrast between illusion and reality is expressed through the magical animation of a scarecrow. In the story, an old witch gives life to a scarecrow for her garden. The pipe in the hands of the scarecrow gives him life. The story is a satire on individuals who create imaginary identities and make the world believe them. It analyses the delicate nature of human identity and the different masks people wear in society. Freud explains that "the ego is not master in its own house" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 143). It is pitiable to note that individuals have themselves begun living in that imaginary identity in their subconscious mind. This state of mind does not allow individuals to realise their abilities and shortcomings. They miscalculate their strengths and weaknesses. It becomes difficult for them to realise the reality. Only when Feathertop looks at the mirror does he realise that his appearance is not real, leading him to collapse in disgust. Jacques Lacan argues that "the mirror stage . . . establishes the subject in an imaginary identity" (76). The psychological crisis in Feathertop has its roots in the society that expects superficial abilities from common people based on morality and ability. It further forces common people to assume an artificial identity. As time moves on, people have an inner struggle to bridge the gap between their real selves and the superficial creature.

Mirror and Existential Collapse: Self-Realisation in "Feathertop"

The mirror in the story embodies the moment of self realisation. The disintegration of the false identity leads to an existential crisis. Thusly, the short story exposes psychological crisis and its further development as existential crisis. The symbolic suicide of Feathertop is the result of the psychological collapse after realising the unattainable false, imaginary identity.

Intellectual Pride and Moral Alienation in "Ethan Brand"

"Ethan Brand" is an inevitable short story with regard to Nathaniel Hawthorne's portrayal of psychological conceits. The short story is about a former lime burner named Ethan Brand who has left his job in search of the "unpardonable sin" in life. A lime burner is a person who produces quicklime by burning limestone to high temperatures. He is replaced in the job by Bartram and his young son, Little Joe. Locals consider Ethan Brand to be insane because of his disappearance. He returns late one evening, after many years of his disappearance. He informs Bartram that he has realised the 'unpardonable sin' in human life. He says that wilful rejection of empathy in pursuit of knowledge is the unpardonable sin. As the narrator reflects,

“Thus Ethan Brand became a fiend. He began to be so from the moment that his moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand” 102).

The Unpardonable Sin and Psychological Isolation

According to Ethan Brand, many people do not respect the emotions of others; empathising with others is considered a hurdle in the pursuit of objective knowledge. People consciously destroy empathy and compassion in favour of cold knowledge and egoism. Ethan Brand considers it an ‘unpardonable sin’ because it is impossible for the person to repent with the hardened heart. He has once been egoistic, concentrates only on his individual development, and wilfully neglects to empathise with the woman who has loved him. During the years of his disappearance, he has become enlightened and has realised that he has made mistakes. He also understands that he cannot repent. When it becomes night and Bartram leaves to sleep, Ethan Brand throws himself into the burning furnace. Freud describes the death instinct as “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state” (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 36). When Bartram and Little Joe return to work the next morning, they find only the heart of Ethan Brand turned into marble.

Ethan Brand’s psychological crisis is rooted in his alienation from humanity in pursuit of superior knowledge that places him above others. By placing reason above empathy, he becomes a symbol of spiritual and emotional desolation. His transformation into a cold, analytical being devoid of human feeling represents a broader conflict between rationalism and morality. The fire in which Brand commits suicide is symbolic of purification and the destruction of excessive pride. The short story is sceptical about intellectual greatness devoid of moral consideration.

Dependency to Autonomy: Psychological Growth in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

Hawthorne’s short story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” narrates the psychological change of a boy from dependency to autonomy. The story is set when American society starts its protest against British colonialism and imperialism. The young boy Robin goes to the city, believing that his relative, Major Molineux, will help him begin a standard life; but life has other plans for Robin as the Major’s prosperity comes to an end because of the protest of common people.

The story reflects the psychological journey from dependency to autonomy, and from innocence to experience. Erik Erikson states that identity formation involves “the struggle between dependence and independence” (Erikson 261). Robin’s crisis is created not by moral guilt but by the expectation of a youth to have support for growth in a complex society. At the end of the story, he becomes mature not to expect external support for the growth in his career. Though not so easy, he decides to establish a life of his own which shows the turbulent psychological development from dependency to autonomy. The ‘coming of age’ short story portrays the volatile political and social reality of cities, and their impact on the behaviour of its people.

Artistic Isolation and Spiritual Triumph in “The Artist of the Beautiful”

Hawthorne’s short story “The Artist of the Beautiful” illustrates the contrast between the artistic devotion of the watchmaker Owen Warland and the indifference of the practical, materialistic world. Warland gives importance to artistic creation of every watch he makes but his employer Robert Danforth dislikes it for the latter wants mechanical production of maximum quantity of the product. Warland’s love is also rejected by Annie Hovenden but Warland remains spiritually content.

Art versus Materialism: Owen Warland’s Psychological Conflict

Owen’s psychological crisis arises from the tension between artistic sensitivity and the utilitarian values of his society. Freud describes sublimation as “the redirection of instinctual energy into socially valued activities” (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 44). His struggle is internal, between his desire for social acceptance and his devotion to art. He chooses to remain true to his artistic vision, accepting solitude as the price of authenticity. As Hawthorne narrates, “He was a man who cared for nothing but the beautiful” (Hawthorne, “The Artist of the Beautiful” 153). The story reflects the nineteenth-century tension between industrialisation and individual creativity. By visualising Owen’s spiritual triumph, Hawthorne illustrates the psychological dominance of Puritan rebellion against materialism. Barry’s statement, “Dreams, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, . . . representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person”(98) best explains the short story.

Symbolism and Imagery as Psychological Representation

In the select short stories, Hawthorne uses imagery to picturise psychological conflicts. Though the characters reflect individuals, they could also be considered as personifications of abstract ideas of pride, guilt, vanity and beauty. Terry Eagleton argues that psychoanalytic criticism “views literary works as expressions of unconscious desires and anxieties” (Eagleton 163). The short stories also universalise the psychological struggles the characters endure. For example, the scarecrow in “Feathertop” symbolises the superficiality of social status. In “Ethan Brand”, the lime kiln is the symbol of inner turmoil and self-destruction. In “The Artist of the Beautiful”, the mechanical butterfly is a symbol of beauty becoming fragile in the material world.

National Identity and Cultural Crisis in Nineteenth-Century America

The tension between the ambitious Europe to control America with traditional values, and the aspirations of Americans to be free and individualistic in the newfound land is central to the moral and psychological crisis in the short stories. The characters in these stories grapple with the burden of inherited sin and the longing for individual freedom. The stories are also personifications of the psychological crisis of the nation of whether to uphold strict moral values or to give space for pluralism and personal autonomy. The desire to break away from

European tradition is complicated by the persistence of Puritanical values. Hawthorne's characters often live in this in-between space, unable to fully embrace either the old or the new. Their psychological torment is, in part, the result of this unresolved cultural identity.

Conclusion: Psychological Crisis as a National and Personal Experience

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories portray not only the mental struggles of individuals but also the broader cultural and historical anxieties of nineteenth-century America. Through characters such as Feathertop, Ethan Brand, Robin, and Owen Warland, Hawthorne presents individuals caught between strict Puritan beliefs and the emerging ideals of personal freedom. These characters reflect how a society in transition influences the thoughts and emotions of ordinary people. In these stories, psychological crisis arises from the conflict between inherited values and personal desires. Hawthorne's characters often experience guilt, isolation, repression, and confusion about their identities as they try to balance their individual aspirations with social expectations. This inner conflict reflects the larger national dilemma of early America, which struggled to balance traditional European values with the promise of liberty and individuality.

Hawthorne's use of allegory and symbolism further strengthens the portrayal of psychological turmoil. The scarecrow in "Feathertop," the lime kiln in "Ethan Brand," Robin's journey in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and the butterfly in "The Artist of the Beautiful" all symbolize inner struggles and moral conflicts. These symbolic elements transform individual experiences into universal reflections of human psychological struggle. Thusly, Hawthorne's short stories are not merely moral narratives but deep explorations of the human mind. The psychological crises faced by his characters mirror the uncertainties of a newly forming nation and highlight the difficulty of developing personal identity within restrictive social systems. By illustrating these conflicts, Hawthorne demonstrates that psychological crisis is both a personal and national experience, making his short stories timeless representations of human struggle and transformation.

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