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## 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

horror to the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) or the ghost in *Hamlet* (1599/1601) – both of which Hawthorne had read as a child. The course also places the works of Edgar Allan Poe, an enthusiastic promoter of Hawthorne, within a literary tradition of supernatural tales that goes beyond entertaining to deeper emotional and moral concerns. As Hawthorne did early on, the students are encouraged to keep a fear journal – in which they write down their nightmares and discover how wicked other people are or could be.

So, what did Hawthorne discover? “There is evil in every human heart,” he wrote in an early journal entry (dated 25 October 1836), “which may remain latent, perhaps, through the whole of life; but circumstances may rouse it to activity. To imagine such circumstances. A woman, tempted to be false to her husband, apparently through mere whim, – or a young man to feel an instinctive thirst for blood, and to commit murder” (*Works* VIII, 29–30). Hawthorne's early notebooks are replete with “morbid anatom[ies]” of the human heart (McFarland 2004: 22). Ghosts appear with a purpose – to warn, to encourage, to punish, or to provide an alter ego.

In their power and subtlety, these stories create a gripping, tension-laden atmosphere. For some spirits, like myself, curling up in the safety of our beds with a terrifying book will do the trick: as the wind blows and a barren branch taps at the window, we can experience once again, without warning, and as if from a reservoir not of years but of centuries, the haunting memories of childhood fears that Hawthorne brings to life so vividly. This brings me to another reason we fall under Hawthorne's spell: A sense of place is at the heart of everything he wrote. He rendered physical settings with such dreamlike clarity that we never doubt their actual existence. We never want to. We enter them as if they are our own.

When I announced in one of my literature classes that I needed to return to Salem, Concord, and Boston to complete a chapter for a book I was writing, one student remarked, “Why bother? That's why we have the Internet. You can do your research that way and save yourself a lot of time and money.” Although expressed completely without guile or malice, that student's seemingly tacit acceptance of the computer over “see-touch-feel” strangely disquieted me. My response, acerbic as it may have sounded, was as follows: “I'm going there because life is not found on the bloodless Internet. Life is found in real places.”

For decades, acting on this belief has deepened my insights into the reading and study of authors whose works become better illuminated by experiencing firsthand the physical spaces they knew and drew from. I cannot claim for others, but that has certainly been my experience with Hawthorne. I wanted to see the fully textured physical and psychic landscape – its warp and woof – where some of my favorite stories, novels, and essays were conceived and written. I went to see the beds on which Hawthorne slept, the tables where he ate, the desks where he wrote, the halls he paced, and the windows he must have stared through when the right words did not come.

In fact, I did much of my early thinking about this book while on the grounds of his Concord homes, The Old Manse and The Wayside, or late at night at the Hawthorne Inn (now permanently closed) across the road from Bronson Alcott's Orchard House, while sipping from a glass of wine, a favorite beverage of Hawthorne's, and almost sensing as if he were there with me, guiding every word.

Hawthorne could never have written *The Scarlet Letter* or *The House of the Seven Gables* under the glare of bright sunshine. Autumn and winter months were the optimal times for his writing – as they are for me. He had to write in the shimmer of candlelight or by the glow of a coal-fire, haunted and inspired by the deep shadows of antiquity. Darkness is primal; it soothes, invites, and relaxes. Voices lower. Thoughts emerge with greater care, ease, and openness. “[B]road daylight dispels shadow just as wakefulness dispels dream; a world of fact crowds out fiction” (Martin 1983: 31).

We might understand what the scenes in a novel or tale say and portend, but we need to transcend the verbal surface of what we read. Perhaps only standing where the author had stood can we do justice to and bring home to our imagination the physical realities of his life and times. Perhaps even more importantly, it is only then that we are able to connect our own reality with the one he strove to create in his work. Every journey outward is a journey inward. I needed to be there, not only in Salem, Concord, and Boston but also in Brunswick, Maine, the Berkshires, Lennox, West Newton, West Roxbury, Liverpool, London, Paris, Florence, and Rome. All these places were important to Hawthorne's development and, as a consequence, to my understanding of him.

I often tell my students of my unabashedly romantic pilgrimages to other sites as well: Ralph Waldo Emerson's two-story clapboard mansion where, with the curator's permission, I touched the bed on which the sage of Concord had drawn his last breath; or upstairs at Orchard House where I lingered at the semicircular fold-down shelf-desk upon which Louisa May Alcott had composed *Little Women* (1868/1869) in just 10 weeks; or the Church of the First Parish from which I walked to Author's Ridge atop Sleepy Hollow Cemetery while envisioning the funeral and Hawthorne's procession. Standing at his gravesite, it dawned upon me that this would be the closest I'd ever get to shaking his hand.

Memory and imagination – tools all writers share – are sheltered inside the walls of homes, said Gaston Bachelard (1964) in *The Poetics of Space* (3). I find it fascinating that we're never quite sure as to what hints, pointers, suggestions, or promises we will discover about our readings, thoughts, and dreams, when we examine the environs where some of the most brilliant minds in history produced their creative gems. Surrounded by their space, we may catch a glimpse, as the authors once did, of humanity in its depths. “Behind every door,” wrote Anna Quindlen (2004), “there are stories, behind every one ghosts. The greatest writers in the history of the written word have given them substance, given them life” (160).

And so, I describe for my students the powerful resonance I felt within the clapboard walls of The Old Manse. Here, from the flurry of family life, Hawthorne collected impressions he later used to develop the interior scenes for some of his memorable tales. Running her hand over Hawthorne's desk and wiping off the dust, one colleague naively sighed, "Oh, that some of his genius might rub off on me!" How many of us have done and said something similar about the authors we care for?

My travels have given me interesting ways to engage my students with Hawthorne. I visited Rome and Florence, where he spent a little more than a year, and I learned that he did most of his preparatory thinking there for his final completed and published romance, *The Marble Faun*. I relate how, upon entering his third-floor study at The Wayside in Concord, I sensed the pain, the isolation, and the frustration as he tried unsuccessfully to compose a new novel after his return from Europe while his family, directly beneath, tended to daily domestic affairs.

I reveal how I have stood at noon at the approximate spot where, on 9 July 1845, the day of the Hawthorne's third wedding anniversary, 19-year-old Martha Hunt, the superintendent of a district school, had left her bonnet and shoes neatly arranged on the shore, and, after hours of pacing the banks, had walked to her death in the Concord River. Later that evening, Hawthorne set out in his boat with Ellery Channing and two other men. As they paddled and dragged the river, they recovered the girl's body. (Several years later, one of her sisters also committed suicide in the river and another died by accidental drowning.)

I explained to the students how standing there connected me emotionally to Zenobia's suicide by drowning in *The Blithedale Romance*, particularly the lines: "Of all modes of death, methinks it is the ugliest. Her wet garments swathed limbs of terrible inflexibility. She was the marble image of a death-agony. Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her, with clenched hands; her knees, too, were bent, and – thank God for it! – in the attitude of prayer. Ah, that rigidity! It is impossible to bear the terror of it" (*Works* III, 235). Until he had written about this mortifying, heart-wrenching scene, Hawthorne could not make peace with the Hunt tragedy. This is one of the many instances in his life where Hawthorne's refusal to let go of a painful episode had positive results in his work.

Discussions that follow elicit useful questions as we speculate about the various ways in which geography informed Hawthorne's works. Every place is inexorably linked to an open-ended question. What does it mean, for example, to say that he will forever be connected with Salem or Concord? What was transpiring in Hawthorne's mind as he walked at dusk, lost in nostalgic contemplation in the green seclusion of the outskirts of Salem? Or while alone in the darkest regions of Liverpool and London? Or within the cathedrals and museums of Rome? His novels and tales indeed capture the spirit of the locale, but in order to appreciate how

he uses a particular place, it can help to visit it, as I have done, and experience there the fairy-tale mystery that intrigued Hawthorne himself.

No website or video can capture this magic: the shaded, plain wooden bench perched on a path above the garden behind his house, The Wayside; the buzz of bees feasting on nearby apple and wild rose; the warm breeze wafting gently from the valley spread out below, bearing with it the cleansing scent of fresh-cut grass of which he wrote in his American journal.

I hope that such discussions not only engage my students but, ultimately, inspire them to set out with high expectations on their respective journeys to make a connection with writers such as Hawthorne. Seeing the sparse tower room upstairs at his Concord home, The Wayside, where he wrote late in life, or the lake, near to the Hawthorne's home, where Sophia slipped and miscarried her child, might kindle or renew an interest in his books.

To some of my colleagues, all this is but a fool's errand, a snooping obsession that borders on the ridiculous – literary idolatry of sorts. “What if the information about the places isn't accurate?” someone said. “What if the guides aren't telling the truth?” My answer is that the tourist information really doesn't matter; I go for the atmosphere of the places. After visiting them, I am moved beyond words to turn to the books and tales again, and my reading is infused with a new, more pungent essence derived from visiting these homes and villages. Regardless of the extent to which they have changed over time, the places Hawthorne captured and drew from continue to live in his work. “Our emotions are somehow stirred,” wrote Cicero, “in those places in which the feet of those whom we love and admire have trodden” (Hendrix 2009: 14).

More than his enchanting storytelling or unforgettable characters, his use of ambiguity and impeccable irony, his taste for the supernatural, and his sense of place, Hawthorne's most memorable gift was his voice – a narrative voice that speaks to each one of us in a uniquely enthralling manner.

Unsentimental and wise, the voice behind his characters beguiles us, humors us, and refuses to let go. There is truth in every line he wrote, almost as if he were incapable of uttering a falsehood. This is the voice of reason, of moderation, of intellectual honesty, and prudence. In the preface to *The Ambassadors*, Henry James (1934) refers to this narrative voice as the reader's friend or confidante (*ficelle*) because it invites us to suspend our disbelief and enter into a world that is different from our own (322).

Suspension of disbelief, a notion introduced into English literature by Coleridge, is central to our pleasure in reading Hawthorne. When we temporarily suspend disbelief, we enjoy the work on its own terms, allowing ourselves to think of the characters as real. We play along in this enchanted world and rarely doubt whose voice we are hearing. Hawthorne's narrator wins and retains our trust.

Although no amount of academic study will ever explain why we prefer one writer's voice over another's, what we do know, as noted by John Le Carré (2005), is that "partly it has to do with trust, partly with good or bad manners of the narrator, partly with his authority or lack of it. And a little also with beauty, though not as much as we might like to think" (xiii). For these reasons and many more, Hawthorne's writings have the iron of permanence. Once under his spell, we never escape.



Bowdoin College, 1823, oil by John G. Brown (Bowdoin College Museum of Art).  
Source: Artokoloro/Alamy Images.