

## **Mixed Messages: Complicating Moral Ambiguity in “Roger Malvin’s Burial”**

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The wilderness is an entity of contradiction, holding a different meaning for each person it comes into contact with. Some view nature as a comforting, rejuvenating environment that invites a connection to the Earth, and thus to moral wholeness. Others view it as a dark, dangerous place that necessarily forces one to tap into a primal instinct, surrendering humanity and notions of societal pleasantries in order to survive. This tension between the two seemingly opposing aspects of the wilderness work together to synthesize a vast, complex, and mysterious setting that layers secrets and multiple, sometimes antithetical messages upon each other. It is this tension which serves as the basis for a number of interesting problems in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “Roger Malvin’s Burial.” In “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” Hawthorne complicates the moral ambiguities attached his two central conflicts (leaving Roger Malvin behind and killing his son, Cyrus, as an accidental means of redemption) by using natural images like the granite boulder, the gloomy pine trees, and the blighted oak tree to send mixed messages about Reuben Bourne’s actions, further adding to the complexity of the question of moral responsibility.

Early in the story, the large, granite stone that juts out of the ground from where Roger Malvin was left behind sends a positive message about Reuben’s actions. The granite slab is described as “not unlike a gigantic gravestone” (Hawthorne 18), which seems to suggest the ominous fate of Roger Malvin. While morbid, the fact that the stone is so reminiscent of a gravestone suggests that nature has set up this burial ground for Roger as a kindness to him. If viewed as a gravestone, the place becomes an acceptable final resting place. Even the ground the two men sat on was covered in “a bed of withered oak leaves” (Hawthorne 18), like a deathbed had been prepared. Nature has essentially created a place where Malvin may fall asleep and drift into death peacefully, and in solitude. “Wherefore should I not rest beneath the open sky, covered only by the oak leaves when the autumn winds shall strew them?” he questions Reuben (Hawthorne 19), suggesting that Malvin views this place as a legitimate one to die; he even carves his name into the granite, transforming the stone from the likeness of a gravestone into a real one (Hawthorne 19). The grave nature has prepared for Malvin is not an appropriate resting final resting place then, but also a memorial to his life and death—a reminder to the world that under the great rock “sleeps a hunter and a warrior” (Hawthorne 19-20). These facts imply that Reuben did the right thing in leaving Malvin to die, despite his failure to return and give Malvin a “proper” burial. The burial the wilderness has provided for the older man seems more than adequate by his own admission.

But while the grave the woods provide for Malvin suggests that Reuben did the right thing in leaving him, the gloom of the pine trees suggest that he was actually in the wrong. Immediately after agreeing to save himself and promising to come back later for Malvin, Reuben notices the woods take on a dark, melancholy atmosphere: “there seemed a gloom on Nature’s face, as if she sympathized with mortal pain and sorrow” (Hawthorne 23). This suggests that Reuben never really feels right about leaving Malvin behind, and the woods reinforce this. When Reuben finally comes back to the woods many years later, nothing has changed; the pine trees still leer over him as a “tangled and gloomy forest” (Hawthorne 27). While referring to the pine trees as “gloomy” four more times before the end of the story suggests that the forest is constantly judging Reuben, the fact that they are the most

prevalent species of tree in the forest—as mentioned at the beginning of the story (18)—also suggests that Reuben cannot escape the judgment and the shame of leaving Malvin behind. Even as Reuben is supernaturally pulled towards Malvin's grave in an attempt to find his bones and grant the older man's final request, the trees fail to relent in their melancholy reflection of the younger man's misdeed, suggesting exactly the opposite of what the gravestone and the bed of oak leaves did about Reuben's actions.

And perhaps the most difficult symbol of the three, the blighted oak tree serves to complicate the moral ambiguity of Reuben's actions by saying nothing about them definitely one way or the other. Reuben comes across the tree upon venturing into the woods and finding where he last left Roger Malvin. There, the tree quickly becomes a reflection of both Reuben's choices and how they have affected his life since. Immediately upon finding the tree, Reuben notices the entire upper half of it is dead, while the lower half thrives with life: "The middle and lower branches were in luxuriant life and an excess of vegetation had fringed the trunk almost to the ground but a blight had apparently stricken the upper part of the oak, and the very topmost bough was withered, sapless, and utterly dead" (Hawthorne 30). The contrast of the living and the dead parts of the tree mirrors the options Reuben had to choose from that fateful day in the woods: either leave Malvin behind in order to live, or stay with him and rot. But, more importantly, the juxtaposition of the flourishing roots and liveliness of the trunk against the dead, withered top boughs of the tree reflect the two opposing questions that plague Reuben's mind. While it is fairly clear in the story that Reuben himself feels guilty for what he has done, from the perspective of the reader, the morality of his actions are much more ambiguous. On the one hand, a man died because Reuben left him behind, to die in the woods alone; but on the other hand, Malvin gave Reuben his permission to go on alone. The two rationalizations are at odds with each other; Reuben can never be satisfied wholly with either.

The oak tree continues its role as an ambiguous symbol that presents both sides of the moral argument for and against Reuben's actions after he accidentally shoots and kills his son. While staring at Cyrus' corpse, lying on the same spot where Roger Malvin died years earlier, the topmost dead branch of the oak tree falls off the tree and gently floats down around ground below him (Hawthorne 32). Because the oak tree is a reflection of Reuben, this breaking of the bough can be seen as mimicking a breaking of him. Cyrus, the only thing that truly brought him joy in his life, is gone, and thus his life is now empty, and broken, deprived of the thing that made it worth living. But the breaking also only occurs on the blighted branches, which could also suggest a sense of release for Reuben; though his son is dead, his debt to Malvin is, in a morbid way, repaid. Now that the blighted portion of the tree is gone, there is an opportunity for the tree to grow and become strong again, which offers a hopeful message to Reuben out of the unfortunate events that transpire. And, like the oak tree, Reuben never reveals how he truly feels about the relief of his debt through the death of his son. The story ends on an image of a highly emotional Reuben:

Then Reuben's heart was stricken, and the tears gushed out like water from a rock. The vow that the wounded youth had made the blighted man had come to redeem. His sin was expiated—the curse was gone from him; and in the hour when he had shed blood dearer to him than his own, a prayer, the first for years, went up to Heaven from the lips of Reuben Bourne. (Hawthorne 32)

Even Reuben's redemption from his guilt over Malvin's death is rife with moral ambiguity, as absolution from his son comes at the cost of his son's life. Though obviously affected by what has happened, it is never made clear if the emotions that Reuben feels are positive or negative, and whether they reflect his opinion of whether or not he thinks what happened was the right, or moral outcome. Yes, he sheds tears, but no language exists in the passage to suggest whether they flow from a source of joy and relief, or one of pain and regret. Hawthorne's omission of adjectives that carry good or bad connotations leave the reader in the dark about what happened and whether or not to pity Reuben. While it may be clear that Reuben always *tries* to do the right thing, the effect of what he does is always somewhat muddled.

Though Reuben may often times express his own guilt over leaving Malvin to die, never in the text is there a place where the question of whether or not what he did was ultimately right answered. The images the wilderness presented by Hawthorne, and the implication those images carry, are constantly at odds with each other, which not only makes answering the question of morality nearly impossible, but also undermines the idea of it at all. After all, while nature seems to suggest a number of opinions on Reuben's actions throughout the short story, it is in essence a non-sentient force, incapable of making moral value-judgments. In nature, there is no sense of morality; the only universal law is a maxim that urges one to do whatever is necessary to survive. And that's exactly what Reuben Bourne did. While functioning within nature's domain, the notion of morality ultimately becomes complicated because, in the wild, morality is a dubious concept that only gets in the way.

#### Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Roger Malvin's Burial." *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*. Ed. James McIntosh. New York: Norton, 1986. 16-32. Print.