

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

Since the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne has been recognized as one of America's most important writers, both a "romancer" who probed inner mysteries and a "realist" who assessed the American character and experience.

Born in Massachusetts on the Fourth of July, 1804, he was the descendant of Puritan worthies and the son of a ship's captain who died at sea in 1808. His mother then brought her son and two daughters to live with her own family, the Mannings. Books freed Hawthorne's imagination, but the Eden of his youth was the lakeside wilderness of Raymond, Maine, where from 1816 to 1819 he lived with his mother and sisters, "free as a bird." Summoned back to Salem to prepare for college, and working part-time in the Mannings stagecoach office, he complained, "No Man can be a Poet & a Book-Keeper at the same time." The problem would recur.

From 1821 to 1825, Hawthorne was a student at Bowdoin College, graduating in the middle of his class of thirty-eight. From the Scottish philosophers, he absorbed the concepts of faculty psychology which would recur in his fiction: belief in a unitary mind with separate but interacting powers (including perception, reason, memory, association of ideas, and imagination) regulated by the will during waking hours but not in dreams; and a conviction that fulfillment requires living throughout the entire range of our faculties and sensibilities. Three classmates would become lifelong friends—Bridge (who helped arrange publication of his first book), Longfellow (who reviewed it), and Pierce (who became President of the United States and appointed Hawthorne Consul to Liverpool).

Even before college, Hawthorne had rejected the major careers open to graduates—the ministry, medicine, and law. He mistrusted institutionalized authority, including organized religion, though he would always provisionally believe in a beneficent deity. "What do you think of my becoming an Author, and relying for support upon my pen," he had asked his mother, musing how proud she would be "to see my works praised." Although that ambition was unrealistic in mercantile America—since most books were imported from England or pirated, and most magazine fiction was low-paid and published anonymously—the new graduate was determined to pursue it. In the tales he produced in the Mannings's "chamber under the eaves," he exaggerated his plight as a lonely writer-dreamer, though his problems were real enough. In 1828, at his own expense, he published a slender novel drawn from his college experience entitled *Fanshawe*, but it is characteristic of his lifelong diffidence that he soon repudiated it and tried to destroy all copies. He linked some of his tales into collections, but for lack of a publisher, he burned some and submitted others to periodicals and gift-books. Editors were eager for his stories and one offered hackwork: in 1836, with the assistance of his sister Elizabeth, Hawthorne edited *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* and wrote a best-selling children's text, *Peter Parley's Universal History*.

In 1837, Hawthorne's "twelve lonely years" as "the obscurest man of letters in America" came to an end when *Twice-told Tales* was published with his name on the cover. Longfellow, already well established as a man of letters, enthusiastically praised the author's poetic imagination, his style, and his use of New England materials, and other critics followed suit, though neither this collection nor the expanded 1842 version attracted a large audience. The volume included "The Minister's Black Veil," a historically



grounded parable about the guilt we hide from one another and about the dangers of self-absorption (which anticipates *The Scarlet Letter*). But Hawthorne had not chosen to include two even more complex early stories, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” or “Young Goodman Brown”: both probe the individual’s complex inner life and interrelationships with society, warning against simplistic moral judgments and challenging pious assumptions about Puritanism and revolutionary America. Both present eruptions of what had been suppressed; and the narrator, who asks if the guilt-obsessed Brown had “only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting” and answers “Be it so if you will,” requires the reader to participate in moral judgment. For the castles of Gothic romance, Hawthorne substituted the American wilderness and the wilderness of the mind. As in a dream, his fiction pushes beyond surface reality, conveying knowledge that resists complete understanding.

Eighteen hundred thirty-seven brought another milestone: Hawthorne met Sophia Peabody, a frail amateur artist to whom he became secretly engaged the following year. He was still writing stories for the magazines; but in January, 1839, to supplement his income, Hawthorne sought political appointment, and became Measurer in the Boston Custom House. Predictably complaining that his imagination was dulled by routine, he produced only a few tales and two collections of children’s stories (*Grandfather’s Chair* and *Famous Old People*), as well as entries in the notebooks he used as literary storehouses and long letters telling Sophia (his “Dove” and his “Wife”) how love had wakened him to life.

He left the Custom House in November, 1840. The following April, he began what he would call “the most romantic episode of his own life—essentially a daydream and yet a fact”: he joined the Utopian commune of Brook Farm. Although skeptical about the community’s socialist ideals, he hoped their way of life would enable him to combine authorship and marriage. But the drudgery of farm work made writing impossible, and he left after half a year. His third novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, would dramatize that venture.

Next came an idyll that would last over three years: in July, 1842, Hawthorne married Sophia and moved into the Old Manse in Concord. He contentedly gardened, ice-skated with Emerson, and rowed with Thoreau. He also wrote prolifically, producing twenty published works, among them two of his most challenging stories—“The Birth-mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” Both explore the dark side of nineteenth-century scientific and technological change by means of experiments that go awry, and both portray men’s anxieties about women’s sexuality. Perhaps working out his own apprehensions as a new groom, Hawthorne presented obsessed and cold-hearted men who destroy the innocent women who love and trust them. He had no trouble selling what he wrote; but his pen did not provide enough support, especially after the birth of his daughter Una in 1844. Political appointment was again the recourse.

In April, 1846, Hawthorne became Surveyor of the Salem Custom House and returned to his birthplace. That June, *Mosses from an Old Manse* was published and his son Julian was born; but predictably, Hawthorne’s imagination was inhibited by routine duty. Nonetheless, he was earning a comfortable living; and when the victorious Whigs dismissed him in 1849, Hawthorne struggled for reinstatement on the grounds that as a Surveyor and a man of letters, he was apolitical. Then, anguished by his mother’s death and frustrated by his dismissal, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*.

His first novel, his masterpiece, is an indictment of Puritan America, but also of his own society. Its introductory essay, “The Custom-House,” purportedly a straightforward account of his experience as Surveyor, attacks officials who connived in his dismissal while vindicating himself as an artist. Like his

heroine Hester, Hawthorne emerges from confrontation with a self-righteous society as an individual of integrity, passion, and moral superiority. The introduction also defines his requisites for writing romance: “a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other”; enlivened by the heart, fiction could then “flow out on the brightening page.” The romance itself also expresses Hawthorne’s “romantic” belief in subjective perception, showing how imagination participates in creating the world we inhabit. Thus in the central scaffold scene, Dimmesdale perceives a meteor as an immense scarlet letter which signifies his guilt.

Leaving Salem forever, Hawthorne moved his family to a small house in the Berkshires in the spring of 1850, and soon produced his second novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*, centering on a Salem family burdened by ancestral guilt. He also wrote most of his third novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, drawing on his Brook Farm experience; his third major collection of short fiction, *The Snow-Image*; and a collection of Greek myths retold for children entitled *A Wonder-Book*. This was also the period of his friendship with Herman Melville—an ideal reader, whose review of *Mosses from an Old Manse* praised Hawthorne’s “power of blackness,” and who would dedicate *Moby-Dick* to him with “admiration for his genius.”

Hawthorne’s third child, Rose, was born in Lenox in 1851, and a year later, he bought a house in Concord, the only one he ever owned. The following year, however, the family would sail for England: as a reward for writing Pierce’s campaign biography, Hawthorne was appointed Consul to Liverpool, serving from 1853 to 1857. As in his other political positions, Hawthorne worked conscientiously, but his imagination became stultified; except for his notebooks, he wrote almost nothing. Then from 1857 to 1859, he lived in Rome and Florence, where his immersion in art and acquaintance with artists generated the last romance he would complete—*The Marble Faun*.

Returning to Concord in 1860, Hawthorne struggled to complete three other romances; but his health was broken and he was distraught by the prospect and then the actuality of civil war. Though he believed slavery was evil and hoped for Union victory, he remained skeptical about what abolitionists (or any other reformers) could accomplish. Except for the eyewitness report “Chiefly About War Matters,” he published only a series of sketches drawn from his English notebooks (collected as *Our Old Home*). He died on May 19, 1864. Soon afterward, Sophia augmented her slim income by editing his American notebooks for publication; and memoirs by Julian and Rose Hawthorne expanded the biographical record.

For more than a century, despite changes in perspective and methodology, the verdict on Hawthorne’s stature has remained virtually constant. The critical consensus continues to be that Hawthorne was a shrewd and large-minded writer who read widely and pondered deeply about the human condition and American identity from Puritan times to his own. Though afflicted by self-doubt and constrained by a materialistic society that did not adequately reward serious artists, he created texts whose power, profundity, and artistry command our attention. He wrote about his own society and its antecedents, but it turns out that he also wrote about ours.

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