

Reading Nathaniel Hawthorne

The short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne are fascinating texts, and will probably inspire you to read one of the great American novels, *The Scarlet Letter*. As you read Hawthorne's fiction, you will encounter these motifs:

A The subconscious

Like Poe, Hawthorne is concerned with internal struggles and dilemmas, and what lies beneath the conscious mind. Often internal forces pull his characters in two directions; sometimes the intellect and the intuition are conflicting operatives within his individuals. While Emerson calls on individuals to "trust thyself" and listen to their inner voices, Hawthorne seems to respond with a question: which inner voice do I listen to? Sometimes these inner forces or motives for action are inscrutable, less definable. Pay careful attention to the motivations of characters.

A Loss of innocence

Many of Hawthorne's characters wander into unfamiliar territories, sometimes representative of inner explorations, as in the allegorical short story, "Young Goodman Brown." Frequently, the loss of innocence or an awareness of a sin-ridden world yields devastating results, as the characters do not seem to know what to do with their newfound knowledge or their new selves.

A Sin: inherited, hidden, exposed

Consider Melville's observation from "Hawthorne and His Mosses," which can also be read as a commentary on Transcendental optimism:

Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in [Hawthorne] derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always wholly free.

Hawthorne's characters are often obsessed with sin. In Hawthorne, children suffer for the sins of their fathers, characters torment themselves for unconfessed sins, and others corrupt themselves when they pry into another's heart to detect sin. Hawthorne's stories rarely seem concerned with the act of sin or the sin itself; instead, their characters reveal an extended focus on the effects of the sin on the sinners and the individuals close to them. *The Scarlet Letter* is driven by the effects of sin upon Hester Prynne, Pearl, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth.

A Isolation and male withdrawal from marriage

Many of Hawthorne's characters live in isolation, frequently self-imposed. However, many of Hawthorne's stories illustrate a sense that it is extraordinarily difficult to know someone else, and, in return, to disclose oneself to another. The result is that even in a circle of love, individuals feel isolated. In Hawthorne's narratives, individuals often seem doomed to one form of isolation or another.

A The search for knowledge or perfection

When Hawthorne's characters strive for perfection of any sort, the results are devastating for them and their families. In the short story, "The Birthmark," Aylmer, a scientist, becomes obsessed with a birthmark on his wife's cheek. In his attempt to remove it, he destroys her and their future happiness. In several characters intellectual pride produces tragic consequences.

A Ambiguity

Hawthorne is intentionally ambiguous. Several narratives refuse to provide easy explanations and solutions. For example, the interplay of light-dark imagery in several stories (including “Young Goodman Brown”) suggests not only an awareness of polarities but also the realization that polarities cannot always be reconciled. Very rarely in Hawthorne are characters completely good or admirable, and very rarely do allegories and parables lend themselves to neat interpretations. The world and morality itself are ambiguous in Hawthorne’s stories, and yet as the laughter indicates at the end of several stories, Hawthorne seems to have achieved a comfort level with ambiguity that he believed was denied Melville: “[Melville] can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” —Hawthorne’s journal entry of November 20, 1856. Hawthorne seems to possess what John Keats called “negative capability”: “. . . that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason . . .” —letter, December 1817.

A Humor: self-deprecation, riddles, and irony

Hawthorne is frequently self-deprecating in his journals and prefaces. Consider the passage in “The Custom-House” when the characters in *The Scarlet Letter* confront him and his “imbecility.” At times, Hawthorne seems to hold out to his readers riddles with no solutions, and his narratives employ all the types of irony.

A Hawthorne and the Puritans

Hawthorne’s best work is inspired by Puritan culture. The Puritans provided for Hawthorne artistic material from which he could speculate about the psyche and the effects of the past on the present. Hawthorne, however, is hardly fond of the Puritans. He presents them as dour, gloomy, narrow-minded cranks. In much of Hawthorne, the Puritan ethos represents a disdain for or censorship of the imagination. In a humorous vein, during the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne imagines a conversation with his Puritan ancestors who regard his work with disdain: “A writer of story-books! . . . Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!”. Remember that Hawthorne’s portrait of the Puritans is harsh and not completely accurate. The Puritans did try to enjoy life; they liked colorful clothes (when they could get them); they took pride in well-kept homes; and they liked to take a drink, although they despised the drunkard.

A Intrusive narrators

When reading Hawthorne’s fiction, always consider the construction of the narrator. Who is this narrator? Even in an era that relished intrusive narrators, Hawthorne’s are among the most intrusive. What effects does an intrusive voice wreak upon a narrative?

A The creation of female characters by a male author

Male authors in the nineteenth century presented few rich and evolving female characters. For example, how does Hester change over the course of *The Scarlet Letter*? Also, consider Pearl at novel’s end. What does the narrator mean, specifically about women, when he says that when Pearl’s “tears fell upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it”?

A The role of “The Custom-House”

When you eventually read Hawthorne’s most famous novel, ask: how does the “The Custom-House” relate to the rest of *The Scarlet Letter*? What effects result from the dream-like atmosphere, the “author’s” discussion with his Puritan ancestors, his delay in writing the text, his attachment to the past, his account of the construction of the text, and the contrasts in tone and setting?