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**NATHANIEL
HAWTHORNE**

by Dale Salwak

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The Life of the Author: Nathaniel Hawthorne

THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

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The Life of the Author

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Dale Salwak

Series editor
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WILEY Blackwell

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To the Memory of my Parents

Stanley F. Salwak
1920–2005

Frances H. Salwak
1922–2021

remembered with gratitude and love.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

List of Illustrations xi

Introduction 1

- 1 Under the Spell of Hawthorne 6
- 2 The Formative Years (1804–1825) 14
- 3 *Fanshawe: A Tale* (1828) 25
- 4 The Dark Years (1825–1837) 35
- 5 A Voice Refined (1837–1842) 51
- 6 The Middle Years (1842–1849) 63
- 7 Nathaniel and Sophia (1837–1860) 80
- 8 *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) 91
- 9 Hawthorne and Melville (1850–1860) 106
- 10 *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) 118
- 11 *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) 131

12 *The Marble Faun* (1853–1860) 144

13 The Final Years (1860–1864) 163

Conclusion 183

References 189

Index 197

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List of Illustrations

- Hawthorne's birthplace, 27 Union Street, Salem (Library of Congress). 6
- Bowdoin College, 1823, oil by John G. Brown (Bowdoin College Museum of Art). 13
- Sarah Peabody, etching by S.A. Schoff (Peabody Essex Museum). 63
- The Old Manse, Concord, Massachusetts (Peabody Essex Museum). 80
- Herman Melville (Library of Congress). 106
- The House of the Seven Gables, 54 Turner Street, Salem (Peabody Essex Museum). 118
- Hawthorne, 1852, portrait by George P.A. Healy (New Hampshire Historical Society). 131
- Franklin Pierce, London, 1860, photograph by J.J.E. Mayall, London (Peabody Essex Museum). 144
- The Wayside, complete with author's tower, 1861 (Concord Free Public Library). 163
- Sophia, 1861, photograph by Silsbee and Case (Peabody Essex Museum). 182
- Julian, Una, and Rose Hawthorne, photograph by Silsbee and Case (Peabody Essex Museum). 182
- The gravesites of Nathaniel and Sophia with Una, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Massachusetts (author's photo). 188

Introduction

Given the astonishing volume and variety of publications on Nathaniel Hawthorne, which have been appearing since his death in 1864, someone coming across the title of my study might ask, “Why another?” It’s a fair question and easy to answer: we need a new biographical approach to Hawthorne.

It’s been said that we write the books we want to read. Indeed, this is one such book: free from what Henry James (1934) referred to as the “shackles of theory” (383), aimed at the general reader with little knowledge of Hawthorne. It is written from my personal perspective, from my own experience – just as I teach his life and work.

My portrait of the author is intended to ignite greater interest in his writings and his psyche. By drawing on my own 45 years of studying and teaching the literature written by and about him, visiting the places where he lived and worked, and reading what he read, I want to bring new readers close to the private man. By exploring the circumstances that led him to become a writer, I hope to enable others to gain insights into his innermost thoughts and ideas. Most crucially, I want to convince my audience that Hawthorne still matters.

For almost a century and a half, ingenious scholars have labored to decipher the truth behind the man and his work, which explains why we have so many theories about his life and art. Ruminating on his first and only visit with the author in 1860, William Dean Howells (1968 [1900]) wrote: “[W]e are always finding new Hawthornes” (52). Close one eye, and he is a Puritan, a Romantic, a Transcendentalist, a socially-conscious humanitarian, an aristocrat, a realist. Close the other eye, and he is a rebel against Puritanism, an anti-Romantic, a critic of Transcendentalism, an introverted aesthete, a democrat, an idealist (Abel 1963: 189). What readers make of Hawthorne depends on their contemporary viewpoint.

There is something eerie, almost magical, about a famous writer who wrote so much and yet gives so little away about himself. “Hawthorne withdraws from the

biographer,” wrote Brooke Allen (2003), “as successfully as he did from his family and friends.” “I love Hawthorne, I admire him; but I do not know him,” remarked Jonathan Cilley, his college classmate. “He lives in a mysterious world of thought and imagination which he never permits me to enter” (Cleaveland and Packard 1882: 303). Henry James (1984 [1879]) alluded to the elusive character that reveals itself in all of his writings: “He was silent, diffident, more inclined to hesitate – to watch, and wait, and meditate – than to produce himself, and fonder, on almost any occasion, of being absent than of being present” (21). Even his wife, Sophia, wrote: “To the last, he was in a measure to me a divine mystery” (Hawthorne 1884: II, 352–353). Hawthorne increased this mystique by burning much of his correspondence (while entreating his family members and friends to do the same) and all early drafts of his prose.

Nevertheless, I welcome the challenge. If every word written by authors divulges some new facets of themselves, we can find the elusive Hawthorne not only in the testimonies from his ever-watchful family members and friends but also through the veil of his own words, both published and unpublished. These writings encompass five novels (or “romances” to use his term); 100 tales and sketches from newspapers, magazines, and gift books (published anonymously until 1836); his American notebooks (spanning the years 1835–1853); three journals comprising his impressions during extended trips to England (1853–1857), France and Italy (1858–1859); a campaign biography of Franklin Pierce; a memoir of his time spent in England; six children’s books; and hundreds of letters that somehow survived the flames.

Despite all that has and continues to be written about Hawthorne, he is the best guide to his own life and work. For this reason, I take seriously what *Newsday* editor, Alan Hathaway, advised Robert Caro (2019) as he was about to embark on the writing of a biography of Lyndon Baines Johnson: “Just remember. Turn every page. Never assume anything” (11). I needed to explore everywhere and everything before I could ascertain what to use and what to discard.

It is not well known that Hawthorne had a penchant for exploring uncomfortable, even contentious issues. He confronted in himself with the deepest secrets of the human heart, including the most fundamental themes of good and evil, body and soul, and expressed those secrets in his work. “That blue-eyed darling Nathaniel knew disagreeable things in his inner soul,” wrote D.H. Lawrence (1977 [1923]). “He was careful to send them out in disguise” (89). “[D]eep as Dante,” Herman Melville would say of “Young Goodman Brown” in its penetration into the mystery of evil (Crowley 1970: 123). In 1883, when Julian Hawthorne visited Melville with a view to seeking credible information for his father’s biography, the latter remarked (as Julian remembered) that he was convinced Hawthorne had all his life “concealed some great secret, which would, were it known, explain all the mysteries of his career” (Parker 2002: 855–856).

In this regard, “negative capability,” the phrase coined by John Keats (2002 [1877]) in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, is particularly useful. Keats distinguished writers like Shakespeare, who exemplified this quality, from others, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who did not: “[A]t once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature,” he wrote. “I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (60). Keats takes Shakespeare as the great example of a poet who, inspired by the external world, was receptive to the contradictions of experience and gave free rein to his imagination.

This was true for Hawthorne, also. He didn’t set out to change the world, to make a point, or even to send a message, yet his stories transcend mere imitations of life. Like Emily Dickinson, who greatly admired him, in a letter to his publisher William D. Ticknor (dated 19 January 1955), he spurned the overly topical or commercial, sneered at what he called the “d-d mob of scribbling women” – the soon-to-be-forgotten middlebrow authors of his time who, with the exception of Fanny Fern, whose work he admired, commented on social issues, not timeless truths of the human heart (*Works* XVII, 304).

Hawthorne was content to remain in a state of ambivalence as he explored “an enduring sense of mystery and chaos just beneath the surface of everyday life, of the burden of the past borne by the present, of the persistence of evil whether the world believes in original sin or not” (Cryer 2004). He did not feel obligated to illuminate his mysteries. Instead, he was secure enough to allow his readers to form their own judgments about him and his characters.

Few writers have represented and encapsulated the ambiguities of moral choice so fully. Did Young Goodman Brown really meet the Devil? Did Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* really have a fiery scar on his breast? What finally became of Miriam and her lover in *The Marble Faun*? To his credit, Hawthorne does not give us clear answers. As readers, we are asked to do what great literature has always required: question everything. As with every art form where ambiguity is a dominant feature, it is perhaps more useful to investigate *how* this condition is achieved and what it means rather than attempting to resolve it.

Each tale or novel becomes, therefore, a kind of mirror or Rorschach test in which we get to see not only our physical reflection, but our innermost being, even our soul, but only if we dare to look. Hawthorne’s fiction demands that we examine ourselves incisively and determine what we intend to do with this self-knowledge. It is for us (as it was for Hawthorne) a means of unleashing the imagination, to reach the deepest recesses of our hearts that are otherwise locked away from us. We get out of his work the more we put into it. “The sources of the truest truths,” said Saul Bellow, “are inevitably profoundly personal” (Bloom 1987: 12).

I approach this project as if I were preparing a seminar for a new generation of intelligent college students disillusioned by perfunctory scholarship and unfriendly theories (though I hope specialists may profit in passing here and there). At one time, we could reasonably expect them to demonstrate some understanding of Hawthorne's writings and their vital role in America's literary history. Today this is not the case. For most students, exposure is limited to a forced (and superficial) reading of *The Scarlet Letter* and a handful of tales, unlike my postwar generation, which began to read him during high school before continuing through our college and graduate years. It is disheartening to find so many students since the mid-1980s indifferent to this great writer.

The reasons for this decline in interest are apparent. There is a prevailing attitude among many teachers that Hawthorne's relevance to our times is steadily dwindling. They contend that we cannot be bothered with unraveling the "impenetrable" mysteries of a nineteenth-century writer, a dead white Western male at that, who has historically "proven" to be inaccurate, insufficiently philosophical, sexist, misogynistic, racist, insular, and elitist. I heard one prominent scholar complain at a conference, "Well, we historians don't take Hawthorne seriously." When I questioned the rationale behind her inference, she said, "Students can't relate to him and his invented facts" – the basis of all fiction. When students (and their teachers) proclaim that they cannot relate to Hawthorne, they do so because they cannot relate to the way he has been taught to them. They are also essentially conceding that they are misreading or unwilling to put in the work his writings demand from them. For reasons I shall explore in greater detail, Hawthorne does matter today – perhaps even more so now than he did to his nineteenth-century readers.

Hawthorne was one of the most acute observers of Puritan life in colonial New England. His understanding of Calvinism, with its emphasis upon predestination and a wrathful, judgmental God, was profound, although he didn't accept most of its doctrines. Without his insights, no modern reader can claim to understand the texture of early American history, with its myriad distortions and delusions, its incendiary, judgmental and unforgiving impulse.

If there's harm associated with Hawthorne, or any of the classics for that matter, it comes from *not* teaching him. Not teaching Hawthorne undervalues the power of his art and undermines the ability of our students to appreciate and be deepened by it. Students suffer poverty of language and cultural references and, worse, they don't even know it.

We can also look at Hawthorne as a guiding force as we think through our contemporary dilemmas; what mattered to him is not devoid of consequences for us as well. The timeless concerns of the effects of sin (both secret and disclosed), guilt and penitence, religious hypocrisy, sexuality, history and national identity, art and the imagination are always encrypted in his works of fiction – hidden, yet

visible if we know how to look – as they are, somewhere, in our thoughts. The truths he conveys hit close to home with the reader. “Make no mistake,” said Robert Frost, an admirer of Hawthorne’s: “A true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life” (Wolff 2003: 47).

I always knew that I’d write this book. My interest in Hawthorne goes back to 1957 when, as a youngster, I made my first journey with my family from Amherst (where I was raised) to Salem, Massachusetts. I picked up a small blue copy of *The House of the Seven Gables* in a bookshop, opened to chapter one, and read in a state of exaltation the first mesmerizing sentence: “Half-way down a by-street of one of our New England towns, stands a rusty wooden house, with seven acutely peaked gables facing towards various points of the compass, and a huge, clustered chimney in the midst” (*Works* II, 5). This passage struck a deep chord within me, possibly because I had just returned from that memorable visit, and when I went back to Salem four years later, I realized that Hawthorne had accurately described the dark ancestral house. After many decades, the novel continues to resonate in my memories of musty smells and haunting sounds and sights.

I kept a worn copy of that volume, published by Classic Books, with my penciled annotations in the margins and endpapers. Since then, I have been perpetually curious about this enigmatic, shy, consummate artist whose life of solitude, mystery, and later marriage to Sophia Peabody never ceases to intrigue and attract visitors to his homes in Salem and Concord.

Such is the personal attachment we tend to develop for the authors and works we admire. The sheer joy of reading Hawthorne and now writing about him has impelled me to ponder deeply as to why I have been drawn to him since childhood and why I still am, albeit in different ways and from a different perspective – as shall be revealed in the chapters to follow.

1

Under the Spell of Hawthorne

Hawthorne's birthplace, 27 Union Street, Salem. Source: Library of Congress.

A man of a deep and noble nature has seized me in this seclusion. His wild, witch-voice rings through me; . . .

—Herman Melville (Crowley 1970: 111)

When those of us with an unbounded love for literature begin reading, we enter the psyche of another and allow our own world to be subsumed in the world created by the author. In so doing, there are times when we are touched within by some sort of awe, even euphoria. We feel edified. We feel transformed. We feel more fully and pleurably alive.

We call such flashes of intense insight “aha” moments – as in *now I see, now I know, now I understand*. Christianity refers to them as “epiphanies” – from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning “a manifestation” (Petridou 2016: 6). Virginia Woolf

(1976) called them “moments of being” (70), and William Wordsworth (2012 [1805]) referred to them as “spots of time” in *The Prelude* (XI, line 257).

Whatever we call them, once these eureka moments occur and we have considered them afterward in calm reflection, we find ourselves in sync with the rhythm of life in a fresh way: the world is put into clearer perspective; we begin to move in a direction that is different from anything we’d ever imagined, a direction that we know is *just right* for us. This describes fairly accurately how many of us respond (as did Herman Melville) to the life and work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. But why? What is it about this particular author’s temperament and artistry that casts such a powerful (almost hypnotic) spell, one that draws us in so quickly and holds us so tenaciously? Why is it that the novels and tales give so many of his devoted readers such a personal experience? Why does Brenda Wineapple’s (2003) assessment – “Once read, his stories never vanish” – ring so very true? (381)

Certainly, his appeal to the reading public lies partly in his fulfillment of what Vladimir Nabokov (1980) identified as the fundamental requirements of any great writer: he is a storyteller, a teacher, but above all, an astute enchanter (5). He points us in the direction of a new discovery, a new conquest, a great new adventure. He often catches us unaware, transporting us to a world we are fascinated by but never knew existed. He speaks to anyone at any age and in any state of mind who is willing to press the pause button and listen. As he specifies in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne strives both to present “the truth of the human heart” – his great subject – and to connect “a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us” (*Works* X, 1, 2).

“[E]very man and woman contains the truth of every man and woman who has ever lived,” wrote Robertson Davies (1997), “and that truth is cloaked in the muddy vesture of everyday life” (137). The context may be different from our own, and on the surface, the characters may be quite unlike us, but what remains constant is the human heart. What separates one generation from another is superficial. We share with Hawthorne’s characters identical needs, desires, fears, and potential for good or, alas, evil. C.S. Lewis (1961 [1942]) refers to this as the doctrine of “The Unchanging Human Heart,” and my belief in it underscores what I say both in the classroom and in this book (62). Quite remarkably, Hawthorne meets us at our point of need.

The seductive appeal of his works, including those that were aimed at children, lies in their invitation to each of us to read as if we, and not solely the characters therein, were its true subject. We find ourselves unraveling a mystery that we’ve always known but didn’t know we knew. Hawthorne very often creates a story with a setting and characters so enchanting and so seemingly real that we end up disregarding the fact that it is fiction.

The Russian poet Kornei Chukovsky (1971) showed the vital importance of enchantment to the growth of the intellect. He described a policy instituted by the

Soviet government in the 1920s that banned all fantasy from the education of children in favor of simple, realistic, factual stories. One of the educators, curious about the effects of this ruling, began to keep a diary of her own child's development. She found that her son began to make up his own fantasies as if to compensate for what he was being denied. He had never heard a fairy tale, never read a ghost story, but talking tigers, birds, and bugs, as well as beautiful maidens, castles, and underground cities, soon consumed his imaginative world. Chukovsky concluded: "Fantasy is the most valuable attribute of the human mind and it should be diligently nurtured from earliest childhood, as one nurtures musical sensitivity and not crushed" (116–117).

Hawthorne never outgrew his need for creative play, and neither do we; many mature and rational adults enjoy imaginative tales, ghost stories, and science fiction. In his writings, events and situations oftentimes occur beyond the realm of the ordinary. He associated the paranormal and the ghostly with the genre of romance in which the purely imaginary could co-exist alongside the mundane. It is "a neutral territory," he wrote in "The Custom-House," "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. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us" (*Works* I, 36). The eerie atmosphere in *The House of the Seven Gables* raises the question, "What does it mean to be haunted by the past?" We are drawn into the tale by its realistic elements, then surprised by weird and abnormal details that convince us that the supernatural affects everyday life. He uses the classic techniques of the ghost story for serious, moral purposes.

Hawthorne's tales also offer perhaps the most eloquent instances of the gratifying triumph over fear – what H.P. Lovecraft (1994 [1927]) called "the oldest and strongest emotion" of humankind (1). Horror stories and tales of the supernatural are a means by which both children and adults can bravely confront frightening adversaries, such as death, ghosts, and the unknown, by reading about them in a safe, even light-hearted context. Hawthorne's characters and settings and mysterious plots express a variety of ideas about the relationship of the individual to the culture. Some reveal human fragility; some satirize and therefore deflate certain stereotypes about death; others make compelling statements about our own worst nightmares. Any horror loses at least some of its magnitude once we have looked squarely upon it. "When we become the dark," said American novelist P. D. Cacek, "the shadows seem less frightening" (Bannatyne 2011: 42).

One of my colleagues makes Hawthorne a centerpiece of the semester as his students examine the dark side of the literary imagination. Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1823), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), or the hauntings of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898) are just a handful of obvious examples his students explore to accompany Hawthorne. It's a short leap from discussions about