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Rebecca Belcher-Rankin

Olivet Nazarene University, rbelcher@olivet.edu

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PAPERS ON BRITISH AND AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

NARRATIVE AUTHORITY IN HAWTHORNE'S "THE AMBITIOUS GUEST"

On August 28, 1826, a landslide in the White Mountains of New Hampshire caused the death of the Samuel Willey family when they left their home, which they thought would be in the path of the slide, and ran to a shelter where they thought they would be safe. By a fluke, the slide split to either side of the house, leaving it intact while burying the shelter where the family had fled for safety. Such pathos provoked a flurry of written articles, poems, songs, and artwork to interpret the ironic tragedy, a tragedy made even more ironic, according to John F. Sears, writing about this historical source for Hawthorne's story "The Ambitious Guest," because the same family had escaped a landslide earlier the same month by running to the shelter (356). In 1832 Hawthorne visited the site of the tragedy and by 1835 had published the short story of the family's flight to its death in the *New-England Journal*. In the course of writing the story, Hawthorne changed the historical account. He made the oldest daughter seventeen years old, instead of thirteen, added a grandmother to the family, subtracted the hired men, and wrote of a stranger, a young man who could be a romantic interest for the seventeen-year-old girl.

Taking such liberties with the historical account proves that Hawthorne did not purpose to advance a factual account. Critics, however, argue what he had planned to do from several points of view. Sears emphasizes the importance of the landscape to nineteenth-century

America.¹ Sears and Nina Baym share the view, along with many others, that this story exemplifies Hawthorne's wish to create a native American literature grounded in accounts that originated in the United States or the earlier colonial America. Baym cites Hawthorne's own words concerning "frames" of characteristic scenes of America, included in *The Story Teller* selections, of which "The Ambitious Guest" and its frame "The Notch of the White Mountains" are two (41). The young traveler who yearned for fame, but received only anonymity in the slide, might be a picture of the young Hawthorne, who, until after the first anonymous publication of this story, had received no recognition, according to Sears (365-66). Just as the family's imaginative inventions and ambitions were crushed and killed by the reality of the slide, so does the story epitomize Hawthorne's own struggle concerning an artistic point of view, according to Baym: "Hawthorne experienced the pressure of the imagination on the actual as liberation, the pressure of the actual on the imagination as constraint" (49-50). In this story the imagination liberates readers from the actual account of the tragedy. According to Michael Colacurcio, however, who cites Kenneth Cameron's references to "sermonic literature" on "themes of necessity, free will, sin, judgment... and the problem of evil" as parallel to the content of the story, Hawthorne used "The Ambitious Guest" and other stories as accounts of the moral history of early America. Colacurcio says that to Hawthorne's contemporaries the mountain stories served as pictures of God's omnipotence (509-510).

On the whole, critics have failed to look at "The Ambitious Guest" as a narrative that Hawthorne invented. Even those who acknowledge that Hawthorne changed the facts of the historical account to create a more interesting narrative have not explored the technical aspects of the tale.² Perhaps they have not because, on a superficial level, the story appears to be a straightforward third-person omniscient narrative in which the narrator winds through the minds and motives of the characters to create a poignant, sympathetic account of an American tragedy. A closer examination of the text reveals that Hawthorne uses a variety of narrative techniques not only to engage his audience, but also to control their responses, at least to some extent.

Such a method points to Hawthorne's Romantic agenda. Although he did not write his definition of "Romance" till 1851 when, in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, he writes the words "to present [the] truth under circumstances... of the writer's own choosing or creation" (xxix), he undoubtedly was already thinking in such terms when he wrote "The Ambitious Guest." By "claim[ing] a certain latitude" in presenting the truth, and yet not "swerv[ing] aside from the truth of the human heart" too far (xxix), Hawthorne provides an early picture of how he uses narrative authority in the Romance to engage the reader in accepting a truth more truthful than history, and, by doing so, illustrates the close connection between his Romantic agenda and our contemporary reader-oriented writerly texts.

Perhaps the most obvious instance of narrative authority in "The Ambitious Guest" is the intrusiveness of the narrator who, after introducing the family and the traveler in a method common to the omniscient narrator with such telling phrases as "it saddened them" and "he felt his heart spring forward," begins a paragraph with the words "[l]et us not suppose" (162, 163, 164). Immediately the narrator has caught the reader as a collaborator in the formation of the story. Nor is this the only instance of the narrator's invitation to the reader to participate both in the formation of the story and in the evaluation of the narrative, for the same paragraph ends with the words "[a]nd thus it should have been. Is not the kindred of a common fate a closer tie than that of birth?" (165). Because the question follows such an assertive statement, the reader is led toward an affirmative answer. Later, when the narrator utters the possibility that a "germ of love" was growing between the young traveler and the oldest daughter, he again encourages his reader to agree with his judgment when he asserts, "For women worship such gentle dignity" and a young man's "proud soul is oftenest captivated by simplicity" (168). Finally, in order to ensure the sympathies of the reader at the point of the tragedy, the narrator uses the emotion of two interjections "Alas" and "Wo[e]" to create an immediate response (170, 171). All of these instances where Hawthorne is guiding the reader's response to the event are also where Hawthorne is taking a "certain latitude" with the historical account, attributing

emotions proper to a 17-year-old woman, but not to a 13-year-old girl, and pointing to the fate of the narratively-created youth.

A second indication that Hawthorne intended to create a fictional account that would evoke certain responses from his readers is his use of Gothic-Romantic elements within the story. First, in order to escape any criticism that might devolve upon him for any inaccuracies of his story, he acknowledges that the “story had been told far and wide, and will forever be a legend of these mountains” and that “[p]oets have sung their fate” (171). Because the actual event occurred in a remote inn, Hawthorne had only to add a certain eerie quality through the use of several oxymora such as “sober gladness,” “lightsome shadows,” and “happy sadness.” Then he adds the mysterious stranger, who not only is shown to be in contrast to the simple, humble family with his “high and abstracted ambition” (165), but who also engages in repartee with the oldest daughter to such an extent that both of them blush at their exchange.

Hawthorne notes in his preface that a writer “will be wise to make a very moderate use of the privileges” of creating the Romance with its choices and creations (xxix). In this tale, he is careful to avoid the supernatural. Instead the “fanciful stranger” said the wind sounded like “the choral strain of the spirits of the blast” (168) with its wail as if “a funeral were passing” (169); the landlord said of the sounds of the loose rock that “[t]he old Mountain has thrown a stone” (164); and the omniscient narrator reports that the inhabitants of the cottage heard the tumbling rocks as “a heavy footstep . . . rushing down the steep side of the mountain” (164). Of course, the setting itself of a cold, dreary, windy night furthers the impression that the tragedy was extraordinary, almost supernatural, especially with the added historical irony that the landslide unexplainably split to spare the house and kill the family and the added fictional irony that on that particular night a stranger among the family group had aroused them to think of ambitions, both of life, and, in the case of the grandmother and her wish to have a looking-glass held over her face in her coffin, of death. This remote, violent, Romantic plot fits a comment of Wallace Martin in his text *Recent Theories of the Narrative* when he describes Northrop Frye’s

archetypal plots, whereby an author can displace a stylistic plot, such as the Gothic, from “dreamlike unreality to make it plausible from a realistic point of view” (65). By using the facts of a contemporary tragedy, Hawthorne’s masks the Romantic-Gothic elements in order to convince his reader that his plausible story is, indeed, the real story.

Hawthorne then encourages the reader to participate in interpretation in what, according to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their study *Understanding Fiction*, is a “fairly simple device for provoking reader participation,” that of point of view (146). Here, with the use of the omniscient narrator, Hawthorne can move the readers to think in certain ways about the narrated events. In “The Ambitious Guest” the omniscient narrator encourages the reader to foretell the ending, which, of course, would have been well known to Hawthorne’s contemporaries, with foreshadowing such as saying that the stranger’s “fate was like to theirs” (163), that the family lived in a “romantic and dangerous abode” (165), that the young man and the family were “kindred of a common fate” (165), that the young man taunted destiny with his words “[w]ere I to vanish from the earth tomorrow” (165) and that the wife said their wandering minds were “a sign of something” (167). The narrator also encourages the reader to assume a mood of somber caution with tonal phrases such as “bleakest spot” and “music and mirth came back drearily” (162, 168). Finally, the narrator invites the reader to form opinions by answering several questions, such as “Is not the kindred of a common fate a closer tie than that of birth?” (165), “Who has not heard their name?” (171), and “Whose was the agony of that death moment?” (171). In each case, the answer is implied in the accompanying passage. The reader can only answer in the affirmative to the first, must agree with the knowledge of the second, and must conclude that the agony is the young man’s whose very existence is in doubt because of the nature of the tragedy.

The most subtle of Hawthorne’s narrative devices, yet the one of perhaps the most interest to contemporary critics, is the diegetic shifts. The most obvious shifts are those from third-person omniscient narrator to the intrusive narrator who invites the reader with the words “[l]et us suppose” to the distant narrator who claims no responsibility

for the narrative with the words “[b]ut it happened” to the concerned narrator who sympathizes with the words “[t]he simplest words must intimate, but not portray, the unutterable horror of the catastrophe” (164, 168, 170). Another kind of shift in the third-person omniscient narrative concerns the change of focus from the narrator to the character, which according to Martin, is the shift from the narrator’s looking into characters’ unconscious thoughts to the narrator’s looking through the character’s mind, which mimics stream of consciousness narrative (143, 140). In “The Ambitious Guest” this shift occurs in a paragraph describing the young man’s ambition:

He could have borne to live an undistinguished life but not to be forgotten in the grave. Yearning desire had been transformed to hope; and hope, long cherished, had become like certainty, that, obscurely as he journeyed now, a glory was to beam on all his pathway.... posterity should gaze back... and confess, that a gifted one had passed from his cradle to his tomb. (165)

These are not the words of one looking into the young man’s mind, but the very words with which the young man frames his thoughts of his future.

Still another shift is one that approximates the modernist notion of the invisible or absent narrator through the careful use of the words “there” and “here” to create an almost cinematic quality to the following passage: “There were the little faces of the children, peeping from their bed apart, and here the father’s frame of strength, the mother’s subdued and careful mien...” (169). “By eliminating all self-references, a narrator cuts deictics loose from their normal connection to an identifiable speaker,” according to Martin, and creates a semblance of reality for the characters on the page (137). When Hawthorne uses such narrative authority, he forces his reader to participate in creating the story that cannot be known, the story buried with those who died. He, as author-narrator, and readers, as reader-narrators, supply the information by “choosing” the circumstances.

The most remarkable of Hawthorne's accomplishments in this short story is the historical credibility of his fictive account. After acknowledging that others will forever tell the story of this family, Hawthorne's narrator, in a typically disinterested manner, reports that some "suppose that a stranger had been received into the cottage on this awful night" while "[o]thers denied that there were sufficient grounds for such a conjecture" (171). His next words, "Wo[e], for the high-souled youth, with his dream of Earthly Immortality!" (171) solidify the reality of the young man's presence in the tragedy. There would be no need to cry for this youth if he had not existed. Hawthorne leaves the impression, not that he did not exist, but that it is tragic that his existence cannot be proven. The reader is again tricked into agreement with the narrator, even though most of the narrative hinges on the words "[l]et us now suppose" (164). And, once again, through Hawthorne's Romantic element of "choosing," of taking a "certain latitude," the historical account is altered and the reader is drawn into a truth of the heart.

Thus, in the words of Michael Dunne in his study *Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies*, "The supposedly historical tales [such as "The Ambitious Guest"] sometimes afford the author more opportunity for creative engagement than the purely fictional" (29). And through Hawthorne's engagement of his Romantic tenets, a narrative authority is created that draws the twenty-first-century reader into the text in a way that is quite contemporary. "The Ambitious Guest," therefore, is a good model for examining Hawthorne's Romantic agenda and for pointing to the extreme modern tendencies of that agenda. The reader is guided to create a new history of the Willey disaster by taking that "certain latitude" and "choosing" the "circumstances" that tell the truth far beyond the mere historical event. A study of other Hawthorne stories, especially those with a historical bent, will forward the idea that Hawthorne's Romantic agenda was fathered long before his "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables* was written and that it continues to draw in readers today because it encourages a most contemporary collaboration between narrator and reader.

Rebecca Harshman Belcher
Olivet Nazarene University

Notes

¹ Eric Purchase, in his dissertation titled "The Willey Slide: The Problem of Landscape in Nineteenth Century Narrative" makes the point that, although intellectuals like Hawthorne saw the story in terms of the "natural catastrophe," in terms of the social climate of the 1820s and 1830s the Willeys' story is the story of a family that was able, for a time, to "reinvent the White Mountain landscape as an Arcadian wilderness" for the wealthy urban tourists.

² Sheila Frazier Kobler, in her dissertation "Postmodern Narrative Techniques in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne: Metafiction, Fabulation and Hermeneutical Semiosis" does address such technical aspects, claiming that "Hawthorne's writerly texts require readers to write their own versions of his texts."

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