

Guilt and Judgement in *Roger Malvin's Burial*

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*Roger Malvin's Burial*, a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is about a young man named Reuben who escapes from a battle with his girlfriend's wounded father. They try to make their way to a settlement, but the old man, Roger Malvin, is too injured to survive the trip. He tells his companion to leave him to die in the woods. Reuben is reluctant and at first refuses, but finally he concedes. He is instructed to marry the man's daughter, tell her about his death, and return with her to give him a proper burial (Hawthorne, 2015). However, Reuben is wracked with a guilt. This paper is to study how guilt and judgement can influence a person's life.

When the main character gets back home, he does not tell of his abandoning the old man, but rather states that he was killed in the battle. He is, however, filled with shame for not honoring the old man's wishes. It consequently turns him into a man of harsh temper and a hard countenance. He begets a son named Cyrus with his wife Dorcas Malvin. He inherits the old man's farm and becomes successful, but his fortunes are later reversed. He and his family depart to start afresh elsewhere, but they arrive at the place of his father-in-law's death, and there he accidentally shoots his son. Ironically, while he regrets the loss of his son, he feels that the burden of his guilt has finally been lifted and that his sin of not fulfilling the wishes of the dead has been purged.

Two of the major themes in the short story are guilt and regret. The author is particularly successful in bringing these out through Reuben, who engenders the bitter consequences of having to live a lie. He is ashamed of both the fact that he did not stay with his father-in-law and the fact that he did not have the courage to own up to what he

did or rather did not do. In the story, Reuben is almost driven to insanity by his feelings of guilt and regret. Eventually, his deeds manifest themselves in his deteriorating psychological state. He becomes irritable, selfish, and mean to the very people he is supposed to love. He feels separated from the rest of the world, which affects his management of the farm and his marriage. Reuben is transformed into a sad man, which culminates in his financial failure. However, the author makes it clear that his character is not the only cause of the farm's deterioration. He says that, simply put, the world does not go very well with him (Hawthorne, 2015). He uses the character of Reuben to demonstrate the nature of America and the frontier, as well as human relationships and the societal expectations of men.

In the scene where he abandons his father-in-law, Reuben does what anyone would have considered the most logical thing to do. By leaving the old man, he is both obeying him and respecting his last wishes. Malvin was unaware that his death would turn out to be a lonely and painful one out there in the wilderness, but he did not wish to have the young man's blood on his soul. Reuben initially refuses to abandon the old man, and even when he does so reluctantly, he seems to cling to the hope that the man would somehow survive. He leaves a collection of roots and herbs and ties a handkerchief to a bough above the tree so that he or future rescuers would know where to find Malvin. These actions sound logical enough, but the young man still refused to recount the true events out of shame for not doing the "right thing". In this way, the author uses Reuben to help the reader re-examine societal feelings about heroism and dutifulness. When men go to war, they are expected either to return victorious or to be mourned as heroes. Running away from battles, or challenges for that matter, could be

considered as cowardice, irrespective of the circumstances. Reuben is aware of the fact that no matter how convincing his story is, many people would still see a person who abandoned an old man on the battlefield to die and went on to inherit his land and wed his daughter. It is unlikely that Reuben expects to receive any sympathy for respecting the dead man's wishes. In addition, he also feels guilty of the fact that he did actually leave him to die, although the action was in honor of his wishes. In fact, he left because, as they both knew, he would have a better chance of surviving alone than with the old man dragging behind him.

Although the author is not very explicit, there is an underlying theme of judgment, which is underpinned by the fact that Reuben is ultimately punished for his inaction. However, this raises two key questions. First, is he right in his superstitions? Secondly, did his son die because of a curse from the old man because Reuben had never fulfilled his dying wish? The story, like many other of Hawthorne's works, is cyclical in nature. Ultimately, it takes the reader back to the start. When they arrive back at the place where it all began, Reuben is distracted by his memories. In this state, he fires off at a rustle only to end up killing his son. From a psychological point of view, the "accident" may not have been so accidental after all. He may have sub-consciously been aware that the only way he could pay penance for his guilt, which had cost him his happiness, would be to bury "Malvin". Finally, he accomplished this task by burying his son at the very spot where his father-in-law could have been buried. The writer examines the idea of curses and superstitions, which emerge as major thematic concerns given that they are the causes of most of Reuben's misfortunes.

The oak sapling to which Reuben ties the handkerchief is withered while all the

others thrive. This is a sign that Reuben is handicapped both physically and mentally by his actions and haunting memories. This sapling represents the rot in his life and his perpetual guilt, which he can never share with anyone, making it even more painful. The author explores through Reuben's sin the themes of crime and punishment, which are especially fitting given the cyclical nature of the narrative. In the same context, one can also allude to the theme of fate that is implied in the notion that what goes around comes around. After Reuben abandons his father-in-law, his life events appear to be controlled by the unseen hand of fate, directing him and his family to the very point necessary to achieve "justice" for the dead man. Reuben's ruin, as aforementioned, was not necessarily wholly a result of his negative mental state, but it contributed a great deal to it.

The main character's actions also appear to be controlled by a supernatural hand as he keeps drifting from the true course of his journey—as if he is seeking to return to the place of his sins without being aware of it. Every time his son points this out, they correct the route, but he almost immediately gets off course again. It is evident that, on a psychological level, the character is trying to get some form of closure that he feels would only be achieved if he revisits the spot where he committed the crime. His intentions, if he has any, are subconscious, but he ultimately achieves what he has wished to achieve all those years. In fact, he makes up for his misdeeds. He has committed a crime from which there can be no escape. He is punished every day of his life by being denied happiness and fellowship with other people. The punishment is finally compounded in his killing the only person he possibly loved more than himself. When he shoots his son, accidentally or otherwise, the author shows Reuben

undergoing a rebirth. He sheds blood that was closer to him than that of his own body—the greatest and only sacrifice he could make to atone for his sins (Hawthorne, 2015). A modern-day reading of the text would, however, elicit more critical reaction to the scene in which the boy dies as well as the implications. The concept of divine punishment and human sacrifice, both of which are implied herein, are largely rejected in the contemporary thinking.

However, in the *ex-post facto* viewpoint, they were morally tenable. The author wants the reader to understand that both action and inaction have consequences. In fact, when one refuses to respect the wishes of the dead, he or she is ultimately made to do so by nature or fate. The main character is aware from the very start that he should have honored the wishes of the old man. This results in his living in a state of perpetual suffering and guilt, which are only lifted after he sacrifices his son. It is critical to underscore that the main character could not be at peace without killing his son.

In the end, Reuben, a man who had not prayed for years, utters a prayer. While there has been much speculation on this occurrence, it seems that he prays because he feels that his sins have been forgiven. Thus, he could have communion with God again. Once again, to the modern reader, it may not seem logical for anyone to expect to commune with God after he or she has just killed an innocent person. Nonetheless, beliefs about crime, punishment, and penance are radically different today from what they were at that time.

Reference

Hawthorne, N. (2015). *Roger Malvin's Burial*. New York, NY: Bookclassic.

Appendix A

Use these guidelines if the customer asks for appendices. The first paragraph of the appendix should be flush with the left margin. Additional paragraphs should be indented.

Begin each appendix on a new page with the word “Appendix” at the top center. Use an identifying capital letter (e.g., Appendix A, Appendix B, etc.) if you have more than one appendix. If you are referring to more than one appendix in your text, use the plural appendices (APA only).

Label tables and figures in the appendix as you would in the text of your manuscript, using the letter A before the number to clarify that the table or figure belongs to the appendix.

## Appendix B

### Demographic Information for Cummings et al. (2002)’s Review

If an appendix consists entirely of a table or figure, the title of the table or figure should



serve as the title of the appendix.