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Domesticity Fails a Romancer: A Study on *The Marble Faun*.

Junko Kokubo

In his writing career, Nathaniel Hawthorne had completed four major romances. Glancing over his texts, we can easily notice that he affixes the preface to each of them. The remarkable point in these prefaces is that there he defines his self as a writer of romance. In the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, he declares his determination to depict the truth of human heart:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel ... The former [Romance] ... has fairly a right to present [the truth of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. (*The House of the Seven Gables* 1)

This quotation testifies that Hawthorne is strongly conscious of his self as a romancer. Moreover, he uses the preface to convince the readers to believe the subjectivity of the romancer and the world of romance written by him. Then what is the sphere of romance which he is trying to create? In "The Custom House," the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, the characteristic of romance he intends to write is explained directly: "... a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (*The Scarlet Letter*

28). "A neutral territory" where fiction and reality merge: this is the sphere of romance where Hawthorne struggles to reveal the truth of human heart. He embarks on realizing his theory of romance on the one hand. On the other hand, however, he feels keenly the difficulty of making this trial in America. It is famous that, in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, he deplores the lack of materials for writing romance in his own country.

Hawthorne makes some devices in the former three romances in order to create the work he considers ideal romance in America. The stage is put on the Puritan community in the seventeenth century in *The Scarlet Letter*: on the Gothic mansion in *The House of the Seven Gables*: and on the utopian community which recedes from ordinary society in *The Blithedale Romance*. Thus Hawthorne tries to represent "the inner truth" (*The Blithedale Romance* 3) in the sphere where "the Actual and the Imaginary may meet." But in *The Marble Faun*, he does not have to contrive such devices, for, in this last finished romance, he finally obtains the ideal stage which he longs for for a long time: Italy. In its preface, he writes: "Italy, as the site of his Romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and must needs be, in America" (*The Marble Faun* 3). It is his object, he states, to clarify "a thoughtful moral" (3) for the readers. However, in spite of obtaining this ideal material, Hawthorne is often severely criticized on the ground that, in *The Marble Faun*, he fails to realize the theory of romance which he defines.¹ Why does this romance give such impression of a failure to the readers? If Hawthorne really fails to create the sphere of romance in *The Marble Faun*, what influence does it have on his self as an artist? In this thesis, I would like to

shed new light on this problem from a viewpoint of domesticity, for I think domesticity is one of the crucial keys to explicate Hawthorne's texts.

Before examining the relation between Hawthorne and domesticity, it is necessary to look over the cult of domesticity which prevailed in the nineteenth century first. Barbara Welter enumerates the four virtues of true woman, one of which is domesticity.² Nina Baym, moreover, notes how the ideology of domesticity sways American culture in this age:

... men as well as women find greatest happiness and fulfillment in domestic relations... Domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society. (Baym 27)

The contrast between happy domestic sphere and severe outside world in the period of American Industrial Revolution is suggested in this passage. Home as a refuge from harsh society or happiness in it is unimaginable without domestic angel, which the true woman is expected to be. It is helpful to cite the words of Helen Irving: "That her home shall be made a loving place of rest and joy and comfort for those who are dear to her, will be the first wish of every true woman's heart" (Welter 166-7). Joel Pfister, furthermore, analyzes the ideological discourse of the nineteenth-century men which makes women the human hearth to warm up their mind:

... his privatized expectations compulsively fed upon a nineteenth-century middle-class sentimental discourse that represented womanhood as a human hearth whose domestic function was to keep a beleaguered masculinity, chilled in the marketplace, emotionally warm and psychologically secure. (Pfister 6)

This passage shows how women are made the object of men's

desire. Since the middle-class men in the nineteenth century are tired from the severe outside society, they are obsessed with the idea of domestic angel to console them physically and mentally. In other words, they satisfy their own desire by reflecting the illusion of domestic angel on women. Looking from a cultural perspective in this way, it is obvious that the ideology of domesticity in the nineteenth-century is produced by the desire of men who require women to be their solacer.

It is in this cultural ethos that Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* is produced. Then how this ethos is influenced on his text? In order to elucidate the relation between Hawthorne and domesticity, I will consider how he is describing two women in this text and his stance against them. The scholars of Hawthorne often point out that there appear two types of female characters in his fictions: the fair woman and the dark woman. In *The Marble Faun*, Hilda plays a part of the fair woman, and Miriam, the dark woman. The attributes of these two women contrast sharply each other. Next I will investigate how these two women are depicted in detail.

Let us begin with Hilda. She is connected with the pure whiteness throughout the story. Suitably enough for the fair woman, she has blond hair and is shrouded in white dresses. She lives with white doves, and she is herself compared to them. In accordance with her outlook, Hilda obtains "sweet faith and pure imagination" (460). She wins "snowy whiteness of her fame" (54) from her acquaintances. She is also associated with white light. The narrator likens her soul to the sunshine and is convinced that it is "incompatible with any shadow of darkness" (128). Kenyon's words, "the white, shining purity" briefly express her peculiarity represented in the text. Thus her quality of angelic, pure whiteness is inscribed in the mind of the readers.

This image of Hilda reminds us of Hawthorne's wife, Sophia. He repeatedly calls her "Dove" in his letters to her.³ He sees in her the angelic quality of pure whiteness.⁴ Walter Herbert insists that Hawthorne is obsessed with the idea of purity of women: "Hawthorne was fascinated by all his life by the male psychodynamics of feminine purity..." (Herbert 145). Hawthorne, along with the middle-class men in the nineteenth century, reflects pure and white image on Sophia. In other words, he wants to make her his ideal domestic angel.

Reading his fictions as well as his letters, we find that Hawthorne is also obsessed with the idea of domestic sphere itself. He expresses the aspiration to create a domestic sphere with Sophia in some of his letters:

Now if my Dove were sitting in the easiest of our two easy chairs... then would the included space of these four walls... seem indeed like home.— But the soul of home is wanting now. Oh, naughtiest, why are you not here to welcome your husband with a kiss... when he comes in at eventide, chilled with his wintry day's toil? (*Letters* 387)

This passage concisely shows the fortunate domestic sphere that Hawthorne longs for. He persuades Sophia to become "the soul of home" in order to make his room the comfortable domestic sphere to relieve his weariness and depression. In this way, the domestic sphere with the angel who provides him with consolation is the object of his desire.

Innocent and pure white image of woman which he searches for in Sophia is represented in Hilda in *The Marble Faun*. In this story, Kenyon, on behalf of Hawthorne, seeks after the image of ideal domestic angel in Hilda. Kenyon aspires to "draw her down to an earthly fireside" (*The Marble Faun* 372) and succeeds in making her the domestic light for him in the end: "... Hilda was coming down from her old tower, to be

herself enshrined and worshipped as a household Saint, in the light of her husband's fireside" (461). We can easily predict that the white light emitted from her will illuminate the domestic sphere and console Kenyon's heart. Hilda is for him the angelic woman indispensable for the fortunate domestic sphere.

Miriam, on the other hand, is depicted as a woman who is incompatible with domesticity. She is endowed with dark attribute; the atmosphere she emits is something ambiguous and mysterious. Her outlook is characterized by rich dark hair and dark eyes which are becoming to the dark woman. Her ambiguous identity remains uncertain even at the end of the story. The inside of her studio, furthermore, is dark because the light, the symbol of domesticity, is shut out. Darkness prevails over the attribute of Miriam, just as it prevails over her studio. If Hilda's peculiarity is white light, Miriam is distinguished by ambiguous darkness. To put it another way, Miriam's ambiguous quality, as if it were a shadow, is contrasted with Hilda's pure white light which symbolizes domesticity.

The color with which Miriam is associated in an impressive way consolidates her image as the dark woman. In contrast with Hilda's whiteness, Miriam is repeatedly associated with red. The connection between Miriam and blood is emphasized throughout the story. The narrator suggests that her past is bloodstained with a terrible crime. Her secret, as she herself confesses, is "dark-red carbuncle ... red as blood" (130). Moreover, the gem Miriam wears emits the red sparkle. We can regard this red stone as her metonymy. Miriam's redness is differentiated sharply from the domestic whiteness. In this way, ambiguous, dark quality of Miriam is symbolically elucidated by the red color, which is incompatible with the notion

of domesticity or domestic angel.

Furthermore, Miriam's own works represent her incompatibility with domesticity. In some of her sketches, she depicts domestic happiness. However, in spite of taking up such a subject, she puts herself on the position dissociated from the fortunate domestic sphere:

In all those sketches of common life, and the affections that spiritualized it, *a figure was portrayed apart*; now, it peeped between the branches of a shrubbery, amid which two lovers sat; now, it was looking through a frosted window, from the outside, while a young wedded pair sat at their new fireside, within; and, once, it leaned from a chariot, which six horses were whirling onward ... and gazed at a scene of humble enjoyment by a cottage-door. (46 emphasis added)

It is noticeable in this passage how observing figures are contrasted with the domestic sphere in Miriam's sketches. These figures are Miriam herself, and the fact that she composes her pictures as such implies that she is conscious of her heterogeneity with domestic happiness. Miriam's room in the residence is the externalization of her anti-domestic attribute: "Only, in not a single nook of the palace (built ... with no vision of a happy fireside or any mode of domestic enjoyment) does the humblest or the haughtiest occupant find comfort" (38). On these grounds, it should be concluded that Miriam is the representation of anti-domesticity.

Miriam is not simply incompatible with domesticity, however: she makes an attack on what its ideology signifies. As mentioned above, the ideology of domesticity produced by men's desire impels women to be their angel. Miriam revolts against their dominating desire. The similarity between Miriam and Beatrice Cenci, who is famous for an episode of

patricide, confirms that she is a woman of rebellion. She resists being imprisoned into the framework of domesticity and repels men's illusion of domestic angel. A statue of Cleopatra created by Kenyon duplicates Miriam's struggling image:

The fierce Egyptian queen had now struggled almost out of the imprisoning stone. ... you already felt her compressed heat, and were aware of a tigerlike character even in her repose. If Octavius should make his appearance ... it was evident that she would tear herself forth in a twinkling ... to spring enraged at his throat. ... (377-8)

Miriam, who also resists being imprisoned, feels deep sympathy with Cleopatra. In short, Miriam shares the same quality with this Egyptian queen: they are both endowed with aggressive passion and defiant of men's desire.

Furthermore, Miriam's rebellion against men is implied in her trial of reinterpreting the pictures of the Old (male) Masters. Contrary to Hilda, who simply admires their pictures and truthfully copies them, Miriam seeks to create the original on the basis of her own interpretation of the subject.⁵ In other words, Miriam possesses her own thinking. Examining Hilda's copy of Guido's *Beatrice Cenci*, Miriam remarks as follows: "...if a woman had painted the original picture, there might have been something in it which we miss now. I have a great mind to undertake a copy myself, and try to give it what it lacks" (68). Miriam is never obedient to male masters. It is the rage of women against male-centric ideology that the portrait of the male master lacks. Since she is dissatisfied with this lack, Miriam intends to represent women's rage vividly in her own pictures by herself.

Miriam recurrently takes up the theme of women's "vengeful mischief towards man" (44) for her sketches. In one of them, she draws Jael "driving the nail through the temple of

Sisera:

It was dashed off with remarkable power, and showed a touch or two that were actually lifelike and deathlike; as if Miriam had been standing by, when Jael gave the first stroke of her murderous hammer--or as if she herself were Jael, and felt irresistibly impelled to make her bloody confession, in this guise. (43)

Here Miriam identifies herself with Jael. Miriam's brush is Jael's nail: it is the symbol of her rebellion as well as the synecdoche of her resisting hand. She gives men's illusion a painful stroke by revealing that the image of woman as domestic angel is but a production of their desire. The narrator observes that she brings out "the moral, that woman must strike through her own heart to reach a human life" (44). This comment is not accurate, however. She represents the woman who strikes through not her own heart but the ideological framework of domestic angel.

The dark woman like Miriam who not only deviates from domestic sphere but also rebels against its ideology is a threat to Hawthorne who aspires after domestic angel. He has taken up the subject of man's ambivalence (enchantment and fear) toward the dark woman as found in *The Blithedale Romance*. But in *The Marble Faun*, man's persistence in the fair woman is far more emphasized than his ambivalence toward the dark woman. What lies behind this shift? In his last years, when he writes this romance, there is a discord in the Hawthorne family caused by a long-term vagabond life in foreign countries and illness of his daughter, Una, as elucidated by a recent study of Herbert: "A structural crisis gripped the Hawthorne family in Rome, centered on Una's special position within it ... she suffered a psychic collapse in which the sacred marital collusion of Nathaniel and Sophia was disrupted" (Herbert

218). As a consequence of this discord, it is presumable that Hawthorne craves for domestic happiness, which the fair woman represents, all the more.

Hawthorne's strong insistence on domesticity is reflected on Kenyon, whose point of view is close to him. Although Kenyon once accepts the conception of the moral ambiguity which Miriam indicates, he immediately withdraws his acceptance of it in favor of Hilda and pleads with her in the last chapter:

"Forgive me, Hilda! ... I never did believe it! But mind wanders wild and wide; and, so lonely as I live and work, I have neither pole-star above, nor light of the cottage-windows here below, to *bring me home*. Were you my guide ... with that white wisdom which clothes you as with a celestial garment, all would go well. Oh, Hilda, *guide me home!*" (*The Marble Faun* 460-1 emphasis added)

We can read Hawthorne's strong obsession with domesticity in the fact that he makes Kenyon repeat the word "home" twice. Hawthorne sticks to the concept of home so firmly that he can't help underlining his secret affirmation of the angelic woman to "guide [him] home" at the end of the story, not the dark woman who challenges its ideology. In short, in *The Marble Faun*, his intense obsession with domesticity forces Kenyon to submit to Hilda, the representation of domesticity, and, consequently, reject anti-domestic Miriam.⁶

The rejection of Miriam, however, accompanies a lot of sacrifice to Hawthorne, for if Kenyon is his spokesperson as a man, Miriam is his spokesperson as an artist. Let us observe the description of her studio:

The room had the customary aspect of a painter's studio; one of those delightful spot that hardly seem to belong to the actual world, but rather to be the outward type of a

poet's haunted imagination, where there are glimpses, sketches, and half-developed hints of beings and objects, grander and more beautiful than we can anywhere find in reality. (41)

This is exactly the neutral territory, the sphere to which a romancer belongs, described in "The Custom House." Along with the writer of romance, Miriam exercises as an artist her free imagination and creativity in this illusory sphere. In addition, her insight into moral ambiguity and her dark fatalism are what characterize Hawthorne as a writer. In order to confirm this proposition, we must not overlook her remark on the chasm:

"... The chasm was merely one of the orifices of that pit of blackness that lies beneath us, everywhere. The firmest substance of human happiness is but a thin crust spread over it, with just reality enough to bear up the illusive stage-scenery amid which we tread. It needs no earthquake to open the chasm. A footstep, a little heavier than ordinary, will serve.... By-and-by, we inevitably sink!" (161-2)

Her utterance summarizes the theme of moral ambiguity and the dark view of fate which Hawthorne seeks to elucidate in his romance. She is endowed with his insight as an artist: she realizes that, beneath the surface of everything including human beings, something chaotic resides (the duplicity of the things), and they are inevitably destined to be involved in this chaos. In short, Miriam plays a part of Hawthorne's alter ego as a romancer.

Nevertheless, the theme of moral ambiguity which Miriam represents is repressed in the text by the contradictory desire for clear white light. Hawthorne's intense craving for domesticity drives him to withdraw so easily his belief in moral

ambiguity, which is the essence of his romance, by admiring Hilda, who flatly rejects it, saying "Oh hush!" On the other hand, he negates Miriam, who realizes moral ambiguity, because she threatens and rebels against the ideology of domesticity. This negation, however, means his own rejection of his self as an artist.

Kenyon falls into a state of utter bewilderment as a result of Hilda's disappearance from Rome, so his heart is not moved by a precious statue which Miriam finds out. He cries, "Imagination and the love of art have both died out of me" (421). He is subject to Hilda so much that he relinquishes his self as an artist. The narrator gives a cynical comment on Kenyon in helpless mentality:

He could hardly, we fear, be reckoned a consummate artist, because there was something dearer to him than his art; and, by the greater strength of a human affection, the divine statue seemed to fall asunder again, and become only a heap of worthless fragment. (424)

"Something dearer to him than his art" is domesticity. This bitter comment, however, is ironically thrown back on Hawthorne himself who conceives the plot of *The Marble Faun*.

One of the reasons why *The Marble Faun* gives us an impression of a failure exists in Hawthorne's immense dependence on domesticity, as we observed above. He interweaves in his text the situation that he is subject to domesticity which the fair woman embodies, which disrupts the theme and the structure of the romance. Consequently, he reveals, in spite of himself, that his statement in the preface that he is going to represent the sphere of romance is but a deceptive one. Thus, Hawthorne exposes the endangered subject of a romancer to the readers. His self as a romancer which he had been struggling to create for a long time is ruined by himself.

Notes

1. The defects of this romance, for example, are listed by Roy R. Male:

Many readers... have found *The Marble Faun* slow going... No coherent structure is immediately apparent... the narrative seems to bog down in the lengthy descriptions of Rome and its art objects... To make matters worse, Hawthorne teases the reader into looking the wrong side of the tapestry... (157-8)

Evan Carton blames Hawthorne for his failure to digest the historicity and materials that Rome provides: "Hawthorne's last 'fairy precinct' is gorged with physical substance and steeped in history, but its historicity and materiality provide no stable foundation, confer no authority, yield no clarity of view" (252-3).

2. Other three virtues mentioned by Welter are "piety", "purity", and "submissiveness."
3. Hawthorne writes many love letters to Sophia during the period of courtship as well as after their marriage, using her nickname "Dove." I will cite here two of them as examples: "Mine own Dove, You will have received my letter, dearest, ere now..." (*Letters* 377); "Sweetest Dove, fly thither sometimes, and alight in my bosom" (345).
4. Following quotation testifies that Hawthorne makes himself believe that Sophia is pure: "Or, rather, each of us will always have [excision] over our mutual self-direct [excision] because you are a woman — the woman; and because you are an immortal and pure spirit" (345). She is not only pure woman but also "the woman" with the definite article. He even exalts her to the position of holiness: "Your unreserve, your out-gushing frankness, is one of the loveliest results of your purity, and innocence, and holiness" (358-9).
5. Miriam, for instance, criticizes the defects of Guido's famous picture of Michael based on the episode in Christianity, which Hilda heartily praises, and vividly represents her own interpretation:

... But, is it that the Virtue looks, the moment after its death-struggle with Evil? NO, no! *I could have told Guido better*. A full third of the Archangel's feathers should have been torn from his wings; the rest all ruffled, till they looked like Satan's own! ... And with all fierceness, this unutterable horror, there should still be something high, tender, and holy, in Michael's eyes, and around his mouth. But the battle never was such child's play as Guido's dapper Archangel seems to

have found it! (*The Marble Faun* 184 emphasis added)

Her expression emphasized above exemplifies her defiance of the Old Master. Her representation also reflects her struggling image. Besides, this representation involves the theme of ambiguity between Virtue and Evil.

6. Emily Schiller also treats the problem of Hawthorne's choice of innocent Hilda:

Hawthorne knew and had written about the seductions and the dangers of domestic innocence. Hilda is neither a failure nor a capitulation. She is a clear demonstration of the power of innocence to blind us to its limitations, warp our judgment, and persuade us to defend its static — and questionable — virtue at all costs. (388)

But I do not agree with her because we are hardly persuaded to defend her innocence, as dissatisfaction with her character by many critics indicates. In addition, Schiller does not mention the relation between domesticity and Hawthorne's self as a romancer. I would like to insist further that his choice of the fair woman is critical to his artistic self.

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