

The Artist and His Art in “The Artist of the Beautiful”

By

Yukitoshi Hayashi*

Among characters of Hawthorne's works, the artist seems to be one of the most interesting ones. It is partially because, I think, art is just in his line and he cannot help considering both the artist as his character and himself. It seems to influence the author's or the narrator's treatment of the artist in Hawthorne's works. It is sometimes sympathetic and sometimes not. It seems to be even ambivalent and ironical. This essay takes up “The Artist of the Beautiful” as a representative of Hawthorne's works in which you can see how Hawthorne treats his artist, comparing with other similar works. There is, of course, “The Marble Faun,” whose main characters are artists, and which Hawthorne wrote in his latest years. However I will discuss mainly his short stories or tales. The important novel will be dealt with in another occasion.

Owen Warland, the young protagonist of “The Artist of the Beautiful,” is not an artist in its strict sense at first. He used to be an apprentice of Peter Hovenden, a retired watchmaker. He is now a master of his own little shop. But it is described in the story that he had a quality in his childhood which was fit for an artist. People around him who were sensitive thought that “he was attempting to imitate the beautiful movements of nature as exemplified in the flight of birds or the activity of little animals”(450). He is now preoccupied with creating his beautiful mechanism, not “the stiff and regular process of ordinary machinery”(450). On the other hand, Robert Danforce, a young blacksmith who is to marry a daughter of Peter Hovenden, has an opposite quality to Owen's. He belongs to the world of utilitarianism. His character is symbolized by his “sledge-hammer”(453), the symbol of “main strength and reality”(449), which Peter Hovenden highly praises. This quality can also be connected with “a steam-engine”(450). It is the very symbol of strength and utilitarianism. The steam engine appeared in the late eighteenth century and encouraged the Industrial Revolution. However, it causes young Owen to “turn[turned] pale, and grow[grew] sick”(450) because it is quite different from what he is pursuing, that is, something delicate, something minute, something spiritual. Owen says, “My force, ... , is altogether spiritual”(453).

Owen Warland seems to be insulated from the rest of the world, like other separated characters such as Aylmer, Dr. Rappaccini and Beatrice, and Goodman Brown. Most people belong to the common world, which Robert Danforce, Peter Hovenden and his daughter Annie also belong to. But unlikely other stories, “The Artist of the Beautiful” is not so tragic. The protagonist and his world are not described so negatively. Owen does not die in the end of the story like Almer's wife and Rappaccini's daughter. On the contrary, he does not despair even when his successful achievement is destroyed by the little child of Danforce and Annie. His mind is even calm as if he had discovered some truth. Concerning this, Gupta denies such criticism that considers Hawthorne's attitude toward the artist as ambiguous and says that “Hawthorn says clearly, explicitly, and unequivocally, that the pursuit of art is a noble ideal which is

* 釧路高専一般教科

worth following, no matter what suffering it involves, and that the artist is among the most precious possessions of which society can boast, but that society is too blind and insensible to value him properly”(80). I cannot completely agree with this idea that Hawthorne entirely supports artist's position. However, at the same time, it is true that there is quite a difference of Hawthorne's attitudes toward his characters between in “The Artist of the Beautiful” and in other stories which don't have artists as its main characters. It seems clear that he is much more sympathetic to the artist than other more tragic figures, only seeing the end of the story.

What is most remarkable about Owen Warland is his growing up as an artist. In this respect, Gupta says, “The story is really about the development of an artist from the wavering faith of his period of apprenticeship to the serenity which he achieves as he attains maturity”(78). This development seems to help Hawthorne's favorable attitude toward the artist. Owen Warland is at first a member of the world which Peter Hovenden and Robert Danforce belong to. Then he revolts against the world of utilitarianism and pursues his own art. However the process is full of vicissitudes. The process includes his artistic pursuits, that is, creating a mechanical butterfly or “spiritualization of matter”(459), and the relationship between the artist and the society. He is bewildered by the society represented by Hovenden and Danforce, which don't understand his ideal art. Even Annie cannot understand the meaning of his art though he thinks she is different from her father and the young blacksmith. Owen Warland is sometimes in despair and discontinues his pursuits. It is interesting to see butterflies help the artist out of his despair, enabling him to resume his work. Butterfly is a symbol of the artist's spirit. Bassil, referring to the myth of Eros and Psyche, compares the artist's development to transformation of a butterfly. He puts an association between Psyche, butterfly and spirit. He says that “the development of the soul parallels the stages of butterfly metamorphosis” and that “his[His] personal metamorphosis runs parallel to the building of the mechanism”(7). Therefore the last stage of transformation corresponds to the achievement of the artist's pursuit and appearing of a real artist of the beautiful.

The process of the artist's development is also one of the conflicts between the artist and the society. His artistic idealism is not understood by the realistic and utilitarian society. Such disbelief causes the artist to isolate himself more from the society. What he fears most is Peter Hovenden's “cold, unimaginative sagacity”(456). With “main strength,” it is another important characteristic of the age of the Industrial Revolution. It is worse than Robert Danforce's “main strength.” Both of them depress the artist and he cannot keep on his creative work. Such depression is “severe but inevitable test” and “it is requisite for the ideal artist to possess a force of character that seems hardly compatible with its delicacy”(454). It seems quite difficult that the artist and the society have mutual understandings. Or rather, it might be able to be expected because it is artist's nature. And his isolation from the society is generally shared among typical Hawthorne's characters; “To persons whose pursuits are insulated from the common business of life, - who are either in advance of mankind, or apart from it - there often comes a sensation of moral cold, that makes the spirit shiver, as if it had reached the frozen solitudes around the pole”(459). Unlike other characters, however, Owen Warland is not so tragic. It is mainly because of the ending of the story but also because of his development as an artist. He continues his pursuits though with some interruptions.

The role of butterfly is important for the artist's revival. Every time (twice) he revives from depression, the butterfly plays an important role. When he discontinues his work after the visit of Peter Hovenden, he wanders in the woods and chases butterflies. It is “an apt emblem of the ideal pursuit”(457). When he gives himself over to drinking after finding Annie unable to understand his art, a beautiful butterfly comes flying and leads him to resume wandering in the woods. It seems to be “a spirit, commissioned to recall him to the pure, ideal life that had so etherealized him among men”(462). On the third occasion when he loses Annie forever (she gets engaged to Danforce) and also loses his willingness to pursue his

work, it is suggested, though not clearly, that he revives again with a butterfly flying around him to recover "the former purpose of his life"(466). On this third occasion his despair is most serious, more serious than on the second occasion. It is because, as the narrator says, "Forgetful of the time when she had shown herself incapable of any deep response, he had persisted in connecting all his dreams of artistical success with Annie's image"(464). His love for Annie causes him to deceive himself. The narrator seems to be more sympathetic to "the former purpose of his life", criticizing that "he had ceased to be an inhabitant of the better sphere" and that "he had lost his faith in the invisible"(466). It is indicated that the artist should continue or cannot help continuing his pursuits as long as he is an artist. It is "his fortune"(468). Even loss of love seems to be one of the trials that are necessary for his artistic purpose. However, it is not so tragic. The artist revives again. He is promised to succeed in the end.

After five years of labor, Owen Warland succeeds in his mechanical butterfly. He visits the Danforces' residence, where Peter Hovenden happens to be as a guest. It is for the purpose of giving his butterfly to Annie as a bridal gift that he comes. In this stage, it is clear that he has reached much higher state of art than ever. He is full of confidence and is no more bewildered by the presence of Peter Hovenden and Robert Danforce. He is not bewildered even when he notices Annie's "secret scorn"(472), which is too subtle to susceptible to a common sensibility, to his mechanical butterfly. Even Annie, who Owen once thinks can understand his art, proves to be not such being. Much less Danforce and Peter Hovenden. Danforce, who casually says that "that does beat all nature!" still thinks of his physical labor being more useful, calling the butterfly "a pretty plaything"(471). Peter Hovenden cannot even touch it. It is almost dying when he tries to touch it. Thus the practical and utilitarian society does not have the capability of accepting his art. The young child of Danforce and Annie can be said to be the symbol of the new generation of such society. He has his grandfather's sagacity and his father's strength, and breaks the butterfly into pieces at the end of the story. However Owen Warland is calm in spite of its destruction.

What should be considered here is the artist's calmness at the destruction of his product. Before that, it is necessary to look at what the butterfly is for the artist. As sometimes mentioned in the story, it is "spiritualized mechanism"(469). Annie also seems to recognize the idea early. She asks him if it is alive several times when she first sees it. Her surprise might be common in the utilitarian society because the mechanical butterfly looks like, or looks more beautiful than, a real one. And the artist answers her question and says; "it may well be said to possess life, for it absorbed my own being into itself; and in the secret of that butterfly, and in its beauty - which is not merely outward, but deep as its whole system - is represented the intellect, the imagination, the sensibility, the soul, of an Artist of the Beautiful!"(471). In this sense the mechanical butterfly is not a mechanism any more but the Artist's soul. And more interestingly, the product seems to be separated from the artist once it is completed. For he says as follows; "Thou hast gone forth out thy master's heart. There is no return for thee!"(475). This indicates Hawthorne's idea of the relationship between artist and his art. Artist and his art are closely related with each other, but they are not the same. The artistic product is just the symbol of the artist's soul. Once it is finished, it departs the artist and is shown to others. This means that subject is changed into object. It is not object but subject that is of importance. This seems to be the cause of Owen Warland's last calmness. As the narrator says at the end of the story; "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"(475). The artist, like the boy carved on the jewel box, must have "ascended from earth to cloud, and from cloud to celestial atmosphere, to win the Beautiful"(470). It is the essence of beauty, the spirit of beauty, that he seeks and achieves through creating the mechanical butterfly. It is not terrestrial but celestial, and Platonic in its idealism.

What should be considered next is if the end of the story shows the artist's victory or not. It can lead to

how favorably Hawthorne sees the artist. There are a lot of ideas different from critic to critic. Many of them seem to take views that are negative to the victory. For example, Matthiessen takes up negative characteristics of artist like "the[The] lack of sympathy...between him and his neighbors"(224) and associates him to Hawthorne's other characters like Clifford, Dimmesdale, Coverdale and Kenyon. Curran, pointing to Hawthorne's ambivalent attitude, says as follows. "Unable to reconcile the artist and society, he(Hawthorne) grants them an ironic victory, ironic because each feels that the other has lost"(43). He sees here the problem of communication between the artist and the society, which results in irony.

On the other hand, there are sympathetic views to the artist. Bassil criticizes "critics like Millicent Bell, who assert that Owen is...a man who 'has chosen to sever himself from the forge and the hearth . . . and to pursue the isolate aims of the head,'" saying "It is not he who rejects their offers of the heart but rather they who reject his offering – one which is the result of his 'passion for the beautiful' and which is freely and lovingly given to the woman whom he has lost"(15). He sees Owen as a successful artist. About the last three sentences of the tale, he says that they "emphasize the artist's fulfillment, thereby saving the tale from nihilism"(16). He thinks that Owen's creation of the beautiful shows "a psychic transformation which cannot be destroyed" and that "It is this achievement, what Hawthorn calls 'the enjoyment of the reality,' that constitutes Owen's triumph over the forces of industrialism, time, and strength"(16). I also find here the final completion of artist, after some stages of transformation, from just a watchmaker to a true artist. A butterfly, the symbol of artist's spirit, dies. However, it is not the artist's defeat, it may be so in physical world, but spiritually he achieves higher development as an artist.

Yoder argues that "Hawthorne had deep roots in American Romantic tradition"(193), finding a similarity between "The Artist of the Beautiful" and Emerson's "The Poet," and that "the conclusion of this tale is as Romantic as its basic situation because Owen is ultimately the victor"(194). He takes up the contrast "between 'performance' in the sense of the doing and the product, the result of that doing"(200). Relating with "The Poet," he says that "the perfection of art is not the work or object, but the man"(205). The art of the artist is now perfected, therefore he can look at his destroyed artistic product calmly. He becomes a true artist.

As referred to formerly, Gupta denies negative views about Hawthorne's artists and says that "we will find that Hawthorne does not deny or even doubt the supreme value of the artist and his art"(67). Even as for "The artist of the Beautiful, one of the most controversial works, it is not exceptional. Loneliness or isolation is often referred to as one of the typical characteristics in Hawthorne's works. Owen also seems to be lonely and isolated from society. Concerning this, Gupta insists that "no[No] pursuit other than that of art is worth paying the price of loneliness it extracts"(79). It means that Hawthorne most values the art and the artist compared with other characters like the scientist, the priest and the politician.

In "The Artist of the Beautiful," these more sympathetic views are justified in spite of the artist's isolation from society. Owen hates his former master Peter Hovenden. He despises material blacksmith Robert Danforce. He commits himself in creating the beautiful alone. He loses his beloved Annie, who he thinks can understand his art. Although he sometimes despairs, he recovers and gradually grows up as an artist. Finally, as indicated by the last several sentences of the tale, his art is completed and he is calm even if his lifelong artistic product is destroyed. This is not enough to conclude Owen's complete victory over society. However, Hawthorne's treatment of the artist is much more sympathetic than other characters like Aylmer, Dr. Rappaccini and Goodman Brown. Now how about other Hawthorne's works which treat the artist? I will take up two tales as another example.

"Drowne's Wooden Image" was first published in the same year as "The Artist of the Beautiful." Drowne is a mechanical carver and a man of genius but lacks in human warmth "which bestows life

upon the lifeless, and warmth upon the cold”(274-5). He can carve a wooden figure which looks almost alive. But there is a deficiency of touch, which might make the wooden figure really alive. It is his love that gives life to his wooden image of a female figure. Then he becomes a true artist. Guputa sees this function of love “the catalytic effect of love on artistic creativity”(76). Although he is a true artist just temporarily and returns to a mechanical carver again, he achieves a great fame in society and is remembered “as Deacon Drown, the carver”(319). The narrator supports his artistic enthusiasm and asserts that “the very highest state to which a human spirit can attain, in its loftiest aspirations, is its truest and most natural state”(320). This seems to be a very sympathetic view of the artist.

“The Prophetic Pictures” was published several years earlier than the two tales already mentioned. The artist, who is unnamed, seems to be a typical Hawthorne’s character who is isolated from society and commits himself to his own pursuit as described in this way; “Like all other men around whom an engrossed purpose wreathes itself, he was insulated from the mass of human kind. He had no aim – no pleasure – no sympathies – but what were ultimately connected with his art. Though gentle in manner, and upright in intent and action, he did not possess kindly feelings; his heart was cold; no living creature could be brought near enough to keep him warm”(178). The narrator criticizes the artist and says, “It is not good for man to cherish a solitary ambition. Unless there be those around him, by whose example he may regulate himself, his thoughts, desires, and hopes will become extravagant, and he the semblance, perhaps the reality, of a madman”(180). Moreover, the artist commits a sin of prying into others’ souls. His pictures are not only appearances of his subjects but also reflections of their inner souls. In this way the artist, like other Hawthorne’s sinful characters, does not seem to be justified. However, at the end of the tale, he saves the young married couple from the ruin which he predicted before hand by his picture. In this point, the artist is quite different from other characters and might be justified.

What is common to the three tales, particularly typical of “The Artist of the Beautiful, is that the narrator or Hawthorne is more or less sympathetic to the artist. The artist tends to be separated from society, because his art is not understood by common people in utilitarian society. His art is considered as a mere mechanical trifle by other members of society. They cannot understand his true art even if he imbues his artistic product with life. They are just surprised by its miraculous wonder. Annie asks the artist many times, “Is it alive?” about the mechanical butterfly(471). Looking at the Drowne’s wooden image, an old Puritan says, “Drowne has sold himself to the devil”(317). It looks like just “apparition”(317) to the town’s people. Some of general public believe that the painter is “a magician, or perhaps the famous Black Man of old witch-times”(169). Therefore the artist is always solitary, pursuing his artistic ideal alone. However his art is closely related with life. It is encouraged by life. And it even gives life to something lifeless, or predicts the future of its subjects. It makes the art look like God’s creation. Owen says, “I created it[the butterfly]”(471) when Annie asks whether he created it. The painter “almost regarded them[Walter and Elinor] as creations of his own”(179). In the latter two tales, the artist is criticized for having offended God’s realm by conservative people or the lower class of society. On the other hand, in “The Artist of the Beautiful,” the artist is criticized just from the aspect of utilitarianism of society. This seems to mean that the art and the artist are treated as a more contemporary problem for Hawthorne than in the other two tales. Anyway, Hawthorne sympathizes with the art and the artist and hopes that its values will be accepted by society, though he keenly understands its difficulty. That is why the artist is insulated from society. He tries to come in contact with society, like Owen trying to get Annie’s love and visiting Annie for giving her a bridal present, and like the painter revisiting the young couple to see their fate. It is interesting to see Drowne flourish in society after he loses his true art. The following seems to be Hawthorne’s true feelings about the art, the artist and society; “He[Owen] knew that the world..., whatever praise might be bestowed, could never say the fitting word, nor feel the fitting sentiment which should be the perfect recompense of an artist

who, symbolizing a lofty moral by a material trifle, - converting what was earthly, to spiritual gold, - had won the Beautiful into his handiwork . Not at this latest moment, was he to learn that the reward of all high performance must be sought within itself, or sought in vain”(472-3).

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. “The Artist of the Beautiful.” Mosses from an Old Manse. Ohio State UP, 1974.

Vol. 10 of The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, 23 vols. 1962-94.

---. “Drowne’s Wooden Image.” Mosses from an Old Manse. Ohio State UP, 1974. Vol. 10 of The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, 23 vols. 1962-94.

---, “The Prophetic Pictures.” Twice-told Tales, Ohio State UP, 1974. Vol. 9 of The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, 23 vols. 1962-94.

Bassil, Veronica. “Eros and Psyche in ‘The Artist of the Beautiful.’” Emerson Society Quarterly 30, no. 1(1984): 1-21

Curran, Ronald T. “Irony: Another Thematic Dimension to ‘The Artist of the Beautiful.’” Studies in Romanticism 6(1966): 34-45

Gupta, R.K. “Hawthorne’s Treatment of the Artist.” New England Quarterly 45(1972): 65-80

Matthiessen, F. O. American Renaissance New York: Oxford UP, 1941.

Yoder, R.A. “Hawthorne and his Artist.” Studies in Romanticism 7(1968): 193-206

Works Consulted

Okada, Ryoichi. Short Tales of Hawthorne – Literature, Love, Existence Tokyo:

Hokuseido Shoten, 1996.