Chapter VIII

Conclusion

In the previous chapters of this thesis, an attempt has been made to establish that the fictional world of Hawthorne can mean many other things to other critics but it is a definite fictional representation of the leading ideologies of his time along with the author’s special interest in his ancestral history. In examining Hawthorne’s fictional domain, the focus was on two historical centers. The first centre was the first generation of the Puritan settlers in the 17th century New England and the other centre was the 19th century America.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s criticism in general showed a remarkable fascination for the symbolic and moral meaning, and allegorical dimensions of his fictional world. The traditional approach to Hawthorne’s fiction forcefully asserted that he had no knowledge of society and politics of his day. Yvor Winter in “Maule’s Curse, or Hawthorne and the Problem of Allegory” [1937] focused on Hawthorne’s allegorical design. The interpretation of his work as a moral allegory, limits the meaning of his work which is written by a“... sombre youth who lived in solitude and in contemplation in Salem, for a dozen years or more, before succumbing to the charm and propinquity of Miss Sophia Peabody and making the spasmodic and only moderately successful efforts to accustom himself to daylight which were to vex the remainder of his life, was one far more likely to concern himself with the theory of mankind than with chaos, trivial, brutal and exhausting of the actuality”(Kaul 12).
James defined Hawthorne as a moralist, whose tales “are glimpses of a great field, of the whole deep mystery of man’s soul and conscience. They are moral, and their interest is moral; they deal with something more than accidents and conventionalities, the surface occurrences of life (59). Various critical approaches to his work categorized his work as a romance, where the real and marvelous were mingled. Hawthorne had generally been regarded as a dweller in the shadows of history who weaved his tales out of the haunted memories of the Puritan past and from the depths of his own eerie, yet, warm and human fantasies. The earliest critical approaches to Hawthorne’s works found a recurring theme of the end of innocence after an awareness of one’s self and human nature which altered everything.

The general impressions of his being an isolated and shadowy figure are doubtlessly exaggerated and his tales are analyzed in the same light. Against these traditional readings of Hawthorne’s fictional world, this thesis attempts to supply readers with a sense of milieu in which these tales were written. Allegory and symbolism are the devices used by Hawthorne which owe their birth to Swedenborg, a widely known writer among English Romantics and American Transcendentalists in the 19th century to convey multi-layered meaning hidden in a culture and society. According to Swedenborg’s doctrine of “Correspondences” all objects of the physical world are expressions of thoughts and feelings of which they are perpetual symbols. Hawthorne’s contemporary Emerson poetically expounded this point in his pamphlet Nature in 1836 and a similar doctrine was preached by the French socialist, Charles Fourier.

The leading ideology of Hawthorne’s time was “transcendentalism”. Hawthorne never avowed its principles in his works but its tenets bespoke themselves unashamed in
his tales through events and characters. Hawthorne lived in close proximity with many renowned transcendentalists at Concord and the present thesis focused on the extent of their influence on him as a man and writer. Sophia Peabody recollected, “Mr. Emerson delights in him; he talks to him all the time, and Mr. Hawthorne’s looks answer. He seems to fascinate Mr. Emerson. Whenever he comes to see him, he takes him away, so that no one may interrupt him in his close and dead –set attack upon his ear” (Mather 159).

The clash of dominant and repressed class encourages artistic expression to imitate objective reality. There is a definite political structure and ideology embedded in Hawthorne’s fiction. His self is fashioned as a sophisticated response to a whole series of cultural problems in his time. His characters Zenobia, Priscilla, Hollingsworth, Hepzibah Pyncheon, Jaffrey Pyncheon, Holgrave, Phoebe, Hester Prynne, Donatello, Rappaccini, Baglioni are not merely characters but representatives of specific ideologies.

Hawthorne’s allegiance to democratic ideologies provided him with a balanced perspective while studying Puritan history. He found that Puritans acted as a kind of military dictators in enforcing laws based on their religious convictions. The church was their governing body and ministers were their agents as chosen people of God to rule the common man in every sphere. In their pursuit of Utopia, the Puritans in the 17th century brutally suffocated and devoiced all voices of dissonance. Even trivial matters were promulgated as theological dogma; slight offences were considered sin against God. The differences of opinion became differences of faith, innovators became heretics and critics of power were declared blasphemers. Under these undemocratic conditions, Hester’s sin of adultery becomes a sin against state in The Scarlet Letter.
As transcendentalism places an individual self at the centre of experience, individualistic Hester never tries to evade the moral accountability of her adultery. In this text, Governor Bellingham and John Wilson are projected as prowess of legal training. Their words reflect the view of the whole colonial authority and the governing outlook of people. Like her antecedent Anne Hutchinson of the 17th century, Hester challenges the male hegemony of her culture. She dares to extricate herself from the dictatorial regime of the spiritual leaders to follow the guidelines of her heart. As a dissenter, she tries to undermine the strength of established system of the government. Hester is expelled from the colony like Ann Hutchinson by ministers and rulers to maintain status quo.

In the character of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne has projected the issues of romantic individual under a despotic regime. She represents a new woman who emerged in the 19th century under the guidance of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Martha C. Wright, and Mary Ann McClintock. These female activists worked incessantly to redefine gender roles in sexual politics in the 19th century. This expounded ideology of the new woman is further projected and elaborated in the character of Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*.

Zenobia ventures to challenge the long-established social customs in the field of marriage and sexual relations. She rejects the conformist ideology governed by male pedagogy. It is interesting to note that these self opinionated and self assertive females like Hester Prynne and Zenobia behave and act according to the unwritten code of conduct for females at the end emerge as conformists.

The treatment of these assertive females betrays Hawthorne’s apprehension regarding prospective matriarchy in his own domestic world and the fear of ink stained
amazons for his career. The demand for changed legal and political status of females in the wake of women’s right movement and romantic individualistic theory of transcendentalism is in the background of his cultural productions.

In spite of Hawthorne’s dismissal of any influence of transcendentalist philosophy on him, his character Donatello in *The Marble Faun* like Hester Prynne emphasizes the importance and role of the individual conscience. They celebrate the value of intuition in the matters of moral guidance and inspiration irrespective of external restrain and formal guidance as has been discussed in Emerson’s essay on “Circle”. In delineating his character, the author is guided by the writings of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson regarding the role of conscience in a civilized society.

In the character of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne projected and illustrated the doctrine of compensation as dealt at length by Emerson in his essay on “Compensation”. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne expressed his distrust for self-styled reformers through denunciation of Hollingsworth’s character. Hollingsworth turns into a violent and reckless detractor when the subject of the reformation of criminals engrosses his feelings and he plays havoc in the lives of other characters.

Reform movements were inspired by the philanthropists’ dream of total regeneration of the community. All embracing perfectionism was one of the notable features of the early 19th century humanitarianism. Reformers pinned their hope upon the model community. Hawthorne’s tales “Shaker’s Bridal” and “The Canterbury Pilgrims” were also inspired by his first hand experience of Shaker establishments at New Hampshire and Hancock which he had visited personally and found them ridiculous and
impractical. Like Hawthorne, his contemporary Emerson also found that the reformers propagated the very evil they proclaimed to remedy.

Reforms have their high origin in an ideal justice, but they do not retain the purity of an idea. They are quickly organized in some low, inadequate form, and present no more poetic image to the mind, than the evil tradition which they reprobated. They mix the fire of the moral sentiment with personal and party heats, with measureless exaggerations, and the blindness that prefers some darling measure to justice and truth. Those who are urging with most ardor what are call the greatest benefits of mankind, are narrow, self-pleasing, conceited men, and affect us as the insane do. (Leopold and Link 325-326)

In the 19th century with the emergence of the democrat Jackson on the political firmament, the political and social paradigms shifted. The aristocratic privileges were on the verge of elimination and democracy was on the rise. It was the subject of his novel *The House of Seven Gables*. The fictional projection of the rivalry between the proletarian Maule and aristocratic Pynchon in the novel was written in the backdrop of contention for gaining privileges between commonality and nobility in the 19th century.

In this changed social set up, hereditary class privileges were nullified and individual talent and capabilities bespoke themselves aloud. Hawthorne’s close association with the emerging democratic ideology, his friendship with Franklin Pierce and Horatio Bridge counted for his preference of republican mode of government but with certain reservation about professional, selfish, and unethical politics. In delineating
the character of Jaffrey Pyncheon, Hawthorne indulged in caricaturing his political opponents who contrived his expulsion from the Salem custom house.

Holgrave’s tryst with mesmerism as lecturer in The House of the Seven Gables and Zenobia’s alliance with mesmerist Westervelt provided Hawthorne with an opportunity to discuss the nefarious aspect of this science which emerged in the 19th century as corollary of reform in the field of medicine. Hawthorne distrusted the various currents of western esotericism, especially spiritualism, as it was an intrusion into man’s soul. Examples have been given from Hawthorne’s epistles to his sweetheart Sophia to prove the points discussed in the previous chapters.

The incipient democratic spirit of the Puritans opposed aristocratic English society but they themselves turned atrocious and undemocratic in trampling peoples’ right to think and act on their will in the new colony. Hawthorne’s tales “The Maypole of Merry Mount” and “Endicott and Red Cross” are centered on the issue of Puritan rigidity and narrowness. Hawthorne’s democratic temper and his pragmatic vision enabled him to see how democratic and spiritual idealism of the puritan degenerated into a kind of moral bigotry, despotism and self righteous pride. This harsh and unsocial rigidity of puritan society is the object of his criticism in The Scarlet Letter and “The May Pole of Merry Mount”.

In Hawthorne’s novels and tales, living characters and forces struggle to express their historical identity. With a modern foresight, Hawthorne could see economic motive and power politic behind the migration of Puritan to the new world and the persecution of Quakers, instead of imputing only religious motive for it whether it was the case of
Colonel Pyncheon of *The House of Seven Gables*, Endicott in “Maypole of Merry Mount” or Tobias Pearson in “The Gentle Boy”.

Hawthorne’s selected tales in this thesis depict the nuance of a particular historical moment. “The Gentle Boy” displays Hawthorne’s ambivalence towards Puritanism. His tales “My Kinsman Major Molineux” and “The Gray Champion” are written in the background of colonial rule and growing agitation against civil authority in the wake of the revocation of the Massachusetts Charter.

Hawthorne belonged to Puritan heritage but he was capable of questioning the very institutions, ethos and ideology which nurtured him. Against the background of solitary expatriate as had been projected by older critics of Hawthorne’s works, a new Hawthorne is discovered in the recent readings of his tales. This redeemed Hawthorne is embedded in his rich cultural context and politically volatile world. The present reading has made an attempt to reestablish Hawthorne’s relationship with American culture. His character as a writer has been reincarnated in this twenty first century reading. It will be appropriate to conclude this thesis with a quote of T.S Eliot “in one thing alone Hawthorne’s more solid than James: he had a very acute historical sense. His erudition in the small field of American colonial history was extensive and he made most fortunate use of it. But men had that sense of past which is peculiarly American but in Hawthorne this sense exercised itself in a grip on past itself; in James it is sense of the sense” (kaul 4).
Works Cited:


