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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* is a story best told through art… By use of oxymoronic phrases, analyses of aesthetics, artistic ambiguities, and religious and pagan interludes, Hawthorne is able to artfully weave the main characters' emotions, sexualities, and dichotomous relationships.

Keywords: Classic Literature, Theology/Christianity, Art History

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*All artworks are listed in order of appearance following the bibliography.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* is a story best told through art. The characters and narrator alike endlessly describe numerous landscapes, ruins, and architecture, interpret various works of art, and note several aesthetics. Oftentimes, Hawthorne's romance, particularly the plot, seems interrupted by dramatic conversations and oxymoronic descriptions of art. Upon further analysis, however, these descriptions simply serve to drive the story. Throughout *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne uses a plethora of artwork as an allegory to signify the change and the paradox of human emotions. In other terms, the relationships between the novel's main characters — Miriam, Hilda, Kenyon, and Donatello — are best rendered by the artworks that appear in the text.

The entirety of *The Marble Faun* directs an array of emotions towards the setting of the city of Rome, the main of which being the juxtaposition of both love and hate. It should also be mentioned, pertaining to the structure of this paper, that the landscape and setting of *The Marble Faun* will be evaluated before individual works of art. Phrases like "warlike precinct so friendly" from a castle's description, to ruins that "still retain a squalid grandeur," to the "vast limits" and "petty glory" of Saint Peter's Basilica, showcase this oxymoronic relationship (Hawthorne 229, 236, 271-272). In regard to describing setting, these oxymorons "establish ambivalence toward the physical world as a major theme; the characters find themselves in one moment uplifted by the beauty of their surroundings and in the next disgusted by its squalor" (Stephenson 6).

In addition to evaluating the setting by the comparison of love and hate, it can also be viewed in accordance with the following sentiment: aesthetic beauty "tends to redeem the ethical" (Brodtkorb 254). Essentially, Rome's tumultuous pagan past, synonymous with moral

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evil, is only deemed endurable by its art and pictorial scenery. Rome's descriptions as "the native soil of ruin" and the "tract where the crimes and calamities of ages… have corrupted all the soil, creating an influence that makes the air deadly to human lungs" further emphasize this idea (Hawthorne 58, 71). Similarly, for artists, Rome is both the "source of artistic inspiration and the moral polluter of its realization" (Brodtkorb 254). In this way, Hawthorne personifies Rome as a character itself. Within this conflict it becomes more and more clear (most lucid in Donatello's fall) that this "moral pollution" is seemingly victorious.

The concept of Donatello's fortunate fall, or 'felix culpa,' is oxymoronic in and of itself. "Miriam propounds the theme out of self-interest; Hilda denies it out of self-righteousness; Donatello supposedly embodies it but does not endorse it; Kenyon enthusiastically defends it and then abandons it all too readily; and there are hints that the narrator is not committed to it" (Stephenson 9). Like the Fall of Adam and Eve, Donatello's fall asserts that while evil, sin is necessary for progress and transformation. In support, Kenyon declares, "Sin has educated Donatello, and elevated him. Is sin, then, —which we deem such a dreadful blackness in the universe, — is it, like sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained? Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier paradise than this?" (Hawthorne 356-357). This sentiment that sin leads to enlightenment is also quite evident in Hawthorne's short story, *Young Goodman Brown*.

In comparison to the author's treatment of the setting, Hawthorne increases the artistic intensity by directly associating each member of the main quartet of characters with an individual work of art. Acting as Donatello's double, the novel opens with the Faun of

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Praxiteles' entrance. However, prior to the faun's appearance, the reader is introduced to other statues of similar, yet unrecognized importance: the Dying Gladiator (Gaul), the Antinous, the Amazon, the Lycian Apollo, and the Juno. The Dying Gaul, dated from the Hellenistic period, depicts a man barely hovering above the ground. The piece represents a conquered enemy, a conquered spirit, that possesses composure and dignity in the face of death. While this piece was briefly introduced in the beginning pages of the novel, The Dying Gaul makes a second appearance in Chapter XVII. The narrator observes a black cross that "marks one of the especial blood-spots of the earth, where, thousands of times over, the Dying Gladiator fell, and more human agony has been endured, for the mere pastime of the multitude, than on the breadth of many battlefields," which prefigures the death and suffering of the Model (Hawthorne 119-120).

While minute, the Antinous and the Lycian Apollo carry a homoerotic connotation. The Antinous showcases Emperor Hadrian's lover and the Apollo showcases the Greek God's relationship with a young boy, Hyacinthus. "Sharing the faun's ephebic masculinity, the Antinous and Apollo, by implication, draw attention to Donatello's sexual ambiguity, and the Apollo, arguably, also stands for Kenyon, who, as a sculptor, indulges in what has been described as Apollonius art" (Pulham 88). Similarly, the Amazon and the Juno allow the reader insight into both Hilda and Miriam. The Amazon's sexual ambiguity is mirrored in Hilda's asexuality, and furthermore, the dissection of Hilda's name, 'battle-maiden,' alludes to the Amazon's military knowledge. Likewise, the Juno captures Miriam's sexual appeal (Pulham 88).

These initial artistic doubles are perfectly characterized by Jonathan Auerbach; "Throughout *The Marble Faun* 'the Actual' and 'the Imaginary,' are constantly shifting places:

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people gain identity through works of art, and works of art are transformed into human beings... Miriam and Donatello… are 'living models' who repeatedly are defined in terms of art objects. Kenyon calls the Faun of Praxiteles Donatello's 'identity', while the narrator portrays Miriam's face solely by describing her self-portrait, in an attempt to 'bring it more forcibly before the reader.'" It is in this sense that Kenyon's sculpture of Cleopatra serves as Miriam's double. Cleopatra captures true womanhood and exotic beauty with "garb proper to her… queenly state… heighten the magnificence of her charms, and kindle a tropic fire in the cold eyes of Octavius… full Nubian lips, and other characteristics of the Egyptian physiognomy" (Hawthorne 98). Here, it is evident that Miriam and Cleopatra are both racialized and sexualized, as well as incessantly contrasted to the ideal New England Puritan, Hilda, whose "womanhood is of the ethereal type" (Hawthorne 99). Moreover, to further stress the difference between Hilda and Miriam, Hawthorne presents them with differing methods of creating art. Hilda is a copyist; she paints details of works created by Renaissance masters. She possesses a "humble magnanimity in choosing to be the handmaid of those old magicians" (Hawthorne 49). Adding to her saintly portrayal, Hilda's reverence of copying is reminiscent of the monks and nuns who tediously copied the Bible before the invention of the printing press. Essentially, copying is the highest, or most saintly, art form (Brodtkorb 260). On the other hand, Miriam's paintings "failed not to bring out the moral, that woman must strike through her own heart to reach a human life, whatever were the motive that impelled her" (Hawthorne 36). Miriam painted with the likeness of Artemisia Gentileschi — both created Biblical scenes with particularly violent and proud women, one example being *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. As an aside, the idealization of an 'exotic' subject was a frequented trope throughout the mid-19th

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century. Examples of said exotic and bewitching women can be found in Ingres' 1814 painting entitled *La Grande Odalisque*, Delacroix's 1834 painting entitled *The Women of Algiers*, as well as Hawthorne's own Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*.

More importantly, however, Kenyon's Cleopatra makes clear to the reader Miriam's past misfortunes and repressed emotions. Cleopatra "had relinquished all activity, and was resting throughout every vein and muscle. It was the repose of despair… But still there was a great smouldering furnace, deep down in the woman's heart" (Hawthorne 98). Miriam desires to confide the truth of her seemingly ugly past with Kenyon yet is curtailed by his reserved response. It is in this instance that the reader first views Miriam as isolated and rejected by all those who should be sympathetic to her troubles: initially by Kenyon, secondly by Donatello's rejection of her outcry of/for love, and lastly by Hilda's abandonment during her time of need. This complete rejection is rather similar to Zenobia, whose response is to drown herself. Possibly paying homage to this action, Hawthorne writes for Miriam when remonstrating Kenyon, "My secret is not a pearl, yet a man might drown himself in plunging after it!" (Hawthorne 101). Similarly linking these proto-femme-fatales, Miriam is described as wearing a red, passionately warm jewel later on in the novel. This could possibly recall Zenobia's hothouse flower. In an interesting turn of events, however, Zenobia is stripped of her flower at the novel's end, whereas Miriam gains her jewel after visual involvement in the Model's murder.

Tracing back to the comparison of Miriam and Hilda, Reni's 1600 *Portrait of Beatrice Cenci* lies at the heart of this madonna-whore juxtaposition, and even the cover of the novel. Hawthorne's descriptions of this portrait momentarily merge the identities of these two women. Hilda proclaims Beatrice a "fallen angel, and yet sinless," a phrase that foreshadows

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both women's negotiations of guilt and innocence following their witnessing of Donatello's crime (Hawthorne 53, Pulham 90). This notion is later revisited in Chapter XXIII when Hilda wistfully states, “She fancied — nor was it without horror — that Beatrice's expression, seen aside and vanishing in a moment, had been depicted in her own face, likewise, and flitted from it timorously” (Hawthorne 160). Once again, this imagery of innocent fallenness, a direct contrast to Donatello’s Edenic felix culpa, merges these three women in sisterhood. While possibly far-fetched, Pulham asserts that this merging is “predicated on a doubling between Miriam and Beatrice’s father” (Pulham 90). The narrator remarks that it was “the consciousness of her father's sin that threw its shadow over her” and that similarly, “it was the knowledge of Miriam's guilt that lent the same expression to Hilda's face” (Hawthorne 166). This connection erotically tinges the relationship between Hilda and Miriam. Adding to the oddity of this sentiment, it is worthy to note how central Reni’s painting is in a book primarily concerned with sculpture. Could this possibly be due to the God-like connection between a sculptor’s hands and those of God? While possibly negligible, there is an 1857 statue (*The Marble Faun* was published in 1860) by female artist Harriet Hosmer, and based on Beatrice Cenci’s likeness, that might have influenced the text as well.

In a similar fashion, Hawthorne’s language regarding the imagery of the Faun of Praxiteles exudes eroticism. “The form, thus displayed, is marvellously graceful, but has a fuller and more rounded outline, more flesh, and less of heroic muscle, than the old sculptors were wont to assign to their types of masculine beauty... The mouth, with its full, yet delicate lips… convey the idea of an amiable and sensual creature” (Hawthorne 10). Here it is evident that the Faun’s voluptuous and androgynous sculpt take physical form in Donatello and imply, once

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again, a sense of homoeroticism. By the close of the novel, the similarities between Donatello and the Faun are heightened to such an extent that it becomes unclear whether Donatello is faun or more. This “slippage” between homoeroticism and heterosexual desire is stressed by Kenyon’s need to carve a bust of Donatello (Pulham 94). Regarding the sexual tension between all four main characters, despite Hilda and Kenyon being wedded by the close of the novel, Hilda is the only figure not explicitly carved by Kenyon; a passion for Miriam is captured in Cleopatra, and obsession with Donatello is captured in a bust, yet Hilda is so-called captured in a fetishistic hand of Cleopatra — nothing more.

Like the opposition encapsulated by Hilda and Miriam, Kenyon and Donatello are also vastly different — their differences are best clarified by the polar combination of Dionysian and Apollonian art mentioned throughout the novel. In the words of Camille Paglia, “The Apollonian and Dionysian, two great western principles, govern sexual personae in life and art. Dionysus is identification, Apollo objectification. Dionysus is empathie, the sympathetic emotion transporting us into other people, other places, other times. Apollo is the hard, cold separatism of western personality and categorical thought. Dionysus is energy, ecstasy, hysteria, promiscuity, emotionalism. Apollo is obsessiveness, voyeurism, idolatry, fascism — frigidity and aggression of the eye, petrification of objects” (Pulham 102). Donatello’s tie to the pagan statue denotes him as a Dionysian, whereas Kenyon, the American, remains uninvolved “observing the complex emotions of his friends with a voyeuristic interest” (Pulham 102). Moreover, Kenyon’s art is the literal petrification of human emotion as he is a sculptor.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* is revolutionary as it articulates a story almost entirely through art. Whether it be the Dying Gaul or the Faun of Praxiteles, every artwork

discussed serves as a double for a main character, mirroring their contextualization and legacy. By use of oxymoronic phrases, analyses of aesthetics, artistic ambiguities, and religious and pagan interludes, Hawthorne is able to artfully weave the main characters' emotions, sexualities, and dichotomous relationships.

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1. *The Dying Gaul*, Roman Copy of Greek Hellenistic statue

2. *The Antinous*, 130 A.D.

3. *The Amazon*, Roman Copy of Greek statue, 5th Century A.D.

4. *The Lycian Apollo*, Roman Copy of Greek statue attributed to Praxiteles, ~130 A.D.

5. *The Juno*, early 2nd Century A.D.

6. Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1612-1613

7. Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814

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8. Delacroix's *The Women of Algiers*, 1834

9. Reni's *Portrait of Beatrice Cenci*, c. 1600

10. *The Faun of Praxiteles*, 1st Century A.D.