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The Link between Fantasy and Reality in Hawthorne's Short Stories

In many of his short stories, Nathaniel Hawthorne utilizes elements of fantasy, usually in the form of dreams, visions, or other imaginative experiences. These fantastic experiences act on the characters to change them in some manner, whether for good or bad. And yet, not all of Hawthorne's stories have a fantastic element. Some focus strictly on reality, concentrating on science and the physical and material aspects of the real world, or even an ideal world. The characters in these stories share the same fate as those who encounter fantasy, being changed in either a good or bad way. At first, it seems as though there is no pattern to the application of fantasy or reality in Hawthorne's stories, but on closer observation, a pattern emerges. The characters that only dwell on pure reality come to a bad end, as do those who focus strictly on the element of fantasy they experience. Through the fate of these characters, Hawthorne hints at a pattern evident in humanity. The question is, what is that pattern, and what, then, is the effect of fantasy and reality on mankind?

In order to understand the answer to this question, it is helpful to gain an understanding of the author behind this tantalizing insight into humanity. Nathaniel Hawthorne was an early American author during the first half of the 1800s. This was during the Romantic period, and Hawthorne is known as a dark romantic writer (Miller 513). Dark Romantics focus on "the darkness of the human soul" and usually portray people as being inclined toward evil and self-destruction rather than good and wisdom ("Dark Romanticism"). Gary Thompson best describes the characteristics of the dark romanticism subgenre in this passage:

Fallen man's inability fully to comprehend haunting reminders of another, supernatural realm that yet seemed not to exist, the constant perplexity of inexplicable and vastly metaphysical phenomena, a propensity for seemingly perverse or evil moral choices that had no firm or fixed measure or rule, and a sense of nameless guilt combined with a suspicion the external world was a delusive projection of the mind—these were major elements in the vision of man the Dark Romantics opposed to the mainstream of Romantic thought. (6)

Many of Hawthorne's dark romantic works were inspired by the New England Puritans, and he combines "historical romance loaded with symbolism and deep psychological themes, bordering on surrealism" (Miller 514). He is also known for "exploring the ideas of individual responsibility, the importance of creative expression and man's relationship to the natural world. He also at times delves into the mysterious and disturbing" (Merriman). This distinctive writing style of merging together the strange and the natural brought him a lot of attention during his time due to the sharp contrast between his works and those of the more optimistic Transcendentalists (*American Writers*), though his career did not start out this way.

When Hawthorne first began, he was mostly a short story writer. But after publishing his first collection of short stories in 1837, *Twice-Told Tales*, he said, "I do not think much of them," and did not expect to get any response from the public (Miller 104). Despite this assessment, "Hawthorne's short stories came slowly but steadily into critical favor, and the best of them have become American classics. It may well be claimed for them as a whole that they are the outstanding achievement in their genre to be found in the English language during the 19th century" (*Encyclopedia of World Biography* 214). At the time, however, Hawthorne did not receive much attention for his works, even when he published his second collection of short stories in 1846, *Mosses from an Old Manse*. He did send this collection to a number of critics for

review, such as Margaret Fuller, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman, and was given some positive feedback (Miller 264). Edgar Allen Poe commended Hawthorne for his writing, saying ““The style of Hawthorne is purity itself. His tone is singularly effective—wild, plaintive, thoughtful, and in full accordance with his themes . . . We look upon him as one of the few men of indisputable genius to whom our country has as yet given birth”” (McFarland 88–89). But despite these flattering comments, Poe also criticized Hawthorne, showing contempt for Hawthorne’s use of allegory and moral tales. Walt Whitman, on the other hand, loved the collection and felt it was unfair that Hawthorne’s book had to compete with books from Europe, saying, ““Shall real American genius shiver with neglect while the public runs after this foreign trash?”” (Miller 264). Herman Melville, a friend of Hawthorne’s, also believed that the stories in the collection were masterful and even dedicated his novel *Moby Dick* to Hawthorne in 1851, writing, “In token of my admiration for his genius, this book is inscribed to Nathaniel Hawthorne” (Mellow 382).

Even with these positive reviews, Hawthorne did not become well-known to the public until he published his first novel in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter*, but it immediately became a best seller in the United States (Cheever 181) and was “eventually recognized as one of the greatest American novels” (*American Writers*). D. H. Lawrence, a twentieth-century writer, even said that “there could be no more perfect work of the American imagination than *The Scarlet Letter*” (Miller 284). *The Scarlet Letter* propelled Hawthorne into popularity, and he “became one of the leading writers of his time” (Merriman). Today, his works are known as “one of the greatest legacies in American literature” (*American Writers*). But it is important to remember that it was his imaginative, dark romantic writing that made his works distinctive and the “dark psychological complexity” (Mellow 285) that made them interesting to both critics and readers. And it is these same elements that critics in the last fifty years analyze in an attempt to discover

the deeper meanings behind Hawthorne's words, such as the meaning behind Hawthorne's use of fantasy and reality in his stories.

Jerry A. Herndon in his critical essay "Hawthorne's Dream Imagery" writes about Hawthorne's use of imaginative fantasy elements and describes a pattern he sees in its use. Herndon believes Hawthorne uses dream imagery to portray the presence of evil and show "his conception of man's mortal life as a 'dim sphere of half development' in which good and evil blend ambiguously" (538). Through dreams, the characters are shown that their chosen path is leading them to lovelessness and death rather than love and life. For some, it brings them to the "realization of life's morally ambiguous mixture of good and evil" (Herndon 543). Others become trapped in dwelling on the evils of life, such as Aylmer in "The Birthmark" who is unable to overcome the evil fate portrayed in his dream and pays for it with Georgiana's life. This is also the case in "Young Goodman Brown." Goodman Brown's life is destroyed because he cannot escape from the evil dream he experiences, even to the point that it becomes his reality. Herndon's conclusion is that Hawthorne's use of dream imagery is for the purpose of revealing "the evils by which man makes his life a nightmare rather than a joyous reality" (545) that can give man the opportunity to redeem himself.

Though Benjamin Friedlander also recognizes the presence of this pattern and its importance, he holds a different opinion on the nature of dreams and reality in Hawthorne's stories. In his essay "Hawthorne's 'Waking Reality,'" Friedlander uses the short story "The Wives of the Dead" to illustrate the idea that many of Hawthorne's stories are "an intricate knitting of interior and exterior worlds, of sleeping and waking realities" (51). Hawthorne blurs the line between dream and reality "so all of a piece is the tale's dreamy quality, that having entertained a doubt as to one moment's facticity, the reader loses faith in the facticity of the whole" (Friedlander 53). This doubt then serves to "overtake and drown our understanding,"

(Friedlander 54) making it impossible to decipher what is real and what is not, whether it is a “dreamlike event” or an “eventful dream” (Friedlander 65). Friedlander proposes that Hawthorne’s intention is to bring readers to an awareness of just how unclear the line between dreams and reality can be, causing inner and outer life to be confused for one another.

Ultimately, though, Friedlander believes that, whether or not the dreams are real, they bring the characters to “a necessary waking, an encounter with one another and with ‘a world which secretes its opaque contents and the forms of a necessity that cannot be deciphered’” (76).

Therefore, Hawthorne’s stories show that mankind needs encounters with both the interior and exterior worlds combined together.

Following this same line of thought, Ted-Larry Pebworth in his essay “‘The Soul’s Instinctive Perception’: Dream, Actuality, and Reality in Four Tales from Hawthorne’s ‘Mosses from an Old Manse’” discusses how Hawthorne’s use of dreams does have a connection with his portrayal of reality. Pebworth identifies two different aspects of Hawthorne’s version of reality: the presence of guilt within mankind and the use of science and technology. He then defines Hawthorne’s reality as “sin and guilt, companionship and isolation, nature and the machine, the scientist and the poet, the cold calculations of the intellect and the warm human dignity of the individual heart, all tied up in a complex scheme not easily explained nor worked out” (Pebworth 19). Pebworth’s overall point is that “Hawthorne uses a dream, in combination with actuality, to indicate reality” (19). There are two different kinds of dreams that Hawthorne uses. The first kind show “the prognostic or foreboding of evil or death to a specific individual” (Pebworth 19), such as the dream in “The Birthmark.” The second kind “point out the general evil which exists in the world. These dreams act as a kind of spiritual initiation ritual upon the dreamer” (Pebworth 19), such as the dream in “Young Goodman Brown.” In both of these examples, “the dream, or the imaginative quality of the mind, becomes reality, that complex combination of

both actuality and the dream . . . The dreams in each case point to realities” (Pebworth 22). By either ignoring or fixating on these prophetic dreams, depending on the circumstances, the characters cause them to become reality. In Hawthorne’s stories, then, true reality is a combination of both dreams and actuality.

David V. Urban in his critical essay “Evasion of the Finite in Hawthorne’s ‘The Artist of the Beautiful’” also perceives this interplay between fantasy and reality, though he labels these elements infinite and finite. However, Urban’s essay is centered around the belief held by Father Lynch that a person must “take the ‘narrow path’ of the definite, of the potential rewards of following this path, and of the heartbreaking consequences of ignoring such wisdom” (367). To Urban, there is no such thing as balance between the infinite and the finite. A person must be rooted in the finite world, or the world of human interaction and feelings, in order to truly be successful in their endeavors. The infinite realm of the ethereal and fantastic is insubstantial, and a person grounded in the infinite cannot fully accomplish the goals they set out to meet. Urban identifies this concept specifically in Hawthorne’s short story “The Artist of the Beautiful,” using Owen Warland as an example of what happens when a person clings to the infinite rather than the finite. He describes Owen as casting aside the finite, specifically the potential relationship he could have shared with Annie. Owen believes Annie to belong to the infinite world and thinks that, as a result, she can lift his artistic abilities beyond his own individual capacity. When Owen learns that Annie, too, is part of the finite world, he casts her aside, along with all human contact. Because of this, Urban explains, Owen ends up having accomplished nothing more than an insubstantial, hollow triumph in his creation of the butterfly because, had he turned to the finite rather than the infinite, he could have done much more. To Urban, Hawthorne is trying to persuade his readers that relying on the infinite world in any way is limiting, while relying on the finite world alone lifts a person to excellence.

Frederick Newberry also focuses on the short story “The Artist of the Beautiful” in his essay ““The Artist of the Beautiful’: Crossing the Transcendent Divide in Hawthorne’s Fiction,” although in contrast with Urban’s analysis, he discusses the importance of imagination in Hawthorne’s writing. Newberry’s main focus is on how there is no imagination or fantasy in the finite world, but only a substitution for fantasy found in materialism, which is nothing more than a “brain-numbing ideology” (95). Owen, however, does not subscribe to this ideology, and as a result, his butterfly “offers the worldmaking gift of imagination and fantasy” (Newberry 94). Newberry describes the butterfly’s emergence at the end of the story as “a transcendent, because imaginative, event—a pure and not-so-simple reification that shatters the everyday world of appearances” (89). The butterfly is a melding of imagination and reality that surpasses what is possible in nature, the imagination coming from Owen and the reality coming from the living creature it was based on. From this, Newberry concludes that “Hawthorne clearly believes that the imagination plays a decisive role in organizing and drawing conclusions from sensory impressions and associational functions” (96). Hawthorne shows through his characters that “waysides,” or “depart[ing] . . . from the beaten tracks of their mental thoroughfares,” practicality, and societal norms, “afford the indispensable opportunity to imagine, fantasize, and dream; and they in turn permit characters (and us) to reenter the everyday world prepared to create it anew” (Newberry 96). Newberry believes Hawthorne includes imaginative fantasies in his stories to show the importance of having imagination in daily life.

Taylor Stoehr condenses all of these critics’ thoughts down into a single idea in his essay ““Young Goodman Brown’ and Hawthorne’s Theory of Mimesis.” Stoehr’s driving point is that Hawthorne “puts the confrontation between the imaginary and the real directly into his plots, as the focus of interest rather than as the means to an effect” to the point that many of his stories are “*about* the relations of fiction and reality, a study of the true-to-life” (396). Hawthorne’s goal is

to connect imagination and reality together while also showing the contrast between them, for “serious analyses of the relations between dream and reality occur in tale after tale. In these, Hawthorne sometimes trusts the dream, sometimes the reality, sometimes cannot decide between them” (Stoehr 400). This is evident because Hawthorne portrays the character’s dreams just as realistically as their actual experiences. The only indication readers have of which is which is in the ambiguous language Hawthorne uses; he often describes events with terms such as “as if” and asks the reader to “suppose” things. While discussing this concept, Stoehr quotes from Emerson’s *Nature* when Emerson says, “A dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments” (408), and he then submits that this is what Hawthorne suggests in his writing. Stoehr ends with the idea that Hawthorne always admonishes his readers not to take dreams and imagination as fact, but to temper them with reality.

Given the insights of these critics, it is evident, then, that this question of why Hawthorne continually contrasts fantasy and reality does have a connection to how these elements affect mankind. In Hawthorne’s short stories, he reveals that a person needs to have both reality, through knowledge of the physical world, and fantasy, through imagination of how the world could be, in his or her life; without both of these elements, it is impossible to have a firm understanding of things as they really are, which ultimately leads to self-destructive behavior. This revelation becomes clear through an in-depth study of the short stories “Wakefield,” “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Birthmark,” and “The Artist of the Beautiful.”

In Hawthorne’s “Wakefield,” neither fantasy nor reality is used in any strong context in the story. Although at first glance this seems to violate the established pattern of reality and fantasy influencing humanity in some way, this story actually illustrates what happens when a person is lacking both elements in their life. Wakefield is a very ordinary, forgettable individual. He is “characterized by a ‘certain sluggishness,’ by an intellect given to ‘long and lazy musings,

that tended to no purpose'; his thoughts are 'seldom so energetic as to seize hold of words. Imagination, in the proper meaning of the term, made no part of Wakefield's gifts'" (Polk 560). Given this description, it is clear that Wakefield is not well-established in reality. Reality involves the physical world, interacting with others and with concrete things, and yet even Wakefield's thoughts are wandering to the point that he rarely even forms words. And he is described as an "intellectual, but not actively so" ("Wakefield" 76), which, combined with his "sluggishness," leaves him disconnected from the world around him. He exists in the world, but is not an active part of it. The narrator also explains that Wakefield does not possess the gift of imagination, which is necessary in order to connect with the fantasy realm. In short, Wakefield has nothing in his life, neither fantasy nor reality, and as a result, Wakefield lacks understanding of things as they really are.

This void in Wakefield's understanding is not made immediately apparent. All the narrator reveals is that, as a result of his inactive mind, Wakefield has developed "a quiet selfishness . . . of a peculiar sort of vanity" ("Wakefield" 76). Because Wakefield does not understand reality, and it does not play a part in his life, he has developed this selfishness, this belief that he is important and therefore everything he does is important. He also lacks understanding of himself, evident in the narrator's comment that "he has taken this very singular step, with the consciousness of a purpose, indeed, but without being able to define it sufficiently for his own contemplation" ("Wakefield" 78). This inflated opinion of self combined with a misunderstanding of self leads Wakefield to live in an apartment just up the street from his own house so that he might discover "how the little sphere of creatures and circumstances, in which he was a central object, will be affected by his removal" ("Wakefield" 78). Because Wakefield lacks the capacity to imagine how his absence would affect those in his life, he instead chooses to actually live out the hypothetical situation. Polk explains Wakefield's state of mind in this way:

Wakefield desperately wants to be discovered, to be observed, so that he will signify something: he is, he thinks, doing something ‘singular,’ something that lifts him out of the crowd, out of the blur of the quotidian, out of the ordinariness of domesticity. But of course in his thinking he cannot be singular unless some observer authenticates him as such; his desire to be seen as singular, then, in effect cancels itself out. (560)

It is because of Wakefield’s disconnection from reality that he does not realize the “insignificance of his action in relation to the total social organism” (Schiller 112). Had he a better grasp of how the world really works and his place in the real world, he would not have endeavored to force a revelation about his importance in the world. Even the narrator is aware of Wakefield’s predicament, commenting, “Little knowest thou thine own insignificance in this great world!” (“Wakefield” 77). Without a firm grounding in both fantasy and reality, however, Wakefield is unaware of the implications of what he has done, and as a result, he loses himself and everything that is important to him.

Wakefield’s downward spiral is a result of his sluggishness. He is “a man of habits” (“Wakefield” 78), meaning he does not possess the imagination necessary to make changes once a system has been established. As a result, he does not return home because “a retrograde movement to the old would be almost as difficult as the step that placed him in his unparalleled position” (“Wakefield” 79). His selfishness also plays a part in his refusal to go back in that “he is rendered obstinate by a sulkiness” (“Wakefield” 79). His unrealistic opinion of himself, caused by his disconnection from reality, makes it impossible for him to go back until he sees proof that his absence has had an effect on someone, his wife in particular. As Polk explains, “He uses his absence, then, to manipulate a reaction, to force from his wife a reaction consistent with his need to have his own significance confirmed; he does not want to abandon his life, but rather to live

that life at a distance from it” (561). Wakefield succeeds in distancing himself from his life, and because of this, he becomes not just disconnected from reality but literally unattached from it. He no longer functions as a part of reality. As the narrator puts it, he manages to “dissever himself from the world—to vanish—to give up his place and privileges with living men, without being admitted among the dead” (“Wakefield” 80). In the end, Wakefield is so unattached from things as they really are that he cannot even acknowledge the changes that have transpired due to his long absence away from home “but deem[s] himself the same man as ever” (“Wakefield” 81). It is only because of “an unpremeditated moment” (“Wakefield” 81) that Wakefield returns home at all, and more as a result of his reliance on habit than an actual change of heart.

Wakefield stands as an example of what happens when a person becomes removed from all aspects of fantasy and reality in their life:

He is not, nor cannot be involved in the world in which he nominally exists.

Wakefield, neither alive nor dead, is in a state of social limbo. His purgation is to be tormented by the life around him, of which he cannot partake, to be suspended between states of perception and non-perception. He is physically in the world, but though it affects him he can no longer affect it. (Schiller 115)

The punishment for ignoring the importance of fantasy and reality in life, then, is a state of nonexistence, a life of physical presence but spiritual absence. The narrator even leaves readers with the warning that “by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place for ever” (“Wakefield” 82). Wakefield loses his place in humanity because he does not understand mankind and the reality of the world they live in, and he loses himself because he does not understand his own mind and intentions, nor can he imagine the possibilities that lay ahead. For twenty years, he neither lives in a fantasy world nor in reality, but in a state of day-to-day existence not understanding his own actions. Because of this, he fades away,

becoming nothing. Without experiencing fantasy or being grounded in reality, Wakefield loses the ability to see the results of his actions and, ultimately, understand himself, becoming trapped in a web created by his own self-destructive behavior.

In “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne utilizes the element of fantasy through the medium of an imaginative, dream-like state, but it still does not seem to be enough without being paired with reality. To understand this, this question must first be answered: “If it has a dream in it, [it] must also have a reality, and there are no very clear boundaries marking the one off from the other. Where does it begin?” (Stoehr 402). The story starts out real enough. Brown begins with a normal view of life, being a happily married man of three months who loves his wife, evident by the fact that he “put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife” (“Brown” 65). As soon as he leaves Faith, however, the border between reality and fantasy blurs. Right after Brown worries to himself, ““What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!”” (“Brown” 66), the devil makes his appearance, as though Brown’s imagination conjures him up. The reality of this experience is also brought into question by the fact that Brown finds Faith’s pink ribbon in the forest. It seems unlikely that the ribbon was actually there because, at the end of the story, Brown sees “the head of Faith, with the pink ribbons, gazing anxiously forth” (“Brown” 75). Both of the ribbons are accounted for, making the ribbon Brown finds in the forest “as much an illusion as everything else Brown thinks he sees or hears” (Berkove 1273). In addition, the moment Brown tells Faith to resist the devil at the communion, “he found himself amid calm night and solitude . . . He staggered against the rock, and felt it chill and damp; while a hanging twig, that had been all on fire, besprinkled his cheek with the coldest dew” (“Brown” 74). Given the coolness of the rock and the dampness of the twig that were supposedly just on fire, it is clear that the meeting Brown thought he saw there could not have been a real experience in the physical world, but must have, instead, been a

fantasy, an illusion created by his own imagination. It seems, then, that the answer to the question the narrator raises, “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?” (“Brown” 75), is yes. Brown does indeed dream the whole event, but he dreams it for a reason.

All the elements in Brown’s dream reflect secret fears or hidden desires he harbors deep within himself. With the understanding that Brown’s experience is indeed a dream,

We must then regard his loss of his faith, both wife and virtue, as a kind of wish—at least we may say that he imagines the loss, and thus far chooses it. He similarly imagines the worst of all mankind, and by so imagining these horrors, he wakes into the condition of believing them . . . his dream becomes his waking life—what he imagines comes true for him. (Stoehr 402)

Brown’s vision of his whole town turning to evil is preceded by the statement, when he finds Faith’s ribbon in the forest, “My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil, for to thee is this world given” (“Brown” 71). And the fact that he imagines himself meeting with the devil in the first place is also indicative of his dark thoughts toward his own faith, as well as the faith of his ancestors and the townsfolk. Because Brown inwardly fears this loss of faith and goodness in the world, his wife, and himself, he imagines an event that brings his worst fears to life. He then gives into his imagined fate; at the meeting, he “approached the congregation, with whom he felt a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart” (“Brown” 73). The reality of the situation is that the people of Salem are indeed just “faces that would be seen next day at the council board of the province, and others which, Sabbath after Sabbath, looked devoutly heavenward” (“Brown” 72), but Brown is blinded by the visions created by his imagination. In this sense, Brown’s experience “depicts how inaccurate perception can be and how often ambiguity attends reality or illusion

cloaks it and, therefore, how recognition of these complications should discourage simplistic judgments” (Berkove 1270). Goodman Brown allows fantasy to cloak the reality that the people in Salem are the same as they have always been and that Faith has done nothing but wait for him to return home. Because of this, he loses his ability to see things as they really are beneath the haze of his fantasy.

Brown is vastly changed as a result of relying too heavily on fantasy without the influence of reality to temper it. As Herndon puts it, “He took earthly illusion for reality and ceased to see the strivings for good in his imperfect fellow creatures: all he could see was imperfection and evil” (539). Because Brown believes his dream to be reality, it turns into his reality. He becomes “a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man” (“Brown” 75) who cannot hear or look upon the faces of the townspeople without shuddering. He even “[shrinks] from the bosom of Faith” and is no longer a faithful man, for “when the family knelt down at prayer, he scowled, and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away” (“Brown” 75). Essentially, Brown loses his sense of reality, of what is real and what is not, believing the words of the devil when he says, “Now are ye undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind” (“Brown” 74). Had Brown recognized the dream for what it was, he would have been able to live a much happier life by simply keeping in mind the dream’s message that he needs to hold fast to his faith and his wife in order to prevent himself from straying into the grasp of the devil. But because he chooses fantasy over reality, when he dies, “they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone; for his dying hour was gloom” (“Brown” 75). Without the stabilizing effect of reality, of knowledge of things as they really are, Brown turns to self-destructive behavior, losing himself to his fear and suspicion and becoming unable to break away from the world created by his imagination.

In contrast with Brown, Aylmer in “The Birthmark” has the opposite problem of focusing

so much on reality, on an ideal world he creates through his scientific knowledge and experiments, that he too loses perspective without the eye-opening presence of fantasy. Reality is never enough for him; he is constantly striving to create the perfect reality. Aylmer is described from the beginning as “a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy” (“Birthmark” 118), and so he knows exactly what things look like inside and out, how they work, and everything else there is to know about them. He is an expert in the knowledge of reality, in knowing things for what they are and what they can become in the physical, material world. His devotion to reality is so great that nothing comes before his love of science, not even his wife. As the narrator explains, “His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science and uniting the strength of the latter to his own” (“Birthmark” 118). In addition to Aylmer’s love of science, he also has a desire for worldly knowledge so he can continue striving to create an idealized reality; however, this is what creates his problem. In the past, “he had studied the wonders of the human frame, and attempted to fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates all her precious influences from earth and air . . . to create and foster man, her masterpiece” (“Birthmark” 122). This reveals that Aylmer is never content with the knowledge he has or how things really are and is therefore always yearning for something greater. In his library are books from ancient naturalists who “imagined themselves to have acquired from the investigation of Nature a power above Nature” (“Birthmark” 126), or in other words, a power above reality. Because of this knowledge of reality he holds, Aylmer comes to believe that he has the ability to create an ideal world and that he can, as the naturalists before him, improve on nature because “Nature itself is to be corrected, to be made perfect” (Brooks and Warren 186). Aylmer’s aspirations of perfecting reality become centered on his wife, Georgiana. Her birthmark, a tiny crimson hand, is the only imperfection in Georgiana’s otherwise perfect form, and he becomes

obsessed with gaining the knowledge needed to remove it so he can make her perfect and thereby fit into his idealized world.

Aylmer's confidence in his scientific knowledge prevents him from admitting that his self-appointed task of making his wife part of his ideal world is beyond his understanding. When Georgiana asks him if he can remove the birthmark, he immediately answers, "I am convinced of the perfect practicability of its removal" ("Birthmark" 121). He even gloats to himself, "What will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work!" ("Birthmark" 122). Aylmer is fully convinced of his success from the beginning, and his thoughts dwell on the glory he will receive from the world when he accomplishes what seems to be impossible. It is important to remember that "had Aylmer not been a scientist, a daring experimenter, the birthmark on his wife's cheek would hardly have come to obsess him . . . had not the thought that it lay within his power to remove it insinuated itself into Aylmer's imagination" (Brooks and Warren 186). It is only because Aylmer is so centered on science and his ideal reality that he is endeavoring to remove his wife's birthmark. And even at the end, he remains confident in his scientific knowledge, telling his wife as he hands her the cure, "The concoction of the draught has been perfect . . . Unless all my science has deceived me, it cannot fail" ("Birthmark" 129). It is only when Georgiana dies in his arms that he realizes his mistake in relying too heavily on reality and not enough on fantasy, for he was given a premonition of the outcome of his experiment in a dream.

In his dream, Aylmer is operating on Georgiana in order to remove the birthmark, "but the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana's heart; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away" ("Birthmark" 121). This dream is a clear sign to Aylmer that "what he is about to attempt is tied in so intimately with Georgiana's very life itself . . . that he should not

attempt the removal of the birthmark” (Pebworth 20). The dream is a manifestation of the fantasy world as it reaches out to him, showing him the end result of his severe reliance on reality and his scientific knowledge. The narrator even comments, “Truth often finds its way to the mind close muffled in robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practise an unconscious self-deception during our waking moments” (“Birthmark” 121). But Aylmer refuses to listen to the warning. He turns away from fantasy, from this prophetic dream he is given, and because of this, “the dream becomes reality when Aylmer attempts the removal of the birthmark and succeeds, only to have his wife, now free of her one mark of mortality, die” (Pebworth 20). He makes the fantasy become reality because he cannot accept that his science cannot find the answer to how to make his idealized world real.

Aylmer’s binding connection to the pure reality of science and his devotion to his idealized reality prevent him from understanding things as they really are. He focuses so much on the hard facts of the reality that could be that he cannot see the realities his imagination points out, such as the fact that “perfection is something never achieved on earth and in terms of mortality” (Brooks and Warren 187). To Aylmer’s scientific understanding, it is indeed possible for perfection to be found on earth. However, “he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present” (“Birthmark” 131), or in other words, he did not use his imagination to consider the possibilities outside the binding limitations of reality. Basically, “Aylmer tries to achieve what is impossible and thus commits a folly” (Brooks and Warren 187). Without the guidance of fantasy, Aylmer cannot see the path that lies before him but only the path right in front of him, and as a result, he falls prey to his own self-destructive blindness.

In contrast to the characters in Hawthorne’s other stories, Owen Warland in “The Artist of the Beautiful” brings both fantasy and reality together in a harmonious union. However,

Hawthorne here uses fantasy and reality a little differently than in his other stories by representing these elements through more external forces. The fantasy element in this story is found in the mechanical butterfly and everything that goes into it. Owen's intentions were to "imitate the beautiful movements of Nature as exemplified in the flight of birds or the activity of little animals" ("Artist" 161), and even the subject of his spiritualized machinery is "sacred as the absorbing dream of his imagination" ("Artist" 163). The butterfly is a result of Owen's imagination: his belief in the possibility of imbuing a mechanism with spirit. As Owen explains to Annie when he gives the butterfly to her, "It absorbed my own being into itself; and in the secret of that butterfly, and in its beauty . . . is represented the intellect, the imagination, the sensibility, the soul, of an Artist of the Beautiful" ("Artist" 174). In this creation, Owen is employing "the practice of those 'imagination' that 'try to achieve a tenuous, mystical contact with the finite, touching it just sufficiently . . . to produce mystical vision, but not solidly enough . . . for their vision to be impaired by the actuality of things'" (Urban 343). In contrast, reality is represented in this story by the characters, but specifically Robert Danforth and Annie Hovenden. Peter Hovenden places Danforth in this position when he gives his opinion of Danforth, saying, "He spends his labor upon a reality . . . it is a good and a wholesome thing to depend upon main strength and reality'" ("Artist" 160). Danforth, then, is a man of the world whose perspective is focused wholly on reality, on what he can see and touch. He makes this clear when, as Owen is showing the butterfly to Danforth, Danforth is more impressed with the workmanship of the box Owen created to hold the butterfly than in the butterfly itself. Annie is connected with reality through her marriage to Danforth, and Owen also makes this connection at the very end, realizing she is a "representative of the world" ("Artist" 175). These two elements, fantasy and reality, interact with each other throughout Owen's experiences, changing him and helping him to realize the need for both in his life.

Through Owen's journey to learn how to combine fantasy and reality, he experiences all of the possible ways to use these elements in his life, first relying just on reality, then on fantasy, and then on neither until he finally learns how to incorporate both together. At the beginning, Owen, like Aylmer, is a man of science, though known for "a delicate ingenuity . . . always for purposes of grace, and never with any mockery of the useful" ("Artist" 161). What makes Owen different from Aylmer is his natural tendency toward imagination to the point that his mentor, Peter Hovenden, feels the need to "restrain his creative eccentricity within bounds" ("Artist" 162) during Owen's apprenticeship. At first, Owen does not understand how to properly utilize this imaginative energy, and so while working on his first attempt to spiritualize machinery, he "drew all his science and manual dexterity into itself, and likewise gave full employment to the characteristic tendencies of his genius" ("Artist" 162). He is mainly focused on the science of how to make his idea a reality rather than relying on his imagination as well. It is his over devotion to reality that causes the first destruction of this first prototype, for he allows Danforth, representative of reality, to distract him; Owen claims that Danforth's influence "'bewildered [him] and obscured [his] perception'" ("Artist" 164). Owen's mindset on reality alone is revealed further when, after his life's work is destroyed, he loses his imaginative abilities and instead "applied himself to business with dogged industry" ("Artist" 164). He buries himself in reality, losing his sense of things as they really are, and remains lost until Peter Hovenden reminds Owen of his vision by criticizing it. Owen is then able to recover from this experience; he changes, turning instead toward fantasy to lead him on the path he wants to take.

For his next attempt at spiritualizing machinery, Owen takes to relying purely on his imagination. He starts "wandering through the woods and fields along the banks of streams. There, like a child, he found amusement in chasing butterflies or watching the motions of water insects" ("Artist" 166), using this time to imagine how he can somehow capture the spirit of the

butterflies and include it in his own butterfly. He takes to working during the night, the time of dreams and imagination, rather than during the daytime. And he seems to be making progress in achieving his goal, but Owen's mistake is in also imbuing Annie with elements of fantasy. The problem is that "Owen has never taken any legitimate steps to explore the finite reality of Annie's being. His initial idealization of her is based wholly on his own ethereal appraisal of what his spirit needs to sustain artistic output" (Urban 355). Because of this, Owen misconstrues her character, "deceiv[ing] himself" by endowing Annie with qualities she doesn't have" (Urban 355), which is why he is again crushed when Annie breaks his second prototype. This time, however, instead of turning to reality for comfort, he uses wine to push himself further into the realm of fantasy, for "its vapor did but shroud life in gloom and fill the gloom with spectres that mocked at him," and it made it so "all was but a delusion" ("Artist" 168). What saves him from his self-destructive behavior this time is a chance encounter with a butterfly that reminds him of his higher purpose. But it is clear that he has not yet given up on Annie because, when Peter Hovenden announces Annie's engagement to Robert Danforth, Owen destroys his third prototype in his shock. He then turns away from both reality and fantasy in his depression, becoming, like Wakefield, nothing more than an empty shell going through the motions of living.

His masterpiece destroyed for the third time, Owen falls into a state where he is neither alive nor dead, but merely living, existing outside of reality and casting off the fantastic ideas he once believed possible. He gains a large amount of weight, an obvious indication of his disconnect from his reality since "his small and slender frame assumed an obtuser garniture of flesh than it had ever before worn" ("Artist" 170). This shows a lack of care and regard for his own needs in the realm of reality to the point that basically "the artist gives up trying" (Urban 357). Nothing matters to him anymore. He similarly stops caring about his connection to the

realm of fantasy, choosing to disbelieve that such ideas he once had faith in could ever be possible, even going so far as to say, “Now that I have acquired a little common sense, it makes me laugh to think of it” (“Artist” 171). This common sense he gains is “the wisdom which rejected much that even his eye could see, and trusted confidently in nothing but what his hand could touch” (“Artist” 171). Since he has cut himself off from the world, his hand can only touch the things he tells himself are true. Because of this, Owen Warland loses his place in reality and “his faith in the invisible” (“Artist” 171). Like Wakefield, “It was as if the spirit had gone out of him, leaving the body to flourish in a sort of vegetable existence” (“Artist” 170), showing again the idea that a person is nothing without some connection to fantasy and reality in their life. And Owen’s transformation from empty, spiritless shell to a confident artist of the beautiful proves that a person needs a strong connection to both of these elements in order to truly understand things as they really are.

The relationship between fantasy, reality, and a true understanding of the world can be seen through Owen’s success at creating his life’s work. Though the specifics of how Owen comes back to himself after his self-destructive episode are not revealed, what the narrator does explain gives a clue into the origin of his revelation: “[Owen’s] first impulse was to thank Heaven for rendering him again the being of thought, imagination, and keenest sensibility that he had long ceased to be” (“Artist” 171). Owen is grateful that not only has he regained his ability to think, the rational part of him that connects him to reality, he has also rediscovered his capacity for imagination, the creative part of him that connects him to fantasy. It takes both in order for Owen to fully recover. And because he has now embraced both of these elements, he is finally able to create the spiritualized machinery he has been striving for all this time. As Newberry explains, “Owen fully understands the salvific need to integrate childlikeness and imagination with adulthood and rationality” (92). This is evident in the statement Owen makes

when Annie asks if his butterfly is alive, saying, “It has absorbed my own being into itself; and in the secret of that butterfly, and in its beauty . . . is represented the intellect, the imagination, the sensibility, the soul of an Artist of the Beautiful!” (“Artist” 174). Owen acknowledges that his butterfly has been imbued with both his intelligence (reality) and his imagination (fantasy). This indicates an understanding that these elements had to be present in himself so that he could then give those to his creation.

It is unfortunate that this transformation Owen undergoes comes too late for him to claim Annie, though he does try to save her from the pure reality of her life: “Owen gently begs Annie to consider that, as she gets older, she becomes further removed from the childhood world of make-believe, fantasy, or imagination. Contained in his plea, of course, is the urgent advice for her to accept the butterfly as an agent of mortal redemption from overreliance on a rationalist psychology” (Newberry 91). Though Annie does not understand what Owen is asking of her, this does show the shift in Owen’s understanding. He knows from his own experience what happens when someone relies wholly upon reality, and he does not want Annie to lose herself to it as he did.

Having gained both fantasy and reality in his life, however, Owen has come to truly understand the nature of what he does. When his creation is destroyed at the very end of the story, the narrator explains the epiphany Owen experiences:

He looked placidly at what seemed the ruin of his life’s labor, and which was yet no ruin. He had caught a far other butterfly than this. When the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality. (“Artist” 177)

Unlike the prototypes before, Owen now understands that neither the physical manifestation of

his design, the butterfly, nor the imagination that brought about his creation, the idea for the butterfly, was the most important thing. What really matters to him in the end is that he had this experience where he learned how to mesh fantasy and reality together into something truly beautiful. Through Owen's "imagination and talent life becomes transformed through a new way of seeing" (Newberry 88). It is this new way of seeing the world that Hawthorne wants his readers to understand: that ability to unite fantasy and reality together into a figurative lens that enables people to see things for what they really are, not for what they could be or are imagined to be.

Given the example of Owen, it is clear that there is a connection between people having fantasy and reality in their life and them being able to really see the world for what it is. And Hawthorne utilizes the elements of fantasy and reality in his stories to show this pattern through the experiences and ultimate fates of his characters. Through the examples of these characters, Hawthorne shows that having neither fantasy nor reality leads to a complete disconnect from the world and self, having only fantasy leads to delusion and an inability to escape imagination, and having only reality leads to blindness to the necessary guidance of imagination. Only those who master the ability to use both fantasy and reality in a unified purpose can escape these self-destructive behaviors in order to truly see things as they really are.

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