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Treasure Hunt in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure"

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In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" Hawthorne deals with the American Dream as an intrinsic part of the American experience. Peter is the lonely individual who confronts the world dreaming. Hawthorne's vision of the American Dream is rooted in his Puritan conception of the man and the world. His Calvinist vision of mankind gives a dramatic aspect to Peter's dreams. Hawthorne thought that man's sinful condition made impossible an innocent and simplistic vision of the American Dream. According to Heather O'Toole, Hawthorne believed "that pure evil is at the core of every individual, keeping everyone from any genuine good" (O'Toole). Thus Hawthorne sees the inevitable doubleness of man's experience and dreams in the new world at once tragic and hopeful.

For Hawthorne dreaming is an essential part of the American experience; however there are different ways of dreaming - the quest for wealth, fame or power; religious freedom and justice; racial equality. In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" Hawthorne deals with one of these basic ways: the quest for wealth. Peter Goldthwaite, the main character, compulsively devotes his life to fortune-hunting; he wants to get rich quick. Getting rich, which is at the very heart of the American capitalist economy and has become an obsession for many in the land of promise, is the result of greed which is the evil of the Western materialist society. Being successful and getting rich have been considered traditionally as the most frequent manifestations of the dreams of the New World.

To understand Hawthorne's vision of the American Dream, we will contrast it with the ideas of the 'Party of Hope', Emerson's term, which have clearly shaped the American Dream. Hawthorne as a gloomy dreamer could never truly believe in America as something entirely new as many described it, "a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World" (Lewis 5). The 'Party of Hope' saw life and history as just beginning and projected towards the future. The vision of the American scene as something entirely new engenders a new kind of hero who is the embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes. This figure (identified by RWB. Lewis as the Adam before the Fall) stands for the archetypal American Dreamer. First he

is a man emancipated from history, "untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (5). In his newness, he is fundamentally innocent. Second he is an individual who stands alone and is able to confront the world with his own unique resources. This figure embodies the very essence of the American Dream, the man in progress toward perfection.

Peter is a dreamer and the Goldthwaites are described as a race of dreamers, however they are not hopeful dreamers. When Peter is awake, he is searching for a treasure: pursuing a chimera in his harsh real life. When he is sleeping, he also has golden dreams. In one of them he is turning a ponderous key in an iron door and disclosing a vault heaped up with gold coins. The house has been changed into a palace made of precious metals. It seems to have been transmuted into gold or silver as if King Midas had touched it.[1] Real life also seems like a golden dream when Peter Goldthwaite drinks the rich old wine and, through the liquid, "beheld the kitchen illuminated with a golden glory, which also enveloped Tabitha, and gilded her silver hair, and converted her mean garments into robes of queenly splendor" (Hawthorne 286). Not just his past or present, but his future remains insubstantial. He has already resolved that when he finds the hidden gold, he will go and find the fairest maid in town.

Peter is the perfect builder of castles in the air, "a man who had fed on windy schemes and empty hopes" (273). His dreamlike quality is clearly symbolized in the bubble image which stands for his airy schemes. In the story, Mr. Brown tells Peter that he might draw the money for his unreal project from "Bubble Bank." This image is also repeated when Peter finally finds the chest of gold. This is filled with old provincial bills of credit, treasury notes, bills of land banks and "all other bubbles of the sort:" a worthless treasure. Unlike gold, bubbles cannot "be inherited or willed to posterity, and yet [...] their momentary beauty embodies a life that is denied to more durable things" (Bewley 446). The insubstantiality of the bubbles is the ghostly quality of Peter's business and life in contrast to Mr. Brown's solid realities. But sometimes they can be as substantial as those.

Peter is depicted as a sort of Quixote devoted to his follies, living in a world of fantasies and dreams. By his side, Tabitha, his servant, is somehow a Sancho Panza who loves her master, although she is never infected with Peter's flightiness. From her realistic standpoint, she cannot do anything, but accept the old bachelor's inevitable crazy acts. When Peter tells her that he is going to tear the house down, she just pragmatically recommends him to leave the kitchen until the last.

Hawthorne questions the hopeful self-sufficiency of the American Dreamer in his tragic confrontation with the whole world. Peter is the

solitary hero in "a hostile universe, or at least neutral, universe" (Fiedler 110). The search for wealth isolates him from those who are a part of the "united struggle" of mankind. Peter has devoted his entire life to his dreams and is an old bachelor who does not have any offspring. His ultimate punishment would be ostracism that would end in annihilation for him and his family line. The Goldthwaites are doomed to extinction. Peter becomes a symbol of extreme isolation, the lonely outcast who prefigures "the plight of modern, alienated man" (Fiedler 445).

The theme of isolation reaches its peak of intensity when, through a window, Peter watches the inhabitants of the town celebrating the first day of January. Through the window, the sunlight and the mild air enter the dismal old house. It is a very lively scene to observe. Peter's brief glimpse into the street gives him a forcible impression and he realizes that he has been secluded pursuing what might turn out to be just a dream. Hawthorne contrasts "the organic relation between past experience and the living moment" (Lewis 8) with the hopeful ideal of newborn innocence. Hawthorne's dreamer is not emancipated from history, neither is he free from family's inheritance. In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" some episodes of the family's past are repeated in the present. Peter, in his ghostly quality, is depicted as the reincarnation of his also greedy ancestor, old Peter Goldthwaite. When Peter starts destroying the house, he finds a multitude of phials with just half of the old apothecary's stuff, "the other half had done its business on Peter's ancestors, *had been brought hither from the death chamber*" (Hawthorne 277) [My emphasis]. Peter is not just his ancestor's vivid image, he also represents perfectly his identity and attributes. They both share the same imagination and their tendency to engage in unrealistic businesses. At one point in the story, Peter himself speculates on his identity: "At that moment a strange notion glimmered through his brain, that he was the identical Peter who had concealed the gold, and ought to know whereabouts it lay. This, however, he had unaccountably forgotten" (277). Tabitha also has her duplicate in the former Peter Goldthwaite's housekeeper. Sometimes present and past get so close that it is as if time had stopped. The same century-old logs of red oak still hissed with the heat of the fire.

These repetitions in the story suggest a somewhat static idea of history and the essentially unchangeable nature of man (Gray 101). It makes us think of history as a circle, conceived in terms of the ancient figure of the wheel of fate[2]. Peter appears as a prisoner of time as well as a prisoner of space. This vision contradicts the principle of sovereign present as formulated in the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine,[3] which determined the hopeful vision of the American Dream as a projection of the future and a

rejection of the past. In Peter's transgression of the law of mortality, he embodies Hawthorne's concept of the continuum of history. Peter is not just his ancestor's reincarnation, but a figure of all time. He is a sort of Wanderer[4] who has been in the world for centuries; an amalgam of past and present.

The mirror is the ultimate expression of Hawthorne's view of history. The past comes back to life through the magic reflection of the mirror, which serves as a sort of connecting door between different times. We might think that the way time is depicted in "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" does not offer a basis for hope. To some extent it seems that we are trapped, we cannot escape from our past. However the ending of the story is somehow optimistic and implies some progress. Like the party of Memory, which believed that "the sinfulness of man seemed never so patent as currently in America" (Lewis: 7), and as a consequence of his Calvinist background, Hawthorne could not believe in the innate innocence of man. His hero, Peter Goldthwaite, is the Adam after the Fall, a figure who is tainted by sin, greed. With Hawthorne the American Dream darkens because it touches sin and evil. According to Fiedler (143) the American Dream of innocence that Europeans brought across the ocean (to build a new society immune to the evil of the past) failed with the slaughter of the Indians and the abominations of the slave trade, both of which proved that evil had not been eradicated. Hawthorne was conscious of the fact that the American Dream of innocence had ended and the Faustian nightmare had replaced it.

Peter is a sinful dreamer. His avarice and his engagement with evil are behind his fantasies (the quest for wealth). According to Thomas Aquinas, greed is a sin against God, just as all mortal sins, because "man contemns things eternal for the sake of temporal things" (Suma Theologica: 118, ar. 1). Hawthorne conveys the evil of Peter's search through the gothic mode and the Faustian bargain stands at the core of his story. When Peter is looking for the Goldthwaites' treasure, he discovers some charcoal sketches. One of these pictures shocks him especially. It represents a ragged man with a spade leaning over to take something that he had found in a hole in the ground. Behind the man, a figure, the devil, with a fiendish laugh on his face, horns, a forked tail and a cloven hoof, is about to seize him. The Faust myth is evident in this sketch: the vain search for the treasure will mean the loss of the treasure seeker's soul. On a religious level, the search for material prosperity also may lead to the death of the spirit, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8: 36). Peter chooses to be damned (Fiedler 133) when he engages in a search for gold. He rejects all bonds of love and sympathy and becomes the lonely individual who tries to strike it rich. He surrenders his hope for heaven.

Peter definitely sells his soul to the Devil when, after seeing the sketches, he decides to go on with his search and seals the pact with the words: "Avaunt, Satan!" [. . .] "The man shall have his gold." Then he hits the horned gentleman in the picture with his axe and demolishes him, but also the treasure seeker. The Gothic weather also contributes to create the gloomy atmosphere that suggests the evil nature of what is happening inside the gabled house. The very last night when Peter finishes his work, there is a snowstorm accompanied by a hurricane. It is an incredibly stormy day as if "the prince of the air in person were putting the final stroke to Peter's labors" (Hawthorne 286). In this story, Hawthorne illustrates his Puritan Calvinist vision of the fallen man in a stormy world.

The association between the Devil and the treasure is also clear in the stories that Tabitha tells Peter about his ancestor. According to these, the ancient Peter could not spend his money because when he tried to unlock the chest of gold, Old Scratch[5] came behind and caught his arm. Some other people said that Peter's ancestor made over the house to Old Scratch and that was why people under its roof were so unlucky. Once he had given the deed to the Devil, the chest flew open, but instead of gold, there was a parcel of old rags. This second rumor connects with the evil influence that the old mansion exerts on its occupants: "There seemed, indeed, to be a fatality that connected him [Peter] with his birth-place" (Hawthorne 272-273). The ill-fated destiny of the Goldthwaites is linked to the house.

Peter's old mansion symbolically stands for the inner life of the Goldthwaites, their obsessive dreams and sins. The anthropomorphism of the house makes it a living presence, a parallel of Peter's soul. According to Fiedler (131), "crumbling edifices project the world of collapsed ego-ideals." The house is the emblem of the human heart symbolized by the hearth and the windows are the eyes looking out on the "mighty river of life." It is also a complex symbol of the past which represents the whole history of the Goldthwaite family. It stands for their sins which are inherited from one generation to the other. Thus Hawthorne recreates the most prevalent theme in Gothic fiction: "the revisiting of the sin of the fathers upon their children" (Punter 46). On the other hand the garret of the ruined mansion is the "limbo of departed fashions, aged trifles of a day, and whatever was valuable only to one generation of men" (Hawthorne 277), an emblem of how material things do not last. The Gothic images of rust, decay, and dust everywhere in the house connect this habitation with the theme of decline and death. The destruction of the house indicates that the quest for money can have only one end, the annihilation of the treasure seeker's soul.

In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" Hawthorne resorts to the hermetic process of alchemy as a metaphor for the fallen state of man and the possibility of a Christian redemption. According to rumors, the ancient Peter had made his gold by alchemy. This ancient refining process was devoted to transmuting iron into gold: "the refining away of what is corruptible and base within a family's character and the emergence of a golden radiance out of an iron darkness" (Kleiman 303). Kleiman further suggests (293) that this could be a metaphor for the metaphysical "chemistry" of body and soul: to draw life out of death. Thus alchemy points to a spiritual pursuit (the artist's?), a process of transformation for the better (We cannot forget that iron was the metal associated with Puritans). Consequently this refining process parallels the Biblical pattern of fall, the transmission of sin and Christian regeneration. This metaphor symbolizes regeneration as well as the search for a deeper truth beyond the Puritans' conceptions.

To completely understand Hawthorne's Calvinist vision of the American Dream in "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure," we should consider two basic Puritan concepts: secular calling and the Protestant Ethic (Johnson). Hawthorne's ancestors brought to the New World the doctrine of secular calling which had a great impact on the seventeenth-century society and was the basis for what was called in the nineteenth-century society the Protestant Ethic. According to the secular calling, everyone had a divinely predestined work and place. Each person had the duty to discover what work God had chosen for them and work hard in their calling. Gender and the social-economic position in which one was born dictated one's calling within the society. A woman had to be a wife and a mother. People who were born into a social class had to stay in the stations God had decided for them. To find one's proper work, accept one's social class and position meant to obey God and begin to obtain spiritual fulfillment.

To determine the proper calling, one should consider his talents and preferences, his social class and finally if the chosen calling was of benefit to the society and glorified God. Some works were regarded as suitable whereas others such as lawless callings were intolerable. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, many believed that working in the arts was undesirable or even unacceptable since it was not of benefit to the society nor could it possibly glorify God. To be an artist was not a proper calling.

In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" Hawthorne depicts the tragic conflict between art and capitalism: between Peter as the artist/dreamer and John Brown as the substantial businessman. Peter is described as a man who might have been a brilliant figure in the world if he had devoted his talent to

"the airy business" of poetry instead of using it in mercantile pursuits. Peter consecrates his life to achieve financial success since his artistic disposition would not have been accepted by his class or by a society which believed in success, but would not have approved of a career of art. Thus Peter represents "the solitude of the artist in the utopia of his art, and his half-willful condemnation of himself to impotence and death" (Fiedler 445). Alienation is at once the artist's crime and his punishment.

With the decline of Puritanism and the rise of industrialism the calling became more and more secularized. Two basic notions of the secular calling remained in the concept of the Protestant ethic: to work hard and to stay in your social class. In the Protestant ethic hard work made it possible not only to achieve financial success, but also God's grace and consequently a place in Heaven. Even though the secular calling was secondary to the spiritual one, financial success became an indicator of accomplishment in both secular and spiritual callings. If a man was successful in his business and made a lot of money, he must be very good and God must love him a lot. Conversely if one was poor, he must not be good or he must not be working hard enough. Success implied virtue whereas failure implied sin. In Hawthorne's tale Peter stands on the verge of ruin pursuing economical success whereas John Brown has succeeded and has become a very wealthy man. According to the Puritan concept of the Protestant ethic, hard work associates John Brown with virtue, while Peter is linked to sin and poverty.

The industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries meant a shift in the traditional Protestant work ethic (American Studies Today Online). Work is seen as a necessary evil until one became rich. Now this has been superseded by the 'get rich quick' ethic by means of lottery, investments, speculation, or lawsuits. "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" shows this shift happening and Peter stands for the philosophy of striking it rich without hard work. Peter is an impoverished businessman who has spent his life chasing a fortune. His very last name "*Goldthwaite*" (the one who waits for the treasure?) points to his fascination with gold that borders on insanity. Like his ancestor, he is a speculator who seeks "to heap up gold by the bushel and the cartload, instead of scraping it together coin by coin" (Hawthorne 275). On the other hand Mr. Brown stands for the legend of "rags to riches" based on the Protestant ethic. John Brown and Peter had worked together in the commercial world about thirty years before the story starts, but this partnership was dissolved because of the incongruity of the members. Their visions of the American Dream are conveyed early in the story: Goldthwaite's dreamlike schemes depend on luck and always miss it; whereas Brown's never reckons upon luck and yet always has it because his

solid foundations are hard work. John Brown is the opposite of the Peters of the world: by just using "*plodding methods* [. . .] [he] had prospered wonderfully and become one of the wealthiest John Browns on earth" [my emphasis] (Hawthorne 272).

Peter has resorted to all kinds of strategies to "get rich quick": speculation, lottery, a gold-gathering expedition, purchasing Mexican scrip. Finally he has been reduced to poverty: his only belonging is his old gabled mansion. Now Peter's obsession is caused by his belief that his last chance to get rich is to find a legendary treasure hidden somewhere in the house by his great granduncle. According to Dryden (303), "the new system, based on the acquisition of money, is a threat to the true individual and the pioneering spirit." Peter, in his pursuit of money, symbolizes the heritage of the materialistic western society. The mystery of the treasure is not solved until Peter has practically torn the house down and just the kitchen is left. Then he discovers an old chest. He eagerly opens it and only finds a worthless treasure of old treasury notes, bills of land banks. As in Tabitha's story, it is the Goldthwaites' lot not to enjoy their coveted wealth: some secret impediment had debarred the ancient Peter from the enjoyment of his riches. Nor will Peter enjoy his wealth. His treasure is as worthless as the former Peter's. The innocent Peter Goldthwaite has been pursuing a worthless dream all along, just like his ancestors. Thus his lust for wealth will never be satisfied: as the Bible suggests, "Thus saith the Lord. Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let no the rich man glory in his riches" (Jer. 9:23).

Peter's quest for wealth cannot be simply identified as the antithesis of Mr. Brown's Protestant ethic. He is depicted as an honest and pious man. On the other hand John Brown is not so virtuous; he is depicted as a good sort of man when the misfortunes of others could "reach his heart through the padded vest of his own prosperity" (Hawthorne 287). Wealth hardens rich people's hearts. By contrast Peter's sin and dreams are also associated with the social class to which he belongs. In fact he stands for the 'genteel' qualities (of the upper-middle classes) and shares their obsession with getting rich. Peter's 'aristocratic' dreams are the dreams of the gentry. Probably like the members of his class, he believes that work is debasing and a mark of inferiority: if a man had to work, it was because he was a member of the lower classes, an inferior human being. Peter is a symbol of the Goldthwaite's 'aristocratic' colonial heritage, based on loyalty to the monarch and to hereditary principles. He is a ruined gentleman who lives in an old decadent and rusty mansion, his "poverty or financial failing was punishment for sin, a public sign of God's displeasure with an individual or

family" (Pennell 193). 'Aristocratic privileges' and colonialism, as part of the American's heritage from the Old World, cannot be cast off like dead skin, the past is a burden: Peter's dreams are not emancipated from history or past. To destroy the colonial inheritance and succeed in creating new democratic dreams, free from family and class, Peter must leave the 'aristocratic' building.

The waning and the decadence of the 'aristocratic' classes contrast with the growth of democracy. Peter Goldthwaite and the ruined dark house represent the genteel past in contrast to Mr. Brown, who represents the contemporary democratic environment. Peter fails as a representative of the upper classes with 'aristocratic' pretensions and colonial dreams; on the other hand Mr. Brown succeeds as a representative of democracy. The rising democracy results in a new race of men who do not live any longer in the past, but project their lives forward into the future. Mr. Brown is a strong representative of democracy, a portrait of one of Emerson's promising Young Americans, the traditional reincarnation of the American Dream, Franklin's successful man.

Probably the destroyed old house will finally be abandoned and replaced by a democratic house where Peter can start a new life. However Peter still has his castles in the air. When John Brown tells him that he will sell the house at a good price and provide them with a new home, the old gentleman says, "I have a plan for laying out the cash to great advantage" (Hawthorne 289). John Brown realizes that Peter will never give up his idealistic schemes.

In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" Hawthorne gives a complex vision of the American experience and dreams. He shows us the ambiguity of life, a complex idea of a self extended in time and in space (Gollin 152) as well as the transformation of a colonial society to a democratic one, in which a new man can shape a new American Dream. According to Agnes Donohue (96), for Hawthorne the American Dream was doomed to failure:

> The central paradox of the Calvinist experiment in America: the coupling of a profound conviction of man's depravity with an earnest hope for a new Canaan. The corrupted American dream, corrupted because it became real through men of human frailty.

However the last scene, when in the middle of the storm Peter and John Brown meet, may point to the old man's salvation from his lust for wealth: to renew his bonds with humankind. In addition, in the destruction of the old house, the hearth remains intact. The hearth meant a lot to Hawthorne as we can see in his tale, "Fire Worship"[6]: "While a man was true to the fireside, so

long would he be true to country and law, to the God whom his fathers worshipped, to the wife of his youth, and all things else which instinct or religion has taught us to consider sacred" (qtd. Waggoner 409). In Waggoner's words (411) "in as a stormy a world as this, one learns the true value of the hearth." The true value of life cannot be found in wealth or success, but in those other important things that money cannot buy.

To conclude with and in Borges' words (62) "Hawthorne's world is the world of dreams" and his dreams are both tragic and hopeful.

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Notes

[1] Midas appears in some Greek and Roman legends. The most famous one shows that he is not very wise: he rescued Silenus, Dionysus' favorite companion, who was completely drunk and treated him well. Therefore Dionysus wanted to thank him and granted him one wish. King Midas chose the capacity of changing everything to gold by a simple touch. He went around his palace and changed everything into gold. After a while, he started to be hungry and thirsty but his servants could not feed him. Understanding that his wish was not very wise, he begged Dionysus to retract it. The god gave him the cure: to bathe in the spring of the river Pactolus. He did so and that is why the Pactolus always has gold dust in it. http://www.phrygians.com/midas.html

[2] The Winter Solstice is a magical season which marks the journey from this year to the next, journeys of the spirit from one world to the next, and the magic of birth, death, and rebirth. In ancient Europe, the symbolism of this night came from the myths of the Norse goddess Freya (also called Frigga) who sat at her spinning wheel weaving the fates, and the celebration was called Yule, from the Norse word Jul, meaning wheel. The Christmas

wreath, a symbol adapted from Freya's "Wheel of Fate", reminds us of the cycle of the seasons and the continuity of life. For more information:

www.goddessgift.com/pandora's_box/winter-solstice.htm

[3] The principle of the sovereign present claims that the living must have control of life so all laws should be completely reviewed every nineteen years.

[4] The Gothic legend of the Wanderer deals with a man who has sinned against God and is doomed to perpetual life on earth.

[5] Probably a corruption of the word *scrat* or hermaphrodite goblin (Middle English). *Old Scratch,* like *Old Nick,* is a nickname for the devil. In the last century it was widely used in the eastern United States, especially in New England.

[6] "Fire Worship" is a tale from Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse,* 1846.