

(Courtesy of an Anonymous Student. Used with permission.)

## Capturing Beauty

“He had caught a far other butterfly than this. When the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality.” -Hawthorne, “The Artist of the Beautiful”

In “The Artist of the Beautiful” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, creative process is represented as the practice of creating an animated mechanism in the shape of a butterfly and imbuing it with the spirit of Owen Warland – the pursuer of beauty. Owen is confronted with the skepticisms of Robert Danforth, a blacksmith, and Peter Hovenden, a retired watch maker. Both Robert and Peter describe Owen’s effort to create beauty as a futile struggle while he could be making watches that are useful and profitable. Owen’s love toward Annie Hovenden, daughter of Peter Hovenden, puts Owen in a very difficult position of loving the daughter of his enemy. After witnessing two incidents of destruction of his project, receiving the despairing news of Annie’s marriage to Robert, and long days and night of toil, Owen finally presents his product of a small machine as a belated-bridal gift to Annie. The story suggests that art is a personal pursuit of the artist’s ideal that takes his or her imagination and intellect beyond the real world to see beauty. The artist strives to produce a materialized representation of his or her vision of beauty.

This act of creativity involves effort, toil, inspiration, failure, and is accompanied by the scorn and criticism of others who do not understand, as Arthur Koestler puts, the bisociative connection the artist makes in his inspiration and imagination. Our society values the importance of profit, practicality, and usefulness of a creation. However, Hawthorne stresses the importance of the process – the intellectual thought process, effort, and imagination – of creating art rather than the usefulness of the product.

From the beginning of the story, Owen Warland, a watchmaker, is alienated from the rest of the characters. Owen struggles against his own self-doubt as well as the disbelief in his efforts expressed by the other characters. He is directly contrasted and compared to Robert Danforth the blacksmith, who produces practical tools, by Owen's former master, Peter Hovenden. Clearly, Peter looks down upon Owen for working on watches and machinery that has less value than "a Dutch toy" (Hawthorne 332). After his work has been destroyed once by Annie Hovenden, Owen withdraws himself from work. When Annie gets engaged to Robert, Owen's health falters, he loses motivation, and he becomes unfit to work. Throughout the story, Owen walks a lonely path "while the incredulous world assails him with its utter disbelief" (337).

My personal experience in visual arts tells me that sometimes artists may prefer being alone. Although Owen is alienated from the rest of the characters due to the social atmosphere in the story, when I worked on the largest pencil drawing I have ever done, I

worked strictly alone; I did not listen to what others had to say about my drawing. Some did not like how I was approaching my drawing, but I felt maybe they will understand once they see the finished product. I used small geometric shapes to draw a self-portrait of me in a subway station in Korea. Also, in order to decrease the amount of time work, I decided to make the outer edges blurry. At first none of the object I was drawing was recognizable. Many people were commenting on my drawing and I started to get annoyed by them because the suggestions contradicted my ideas. I ended up working late at night when no one was around in the art room and I found that more relaxing and helpful.

Drawing a six feet by four feet drawing took a long time. Time to time, I got sick of drawing and just sat on the stool staring at the wall. The drawing became very repetitive and boring. Those are when I got ideas how to make my drawing better and got motivated to work and concentrate harder. One of the ideas was actually a realization that erasers can be considered a white pencil. I made good use of five erasers on the project to make a nice blurring effect towards the edges of the whole drawing.

Whenever Owen falls into despair, he eventually comes back to work after encountering a butterfly. While Owen is in the state of reclusion, he spends his time drinking throughout the winter. However, when he sees a butterfly and knows that spring has come again, he suddenly decides to work. The butterfly symbolizes Owen's

inspiration and his creativity at work; Annie's bridal gift also takes the form of a butterfly. His inspiration and "faith in the invisible," he is not any different from others who "rejected much that even his eye could see, and [Owen] trusted confidently in nothing but what his hand could touch" (346). However, when Owen is motivated to work, he is "the being of thought, imagination, and keenest sensibility" (346).

The butterfly Owen makes is only a representation of his thoughts and imagination. He is making his mechanical butterfly since he "[feels] the impulse to give external reality to his ideas as irresistibly as any of the poets or painters who have arrayed the world in a dimmer and fainter beauty, imperfectly copied from the richness of their visions" (340). It is suggested that Owen's obsession to make the "exquisite mechanism" comes from his desire to materialize the abstract ideas and visions he sees in connection to the real world. Koestler calls this act a "cross-fertilization" or "self-fertilization" (2) of two distant, separate ideas that people normally would not connect them. Perhaps Owen saw that beauty has greater value than any practical tool humans may make. The tools we use today will become useless when our civilization ends. However, the beauty of nature or of a butterfly has better chance of lasting longer or even forever. Hawthorne is implying that the beauty of nature which Owen tries to capture in the form of art is "a finer, more ethereal power" (336) than the usefulness of a tool.

Similarly, my self-portrait was a representation of what I think who I am. I took an unusual approach for a self-portrait; I drew myself very small and instead put a lot of detail in the surroundings that represents me well. However, I managed to draw a typical subway station in Seoul as well. I considered my drawing a success when people were able to say “That’s Albert’s drawing.” from far away at first glance at the Student Art Show at my high school. However, it was a long and hard process of thinking and working patiently and diligently. Every object and its position were contemplated over and over again before drawing it on the paper.

Both incidents of Owen’s failure and loss of inspiration result from both Annie’s mistake of destroying the machine and her engagement to Robert. What role does she play in the story? Why did Hawthorne create such a character in the story? It is clear to the readers that Owen is in love with Annie; she might be the reason why he works so hard. Perhaps it is Annie’s beauty that Owen is trying to capture in his work. However, Owen asserts that “[he has] deceived [himself]” when he “yearned for sympathy and thought, fancied, and dreamed” that he could “admit [her] into [his] secrets” (342). This shows what a personal experience art can be. Because art can be so personal, that is probably why we see most artists working alone and sometimes alienated from the rest of the society.

Owen presents his final product, an animated butterfly, as a belated bridal gift to Annie. The butterfly that Owen made is so lively that Annie, Robert, and Peter question whether it is alive. To this question, Owen responds that his work has “absorbed [his] own being into itself” and it is a “[representation] of his intellect, the imagination, the sensibility, and the soul of an Artist of the Beautiful” (350). The butterfly well might be a representation of the spirit of an artist as its beauty and light diminishes in “an atmosphere of doubt and mockery” (352). Although the cost of his toil and thought was only to be shattered again by a stroke of a baby, the destruction of his masterpiece did not disappoint him for he “rose high enough to achieve the beautiful... [and] his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality” (354).