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GOTHIC AND SYMBOLISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* belong to the most famous works based on gothic and symbolism. *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* can be called one of the first American ironic gothic novels and *Young Goodman Brown* is an example of the work based on symbolism which depicts Puritan New England and pays major attention to the religious matters. Both authors used gothic and symbolism in their works even though they had different purposes. Washington Irving used symbolism and gothic in order to create irony and to confront traditional European values and new American traditions. Nathaniel Hawthorne used symbolism in order to represent the collapse of Puritanism and to demonstrate corruption of the society caused by false morality.

The critics researching *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* point out that its main characters are its main symbols. Ichabod Crane who is represented by the author as an urban intellectual is a symbol of British imperialism. The author describes him as a tall and thin man with huge ears and a long nose. His main desire is to marry Katrina but not because of sincere love to this

girl; Ichabod wants to absorb her wealth, just like the British Empire strived for the wealth of its former colonies. In addition, his obsession with religious matters and superstitions also demonstrates his connection to European traditions and values. Crane is opposed to Brom who is described as a broad-shouldered man with curly black hair. Unlike Crane, Brom is physically strong and enjoys physical work. He is a local hero and all neighbors like him for his good nature. In *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* Brom serves as a symbol of a new nation. The symbolic victory of Brom is also important because it represents the win of a new thinking over old values.

As the critics point out, Irving deliberately used the form of the gothic novel but he filled it with irony and sarcasm. He did it because he wanted to “flatter his countrymen’s assumption that they were, in truth, gentlefolk who could sip appreciatively on Old World culture at the same time that they built new traditions of strength and hardihood” [1, p. 5]. So, this short story is based on the traditional form of a gothic tale but it is filled with a new meaning and a new mood. The old form is filled with irony and it dominates over the atmosphere of mystery. Donald Ringe offers his own understanding of the story, according to which “to oppose the material values they see in the Yankee desire for change, improvement, and profit, the New York writers affirm a stable society that places its emphasis on order, tradition, and the family values that accompany social stability” [2, p. 455]. Old superstitions are used by Irving for creating irony and the author clearly demonstrates it in the end of his work when he claims that the mysterious head found in the hollow was nothing more than a usual pumpkin.

Unlike Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne uses symbolism and gothic elements in order to create an allegoric work that analyzes deep social and psychological problems. The characters created by Hawthorne are also symbolic. The protagonist of the story is described by Hawthorne as a good Christian who is happily married man whose insatiable curiosity makes him accept an offer and visit a mysterious ceremony. This ceremony becomes a real revelation that discloses all the hypocrisy of the puritan society in which people only pretend to be devoted to God while in reality are servants of the devil. Actually, the character of Goodman Brown is not stable and it develops through the whole story. In the beginning of the

novel he is a Christian proud of his family traditions, then he becomes a doubting person who cannot believe his eyes and in the end of the story he is depicted as a disappointed man. One more important character of this story is the devil described as an ordinary man in usual clothes and his only remarkable feature is a walking stick. Such simplicity of this image is created on purpose because it emphasizes the idea that the devil can have different appearances and can appear at any time. Actually, the meeting with the old man becomes a turning point of this story that changes the lives of all other characters forever.

Alongside with characters, the setting of the story plays a very important role. Hawthorne writes in the first line of the story that the action takes place in Salem and this is one of the most remarkable places in the American history. This place has a special importance for many Americans because it is associated with the witch trials of 1692 and thus it is a place that is viewed by many as the habitat of the devilish power. This place is exceptionally important for Hawthorne whose ancestor was one of the judges during the witch trials. The setting of the action creates the mood of the story that can be characterized as a gloomy and a mysterious one. This atmosphere is typical for Hawthorne who is considered to be a real master of dark romanticism. His style of writing is characterized by the skillful descriptions of scenes that are aimed at creating mysticism. The other typical feature of his style of writing is applying numerous symbols and metaphors in all his works. They are often applied to disclose the main theme of the novel. In this case it is the corruption of the society caused by the false public morality. The most ardent adepts turn out to be the greatest hypocrites.

While defining the role of symbols *Young Goodman Brown*, the critics are not unanimous. Sarah Bird Wright states that “This tale is one of the Hawthorne’s most celebrated, dealing with the initiation of Young Goodman Brown into the true nature of the villagers he has assumed he knows, and into the cosmos of evil” [4, p. 237]. Wright states that the night in the forest transforms the main character, because the devil corrupts Goodman making him disillusioned with the mankind and thus taking his religious and moral faith. That is why this night can be compared to the ritual of initiation. Abby Werlock states that the radical change of the main character of this work can be understood as the transformation of the

American society influenced by the witch trials. Werlock writes that “In just such a way did the Salem witch trials effectively bring about the collapse of Puritanism” [3, p.724]. She believes that Goodman Brown can be treated as “an American Adam” who did not manage to solve a difficult moral and religious dilemma.

The analysis demonstrates that both authors used symbolism and gothic elements in their works. Irving used them to confront old European values and new American traditions. These elements are also used by Irving to create irony within the text. Nathaniel Hawthorne used symbolism in order to demonstrate corruption of the society caused by false public morality. Symbolism in this case is used to represent the collapse of Puritanism caused by a number of factors including notorious Salem witch trials. Despite essential differences that can be found in these works, they are also united by featuring American landscape as the main source of mystery.

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