



Fragmented Self: Hawthorne’s Prescient Eye in “The Prophetic Pictures” and “Wakefield”

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Abstract

This brief essay intends to shed a fresh light on two short stories written by the celebrated American author Nathaniel Hawthorne from the perspective of how the ‘self’ is explored; the works to be discussed are “The Prophetic Pictures” and “Wakefield”. Concretely, it will demonstrate that the author presents a characteristic individual whose self is fragmented in each of the two tales. In other words, those characters are separated not only from a common community to which they should ordinarily belong but also from themselves—namely, they are fissured inside themselves. The process of the argument would go as follows: first, it will explain in what way the self of the characters is impaired, then analyze the characteristics, and, in closing, theorize that Hawthorne urges us to review our naïve conception of the self and to introspect ourselves from another outlook. Put differently, he, by shaking our common notion of the self, goads us to make a brief halt and be self-reflective in this bustling world where people often lose themselves.

Keywords: American Literature, Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures”, “Wakefield”, self

As far as one can judge from existing publications, it would not be erroneous to regard Hawthorne as an established member in the pantheon of American literature. Both general readership and literary scholars of various countries have displayed an interest in his works, and diverse critical interpretations which have been accorded to them could be reckoned as testimonies of their narrative richness.

Isolation or solitude is one of several qualities which are often considered characteristic of the pieces produced by the writer; an antique but incisive study of Pryse investigates *The Scarlet Letter* from that sort of outlook and states that “every single individual in *The Scarlet Letter* is, though having contacts with others on the surface, in desperate isolation from one another” (277), while Otani’s more recent essay presents the opinion that Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables* is “a fine type of modern people who suffer from both the inseparable fetters and the sheer lack of bonds” (28).

In addition to the studies, those which inspected Hawthorne’s texts with conceptions of other disciplines have provided profound insight. For instance, the first chapter of Kennedy’s ambitious thesis dissects “Ethan Brand” and its alienated protagonist with the aid of the sociological notions of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), and



convincingly demonstrates that the text encourages readers “to think over the importance of the former kind of social relations” which are “based upon intimate personal and familial bonds”, rather than the latter that is “based upon impersonal interests” (11). Each of the previous studies has adequate coherence and merits on its own, and poking holes in them would be not only bootless but also counterproductive.

Nevertheless, every one of Hawthorne’s texts seems by no means reducible to any one construal, and the interpretative potentiality of them would never be exhaustible by the whole of the past and future interpretations.

“The Prophetic Pictures” and “Wakefield” are the precise examples of such texts. In each of the two, Hawthorne sets forth a figure whose self is in fragments; those characters are separated not only from a human community outside them but also from themselves; put differently, there are fissures inside them. Below this paper will explain in what way their self is impaired, analyze its traits, and, in closing, theorize that Hawthorne urges us to review the naive conception of our self and to introspect ourselves from another perspective.

“The Prophetic Pictures”: A Man’s Self Dominated by his Occupation

Though not as famed as “Wakefield” which will later be analyzed, this tale has often been dealt with in the sphere of literary criticism; for instance, by meticulously tracing its source materials and inspecting literary modifications which Hawthorne executed, Ducey judges it to be “a salient evidence of Hawthorne’s capability to turn a sterile report into a literary masterpiece” (18).

As the title portends, it concerns a painter and his pictures. The story begins to unfold when a couple commissions him to paint their portraits. He is introduced as a man endowed with a “natural gift of adapting himself to every variety of character” (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 166). That his talent is exceptional is accentuated again and again; the narrator commends him to the extent of proclaiming that “he had studied the grandeur or beauty of conception, and every touch of the master-hand, in all the most famous pictures, in cabinets and galleries, and on the walls of churches, till there was nothing more for his powerful mind to learn (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 168).

Above all, he is proficient in drawing portraits; the capability is explained in the following manner: “In most of the pictures, the whole mind and character were brought out on the countenance, and concentrated into a single look” (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 170). That the painter himself has a keen awareness of the mastery could be known from the fact that the major part of his oeuvre are portraits.



Yet, his most incredible prowess is not producing a lifelike copy on canvas; he is able to paint a person “in any act or situation whatever—and *the picture will be prophetic*”; to paraphrase, “his penetrative eye” can foresee those events which will befall to the painted person (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 172-173; italics mine).

What he spots in the future of the lovers is a catastrophic tragedy. But the man displays no will to intervene to prevent the doom from betiding since he identifies himself almost exclusively as a painter and can no longer cherish a human interest in others. For him, the couple is only a subject to draw and to exhibit his skill; therefore, he, despite the awareness that he “might change the action of these figures”, makes no attempt to save them (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 176).

In order to understand his conduct more properly, a discussion Fritz Pappenheim, a German-born U.S. sociologist, sets forth in his analysis of a propensity of modern people would be helpful. Comparing a woman pulling out teeth of a hanged man in a Goya’s painting with a real photographer who was given an award because of his picture which had vividly captured the tortured face of a man run over by a car, he points out a striking similarity between them; for them, their human selves are consumed by their jobs, which lead them to view only those aspects of others which are instrumentally useful; namely, they, with their mutilated self, cannot recognize the plain fact that the objects before them are individuals who should be treated with due respect (Pappenheim 11-12).

That is exactly the condition into which the painter has fallen. Even as he is conscious that the prophetic vision that he innately possesses could be employed for better purposes, he uses it solely for his occupation and his artworks, remaining aloof himself from others:

Like all other men around whom an engrossing purpose wreathes itself, he was insulated from the mass of humankind. 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 hear was cold*; no living creature could be brought near enough to keep him warm. (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 178; emphasis mine)

After some years, he revisits the couple; still, the aim is to confirm whether his prophecy will come true. The narrator informs us of his mental state: “Reading other bosoms, with an acuteness almost preternatural, the painter failed to see the disorder of his own” (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 180). Consequently, upon crossing the threshold of the house, he exclaims: “The Portraits! Are they within?” (Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures” 180), and hurries to behold the realization of the foreseen occurrence.



Though the doom is barely forestalled, what is important is that the man's self is entirely dominated by his being a prophetic painter; to express differently, he loses himself in his being an artist, which is actually a portion of his self. Hawthorne never names this painter throughout the story, which implies that he may have been cognizant of our harmful proclivity to equate a person with her or his occupation. It is doubtless true that our profession is highly important, but it should not be given superiority over our being human. When one forgets this and lets her or his self be fragmented, a tragic outcome would come to pass. It is remarkable that Hawthorne succeeds in prophetically creating a type of modern people who are absorbed in their daily routine and whose selves are unknowingly undermined.

“Wakefield”: A Straying Soul

Composed of less than 3,500 words, this narrative, which some have ranked as the best short story of Hawthorne (Borges 40; Pryse 43), has also been read from miscellaneous perspectives. Although set in an old period when a man who goes out equips himself with “a drab greatcoat, a hat covered with an oil-cloth, top-boots, an umbrella in one hand and a small portmanteau in the other” (97), almost every person who reads it would be astonished to discover elements that might strike her or him as peculiarly contemporary.

Its plot mainly concerns its protagonist called Wakefield. Being a middle-aged man who has led an unexceptional life in London, he is the last person to perform something startling, with the narrator saying, “Had his acquaintances been asked who was the man in London the surest to perform nothing today which should be remembered on the morrow, they would have thought of Wakefield (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 97). The wife with whom Wakefield lives is alike an everyday sort of person; they are a couple in which no one would discern even a slight potential for a commotion or a drama.

Nonetheless, this common man carries out an act which is “the strangest instance on record of marital delinquency and, moreover, as remarkable a freak as may be found in the whole list of human oddities.” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 96). What is the most remarkable is that the man himself has little idea of why he does it; in other words, his conscious self by no means grasps his weird deed nor its driving force.

One day in November, a prankish scheme to surprise his wife occurs to Wakefield; he thinks that “a whole week's absence” could perplex his good lady (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 98). Then, however, noticing the absurdity of his plan immediately after the departure from his home, the man soon comes back to his neighborhood; yet, feeling embarrassed, he does not return home directly. Instead, he finds himself “in the next street to his own and at his journey's end” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 98). Amid “the wide and solitary waste of the



unaccustomed bed”, Wakefield makes a determined remark: “I will not sleep alone another night” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 98).

But, things do not go in accordance with his anticipations. He is to spend a much longer time without showing his face to his partner; it stretches over twenty years. Of note is that those reasons to which the narrator ascribes this uncanny phenomenon originate from the fragmented self of Wakefield—i.e., the protagonist is driven by internal motives which stem unquestionably from him, but are unknowable for him.

On the following morning, he ruminates over “what he really means to do”; and yet, he cannot reach a conclusion, with the narrator stating: “Such are his loose and rambling modes of thought 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” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield 98-99). In this passage, a reader could descry a palpable example which evinces the fragmentation of Wakefield’s self. Notwithstanding the resolution not to sleep alone anymore, he is somehow hampered from returning home. Neither Wakefield nor the narrator is capable of clarifying the rationales: “A great moral change has been effected. But this is a secret from himself” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 99).

That he is incognizant of himself proves to be almost fatal. At one time during the first decade of this errant existence, he knows that his wife is in a critical condition; still, despite the fact that it takes only several steps to get there and he sometimes says to himself that “it is but in the next street” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 100), he could not cease from hiding. What is worse, although “hitherto he has put off his return from one particular day to another”, thence “he leaves the precise time undetermined.” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 100).

It requires another decade for him finally to get back home again, during which he once encounters his wife on the street, though she does not recognize her husband in him; furthermore, he becomes aware of his disconnected self, voicing: “Wakefield! Wakefield! You are mad!” (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 101). The most telling is that his return is prompted by an inexplicable inducement which some may consider being a sheer happenstance. When he just passes by the house “which he still calls his own”, he is overtaken by an evening shower, whereupon, in order probably to evade the “autumnal chill”, “he ascends the steps” and enters into his home for the first time in two decades (Hawthorne, “Wakefield” 102).

Allowing for the fact that societal structures were rapidly changing when Hawthorne wrote this piece, it does not erroneous to reckon one of its primary themes as the importance of maintaining one’s position in society. Nevertheless, readers could not help but detect something oddly contemporary in Wakefield’s deed. As we have surveyed above, Wakefield, staying in a room which is within a stone’s throw of his original abode, never returns to it for



twenty years without any specific reason, while his eventual homecoming is occasioned by an accidental chance. One should note that his actions never square with his intention, and vice versa: although he incessantly plans to go back during the period, they by no means come true.

What has hindered him from doing such a simple act as opening a door of his own dwelling? No external factor like an authoritative institution, without doubt, can be cited; hence, we should heed elements inside him. Remember that what characterizes Wakefield throughout the tale is an incompatibility between what he intends to do and what he actually performs. Such a state results from the fragmentation of one's self, which has become a prevalent symptom since the inception of the modern age (Ingerman i-xii; Berger et al. 23).

It is astounding that Hawthorne grasped what was beginning in the minds of his coeval people. We could easily find 'a' Wakefield in workplaces, classrooms, and even in ourselves. I admit that Hawthorne does not succeed in a thorough theorization upon this particular state, whereas Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari did in the last century (36-41). But the man he created in this brief narrative is as powerful as their argument in terms of the ability to urge us to rethink our naïve view about our self; it would be remiss of us not to listen to these valuable whispers from the text: we are sometimes not as unified as we think—fragmented.

As shown above, we should now recognize the fact that “The Prophetic Pictures” and “Wakefield” own a significant aspect which issues a challenge to our customary view of the self.

Of course, as stated in the introductory part, this attribute is only one of the variety of properties which Hawthorne's works possess, and the author of this paper has no intention to insist that it is the most vital quality of the prominent writer; still, it would be careless of us not to perceive his penetrative eye for our credulous inattention to a matter of commonly accepted knowledge. One can recognize this kind of shrewd observation not exclusively in the stories examined above; “Rappaccini's Daughter” and “Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent” would be suitable subjects for a future study from this perspective.

Today we live in a world where relationships with others and ourselves are increasingly becoming complex; in such a condition, it is obvious that one should make incessant efforts to comprehend both of the two, if not completely, as exactly as possible. Considering this, it would not be a prudent move to ignore the callings of Hawthorne's texts which remind us of Merleau-Ponty's famed statement that “true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world” (xxiii); they, by debunking our common ideas of the self, encourage us to make a brief halt and reflect upon ourselves in this bustling world.



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