



Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales

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Criticism offers key contemporary assessments by Park Benjamin, Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry F. Chorley, James Russell Lowell, and Henry James. The collection of recent criticism displays a considerable range of approaches, including essays by Q. D. Leavis, John P. McWilliams, Jr., Frederick C. Crews, Michael J. Colacurcio, Jorge Luis Borges, Sharon Cameron, Robert B. Heilman, Nina Baym, Leo Marx, and John W. Wright. A Chronology of Hawthorne's life and a Selected Bibliography are included.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales Details

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Mark Valentine says

My all-time favorite Hawthorne story is "Wakefield," but the rest are in here too ("Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," and "The May-Pole of Merrymount"). All except "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," though. Still a worthy collection from a man whose short stories are as legendary as his novels.

Danny says

"The May-Pole of Merry Mount"

A historical allegory set in 17th century New England. The story allegories a mythic pivotal point in American history when the character of the nation was yet to be decided. The pagan revelers dancing around the May-Pole ('Comus' Crew) are brutally ousted by the grim Puritans, whose stern religiosity extinguishes the joy of life; their version of the May-Pole is the whipping post.

"Roger Malvin's Burial"

The story begins immediately after the Battle of Pequawket in 1725, when two men who have just returned from the battle--Roger Malvin and Reuben Bourne--are trying to get home through the woods. Roger is badly injured and asks for Reuben to simply leave him there to die, although he later asks that he come back to bury him. Reuben agrees, but when the latter returns home, he is too conscience-stricken to tell his fiancée Dorcas (Roger's daughter) that he left her father in the woods when he was still alive, so he never returns to bury him. Here we have another iteration of Hawthorne's "secret sin" narratives. The guilt eats away at him for many years. He eventually marries Dorcas and they have a son, though they grow impoverished and are forced to live in the woods, where, out hunting one day, he thinks he hears a deer and shoots: it was his son, instead. He comes to the realization that he shot his son in the same spot where he left Roger Malvin so many years ago.

"The Minister's Black Veil" (1832)

Also set in Puritan New England. When the Minister shows up wearing a black veil on e day, everyone in his congregation is deeply disturbed. The story traces the villagers reactions to his awful veil, which he reveals is a symbol of the secret sin that we all conceal beneath our exterior. The veil is an outward manifestation of an inward impurity.

"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832)

A historical allegory about pre-revolutionary America in the years leading up to 1776. It's set in the 1730s and centers on a British youth names Robin who arrives in Boston looking for his uncle Major Molineux to serve as a connection and help him find work. Everywhere he inquires for his uncle, he is spurned and dismissed. In the end, he finds his uncle being wheeled down the village square after having been tarred and feathered. Robing laughs. An allegory of a changing America, in which the British no longer hold sway. The way to get ahead in this new country, as Robin realizes at the end, is to dissociate oneself from British authority not associate with it.

“Young Goodman Brown” (1835)

An allegory dream vision of the discovery of man's sinful nature. Young Goodman Brown has a revelation in a dream in which he realizes how all of us conceal secret sins within our breasts; even our role models (his catechism teacher, and the minister) are stained with sin. In leaving behind Faith his wife and journeying through the Dark woods, Young Goodman Brown (and the quaint appellation is ironized within the context of the story) goes deeper and deeper into a journey of discovery until he as a vision of all the villagers being baptized by the devil. The story follows a haunting dream logic. When he wakes up, he can never be the same again. He knows too much. He sees men and women for their true sinful natures.

“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” (1837)

When the old Dr. Heidegger invites four of his friends to his study for an experiment involving a pitcher of water he had a friend retrieve for him from the Fountain of Youth in Florida, things get strange. They drink a glass and a process of rejuvenation begins; they become young and begin acting as foolishly as they did then. The three men compete for the girl. In their merriment, the pitcher of water spills on the ground, and they find they are grown old again. They agree to journey to Florida to get some more water from the fountain.

“The Ambitious Guest” (1841)

A traveler stops by an idyllic domestic cottage in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The house is a place of warmth, family harmony, and rustic simplicity. The children play around the hearth, etc, while the grandmother knits in her rocker. The stranger begins conversing with the family, and he tells them that he plans to be someone great one day. This gets everyone in the family thinking about what their respective greatest ambitions are. A landslide above them begins to fall. They seek refuge in a nearby dwelling but are crushed beneath the landslide. Only the cottage stands. The aspirational optimism (the vanity on the stranger's part) is squashed by the dark and sinister landslide, which gives rise to a series of haunting ironies about the nature of fate, life, death, anonymity, fame, and human happiness.

“Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844)

Set in Padua. The young Giovanni falls in love with the daughter of Dr. Rappaccini, a botanist who keeps a carefully cultivated garden beside the lodgings Giovanni is living in. All of the plants, Giovanni realizes, are poisonous, and Beatrice--the doctor's daughter--has herself become poisonous through tending them. Giovanni finds that he himself begins to grow poisonous after being in the garden too long. He gets an antidote for Beatrice; she drinks it but she dies.

“The Birth-Mark” (1843)

Aylmer adores his beautiful wife but can't stand the small red birthmark in the shape of a hand on her cheek. The birth-mark is hidden when she blushes but very apparent when her cheeks turn white. The marks--which he takes to be a mark of human imperfection, the bloody hand of mortality claiming his otherwise perfect wife--drives him mad and he devises a drink for his wife to drink that will expunge the mark. She drinks it, trusting him utterly with her life. The mark goes away but she dies as a consequence. Aylmer destroys his wife Giorginanna in trying to perfect her.

Mari says

This volume includes a brilliant short critical essay by Borges which articulates both the genius and limit of Hawthorne: Hawthorne writes as a dreamer of allegories and fables. However, too often the stories too clearly serve moral plots rather than our current taste for truth or fullness of character.

Well, what I love most about Hawthorne is how deftly he blurs the edges of ethics in both the individual and in Puritan society.

James says

The ghosts of Salem and Nathaniel Hawthorne's past are presented in many of these tales. None do it as well as in his magnificent short story, "Young Goodman Brown". In this story Hawthorne describes the titular young man on a journey one evening that would change his life. As the story begins he comes "forth at sunset" after "crossing the threshold" of his house and his life, leaving his wife, Faith, who talks of "dreams" and is, he believes, "a blessed angel". His journey turns into one of his own dreams or visions where one after another of the people in his life are unmasked by the devil. He gradually discovers that his own corruptibility which he fears his embodied in his fellow townspeople, and ultimately in his own wife Faith. Young Goodman starts the evening journey with "excellent resolve", but he also has doubts which are fueled by comments from the stranger he meets. He grows more concerned and conceals himself even as his spectral visions (not unlike the evidence of witches in old Salem) show the deacon and elders of the town laid bare in their consorting with the devil. The evening has led to Young Goodman's loss of moral virginity. It is a loss that will haunt him the rest of his life.

Hawthorne mirrors the communion of the church with that of Satan's altar. Contrasts abound with Faith, the angel of Young Goodman, joining the fallen angel in his mind. His tale is a blend of simplicity and seriousness. But more importantly he portrays experiences, fears, and feelings that, at least in part, his readers share in the sense they may experience similar doubts and wonder about the nature of their own morality and mortality. Melville would say of Hawthorne that his writing was "as deep as Dante". There is abundant evidence in this and the best of his early stories that Hawthorne has much magic in his prose.

Kate says

A mixed bag to be sure, but when Hawthorne is at his best, he can be quite disturbing and shocking. He has a wonderful sense of the grotesque, and most of his stories transcend the boundaries of classification. I enjoyed these even more than his novels.

Matea says

Haven't read all of the short stories here, but I've read several of them over the course of two semesters, once for Gothic Fiction, the other for ENG314. There's some good ones in here, the others are just classic.
Favorites: Man of Adamant, Wakefield,
Read: Celestial Rail Road, Rappacini's Daughter, The Birthmark, Young Goodman Brown, My Kinsman Major Mullineux

Susan says

As a feminist, many of these stories made me angry because of the way the female characters were objectified and taken advantage of. However, I also enjoyed the way the stories unfolded and resolved themselves. If you're looking for strange, whimsical, dreamy short stories, this book would be a great place to start!

Vernon Ray says

Long Story Short: Hawthorne doesn't like Puritans, Soldiers, Preachers, Scientists, and Artists.

He tends to fall a little too deep into allegory for me, especially since they are transcendentalist allegories, which end up as meaning nothing and everything at the same time and usually ends up being neither. I'm tired so I think that made sense. Highlights would probably be The Artist of the Beautiful, The Birthmark, My Kinsman Major Molineux, and (my personal favorite) Young Goodman Brown.

Lindsay says

Good. Bless. W.W. Norton!

This edition not only combines many of Hawthorne's shorts that are rarely anthologized, but also provides several of Hawthorne's own prefaces--a useful and entertaining addition. And, of course, the critical materials are wonderful. I appreciate the inclusion of Hawthorne's historical letters and reviews from the hand of Poe and James almost as much as Crew's contemporary article "The Logic of Compulsion."

Dave Moyer says

He is a bit much for me. His style and era are really not for me.

Joshy K says

Hawthorne is a genius, but it takes reading beyond The Scarlet Letter to realize it.

Kiah says

Confession: I haven't read every story and essay in this collection.

However, I have read the majority, and I must say that LOVE Hawthorne's short stories. His grasp on human

psychology is mind-boggling. I have truly come to appreciate his elevated language and old-fashioned writing style, even if it did take me a few stories before I could read him without much difficulty. Ultimately, Hawthorne's stories make me think. Really think. About life, God, religion, community, guilt, nature, family, isolation, identity... the list goes on. He is a brilliant man, a brilliant writer, and his stories are a captivating read.

Martin Mcgoey says

Mostly great stories about Puritanism with a Gothic undertone throughout. Hawthorne reads like a PG-13 version of Poe.

David Meditationseed says

With engaging writing, going through the supernatural and gothic world, Hawthorne is one of the exponents of this style in the early half of the 18th century, influencing many other writers who came after him.

Young Master Brown, for example, how many movie scenes we see were possibly inspired by this tale written in 1835, in which the protagonist seeing the most ordinary people in society: from pastors and priests to politicians to merchants, from acquaintances to unknown pedestrians of a city - watches them closely and realizes that they are devils or faithful of a satanic cult. I remember for example, *The Devil's Advocate*, or a TV adaptation of an episode of Grimm.

In this tale, the characters' names are related to the symbolic, a direct metaphor of the story itself, as in *American Gods*, by Neil Gaiman. Here we find a woman named Faith and the protagonist Goodman.

From the dark and mysterious adventure of a satanic cult, without the certainty of that if it is a dream or reality, and the participation in it of a kind of secret society with the most unlikely members, the author points to two profound reflections: the greater evil would be that which dwells within people? And guilt and obsession could intoxicate an individual's mind in a radical way until death?

Adam says

I enjoyed Hawthorne's tales. They were entertaining and an interesting contrast to the Transcendentalists, like Emerson, who denied evil and suffering in man. Hawthorne does spend a lot of time on the darkness of men's souls but unlike Poe, he does not simply dwell in that darkness but tries to bring out a moral at the end of these tales. Since I'm reading this for my grad school class on Melville, it was good to see the connection between Hawthorne and Melville.
