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## The secret smile: Mirth and humor in the tales and sketches of Nathaniel Hawthorne

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**The secret smile: Mirth and humor in the tales and sketches of  
Nathaniel Hawthorne**

**Power, John Steele, M.A.**

**University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1993**

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THE SECRET SMILE  
MIRTH AND HUMOR IN THE TALES AND SKETCHES  
OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

by

John S. Power

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

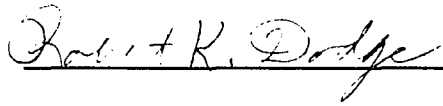
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Department of English  
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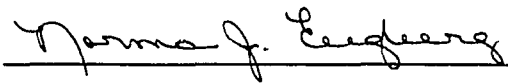
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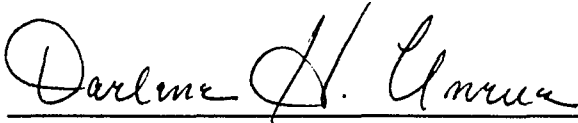
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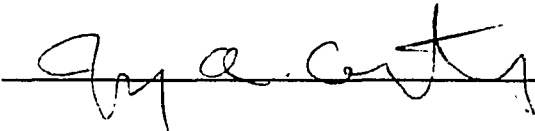
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December 1993



## ABSTRACT

To declare that Nathaniel Hawthorne is not known for humor would be a conspicuous understatement, for literary criticism has assigned to him the role of a melancholy, reclusive descendant of Puritans who explores and expounds the evil that lurks in the heart of man. In spite of this grave characterization, initiated by Melville in the critical essay "Hawthorne and his Mosses" and cultivated by the melodramatic exaggeration of Hawthorne himself, a thorough and unprejudiced reading of the tales and sketches reveals an abundance of humor and mirth. Furthermore, an unbiased review of biographical materials leads to a characterization of Hawthorne as a shy but well-rounded man with an active sense of humor.

This study surveys the subtle humor evinced in many stories through the ironic voice of Hawthorne's narrator confronting the vagaries and ambiguities of reality—a minister inexplicably wears a veil, a scientist experiments with the Fountain of Youth, a man imagines a snake nesting in his bosom. It elucidates many instances of Hawthorne gently ridiculing himself and the writing profession and amiably displaying the foibles of mankind. It explores the startling assertion that even Hawthorne's so-called "dark side" has its humorous vein, and concludes with an in depth look at Hawthorne's humorous tales, culminating with the masterful "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."

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## INTRODUCTION

The secret smile of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the comic spirit with which he confronted life's ambiguities, has remained veiled for nearly a century and a half, ignored or explained away by literary critics adhering to the traditional conception of the man and his works. For reasons which shall be elaborated in this study, Hawthorne was labeled early in his career as a writer preoccupied with the dark side in men's souls—with a kind of supernatural malevolence. While no one can refute the existence of these kinds of themes in his work, it is time that Hawthorne criticism acknowledge that these dark or tragic elements are counterbalanced by an equally exuberant comic spirit which pervades virtually all of his writing.

Engaging in a discussion concerning the existence of humor in any work of literature is a hazardous enterprise. One approach is to select a theory of humor and apply it to the text. The difficulty with this tactic, however, is that humor has resisted successful theorization by great minds through the ages.<sup>1</sup> From Aristotle to Hobbes to Bergson and Freud, a common flaw has plagued attempts at developing a theory of humor—a tendency to overgeneralize. As Paul Lewis has pointed out, these efforts invariably focus on one aspect of humor and then generalize to arrive at an overall theory of humor.<sup>2</sup> Although such theories succeed in explaining a particular style or aspect of humor, they fall far short of the mark when they attempt to reduce all humor to the rigid formula which has worked so well for the particular aspect they have explored.<sup>3</sup> As a result, although a particular theory might be compatible

with an individual work, there is no single theory whose scope encompasses the range of humor which is found in the tales and sketches of Hawthorne. Lewis points out that there are “critics who reject such global descriptions and insist on the uniqueness of either literary humor in general or of each instance of humor that occurs in literature.”<sup>4</sup> He terms these critics “anti-universalists” and numbers among them L. C. Knights and Harry Levin.<sup>5</sup>

Arriving at a workable definition of humor is nearly as difficult as propounding a theory, but what proves to be the most practical one was delineated by Samuel Johnson as he discoursed about comedy in the theater of his day:

Comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers; though perhaps they might properly have contented themselves with declaring it to be *such a dramatic representation of human life as may excite mirth*, they have embarrassed their definition with the means by which the comic writers attain their end, without considering that the various methods of exhilarating their audience, not being limited by nature, cannot be comprised in precept. Thus, some make comedy a representation of mean, and others of bad men; some think that its essence consists in the unimportance, others in the fictitiousness of the transaction. But any man’s reflection will inform him, that every dramatic composition which raises mirth is comic: and that, to raise mirth, it is by no means necessary, that the personages should be either mean or corrupt, nor always requisite, that the action should be trivial, nor ever, that it should be fictitious.<sup>6</sup>

Johnson’s remarks are equally applicable to what we today call humor and which, following his lead, may be defined as *that which excites mirth* or, less

formally, as *anything that makes us laugh or smile*. Although this adequate but very general definition circumvents the difficulty already discussed, it raises another obstacle to any discussion of literary humor.

The problem is succinctly stated by Lewis:

If humor appreciation is subjective and contextual, rooted in individual affective and intellectual responses, how can critics isolate such phenomena for analysis? Although we can all identify metaphors and metonymies, one reader's joke is another's sad irony.<sup>7</sup>

Lewis' solution to this dilemma is to contend that a person may understand how something may be perceived as humorous by others without personally finding it to be funny. I would add to this contention my own that there is much more shared by humanity, with regard to a sense of humor, than there is divergent. If this were not so there would be very few comedians. In the final analysis, however, the evidence for the existence of humor in a work of literature is always going to be circumstantial and subject ultimately to the judgment of the reader.

In this study, I will present numerous examples of what I perceive to be humor in the tales and sketches of Hawthorne using his own words as much as possible. Where there is contextual evidence of humorous intent by the author, I will point it out. Where explanation or description may clarify the humor, I will offer them. I will not, however, attempt to impose a theory of humor, for there is none that fits the broad range of Hawthorne's humor.

The presence of humor in Hawthorne's work is sometimes marked by a subtle wink or smile from the narrator as in the futile search of "The Great Carbuncle" or the gentle irony of "The Great Stone Face." Elsewhere it is marked by outright laughter as in the climactic scene of "My Kinsman, Major

Molineux" or the young girls laughing at Hawthorne in "Foot-prints on the Sea-shore." It encompasses a broad spectrum of intensities and styles, from the stinging sarcasm of "The Haunted Quack" to the amiable satire of "The Celestial Rail-road" to the kindly good humor of such sketches as "Little Annie's Ramble." It is a broad and vivacious humor that belies the traditional image of Hawthorne as a melancholy recluse.

It was in the process of scrutinizing "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and reviewing the many critical approaches that have been applied to the tale that I finally got the joke. The spontaneous insight occurred to me that Robin was laughing in the climactic scene, not at his pitiful uncle, but at himself and that Hawthorne had intended the story in a fundamental way to be funny. While this may hardly seem to be an earth-shattering assertion, it has not been made by anyone else to my knowledge, and it has implications for the entire body of Hawthorne's work and for its critical assessment. It means that Nathaniel Hawthorne, the supposedly dour recluse, had a well-developed sense of humor that manifested itself in his works and that to appreciate his full talent one must explore this long neglected facet of his writings.

The next logical step was to search Hawthorne's writings for other instances of humor. In order to maintain a manageable scope, however, the investigation was necessarily limited to the tales and sketches plus the early novella, *Fanshawe*. The result of this search was the discovery of a plethora of humor, from the slapstick comic relief and satire of *Fanshawe* to the self-deprecation of *Monsieur Du Miroir* to the laughter at human foibles in *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*. In reading the tales and sketches, it becomes apparent that Hawthorne peered deep into the heart of man and was both horrified and amused by what he saw.

Once one becomes aware of the abundance of humor in Hawthorne's

writings, it is difficult to fathom how it could have been overlooked by so many astute readers for such a long period of time. Literary reputations, fostered by enthusiastic and persuasive critical reviews, can become calcified into literary credo in just a few decades. What might begin as meaningful insight can become a form of literary blinders, inadvertently focusing the critical eye on one aspect or dimension to the exclusion of any others. Over a period of time, opinion and assertion come to be accepted as fact and law, and the contradictory and the problematical are smoothed away. An author's reputation becomes an easily recited formula, enshrined in the literary pantheon and passed on to generation after generation of unquestioning true believers. Occasionally, however, a fresh perspective is applied to a body of work and a scorned author is rejuvenated or an already established reputation is enhanced. John Donne and Herman Melville are but two of many names who have experienced such literary regeneration.

It is my contention that Hawthorne's humor has been generally overlooked, with the exception of his earliest critics, because it was never expected or sought after, for the presence of humor would be seen as contradictory to the conventional view of Hawthorne as the master of the dark side of mankind. The meager amount of humor that manages to manifest itself within this context is explained away and made to conform with an unyielding dark view that has become the critical credo. If Hawthorne is the unmasker of the evil that lurks in the heart of man and the literary heir to the Puritan spirit of his ancestors, there is obviously no room for humor in such a scheme. The evidence for this contention will be discussed in Chapter 1.

One of the few modern mentions of the comic element in the writings of Hawthorne is by Mary Allen in an essay entitled "Smiles and Laughter in

Hawthorne.”<sup>8</sup> She takes the stance that the frequent images of smiles and laughter are “almost entirely without the usual accompaniments of humor, either grotesque, bitter, or benign.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently under the influence of Hawthorne’s dour reputation, she ignores much of the humor and reshapes the rest to suit the image. Although she refers to the critical neglect of Hawthorne’s humor as noted by James K. Folsom (which I will discuss shortly), she oddly makes no comment upon the many instances of humor which he describes. She ascribes to Hawthorne a “Puritan distrust of gaiety”<sup>10</sup> on the rather tenuous basis of his convincing portrayal of the Puritans in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”:

Hawthorne no doubt meant to chastise his ancestors for their dismal approach to life in this tale; but in playing their part so convincingly he nevertheless betrays his own fear of pleasure.<sup>11</sup>

It seems abundantly clear that Allen has seen what she wanted to see and read into the material something that is simply not there. Contrary to her inadequate assessment, as this study will show, there is a preponderance of evidence, both biographical and literary, indicating that Hawthorne had a well-developed and active sense of humor.

Allen also attempts to apply Edward H. Rosenberry’s four phases of Melville’s humor<sup>12</sup> to Hawthorne and comes to the rather questionable conclusion that Hawthorne can only be identified with the third phase, *philosophical-psychological*,<sup>13</sup> which deals with the ambiguity of reality and, according to Allen, is not concerned with laughter. Rosenberry’s categories of humor are an attempt to describe the evolution of humor in Melville’s works. While they may be applicable to Melville, to arbitrarily apply them to Hawthorne proves unworkable. As this study will show, Hawthorne’s humor shows no progressive development but is expressed in a variety of



forms as an underlying motif throughout the tales and sketches.

The lone modern critic who has espoused the existence of significant humor in Hawthorne's works is the above-mentioned James K. Folsom who devotes an entire chapter to "Hawthorne and the Comic Spirit."<sup>14</sup> He argues convincingly that there has been critical neglect of this facet of Hawthorne and points out a number of examples that aptly demonstrate Hawthorne's use of humor. He describes Hawthorne's humor, rather usefully I think, as a way of viewing reality that is complementary to his tragic vision. He also makes the important point that "an unerring sense of the ludicrous, especially of the humor inherent in the difference between man's noble pretensions and often rather feeble performance"<sup>14</sup> is fundamental to Hawthorne's comic vision. Folsom's observations lead him to a discussion of Hawthorne's longer works, but, as we shall see, the humor found in the tales and sketches provides significant support to his assertions.

The variety and mixture of ways in which Hawthorne's humor finds expression, flowing naturally from the work, render its organization strictly by genres impractical. For this same reason, the imposition of any rigid kind of structure on the humorous material is unfeasible and, in fact, tends to be counterproductive to the presentation and understanding of the humor in its original context. The isolation of puns, for example, would fail to effectively portray their use in combination with a humorous context such as is found in "The Devil in Manuscript."

As a result of these considerations, I have chosen to follow a efficacious organization which is flexible and allows an overlapping of topics when necessary. Chapter 1 presents the evidence for the existence of Hawthorne's sense of humor and culminates in an exposition of the humor found in *Fanshawe*, Hawthorne's first published work. Chapter 2 elucidates the subtle

humor that is so pervasive in the tales and sketches, yet is so easily missed. Chapter 3 demarcates the frequent instances of Hawthorne's self-deprecatory humor. The for the most part gently satirical humor directed at mankind is elaborated upon in Chapter 4, and the dark humor which some have seen as the antecedent of twentieth century black humor is the topic of Chapter 5. The final chapter deals with Hawthorne's most overtly humorous writings, the humorous tales, and concentrates on an explication of the joke-like structure of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."

## CHAPTER I

### THE REAL NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

"Will the real Nathaniel Hawthorne please stand up!"—it would have made for an exquisitely puzzling edition of *To Tell the Truth* had the celebrity panel been forced to choose the real Hawthorne from among the several personas that may be fabricated out of the material that history has handed down to us. After all, literary critics appear to have been dealing with an impostor in the person of a brooding, reclusive Puritan for well over a century, and it is tempting, in reaction to the unflattering portrayals of the past, to reinvent Hawthorne as a sociable bon vivant and man about town. The truth, however, is that the real Nathaniel Hawthorne sits somewhere in the middle, a shy, good-humored man fascinated by the ironies and ambiguities of life. After well over a century of mistaken identity, this is the Hawthorne that should stand up to acknowledge the applause of the audience.

It is ironic that Nathaniel Hawthorne has become so identified with the ancestral Puritan spirit which so haunted him. Although he evidenced a lifelong fascination for his heritage as he chronicled and explored its intricacies in his fiction, Hawthorne himself did not possess the dour Puritanical disposition so often ascribed to him by unquestioning critics. To the contrary, even a casual inspection of his tales and sketches reveals a warm and playful sense of humor that is present to some degree in virtually all of

his writings. This critical neglect of Hawthorne's comic side has left a huge gap in our understanding and appreciation of the man and his work.

In the initial critical reception of Hawthorne's tales, his humorous touch received prominent notice. For example, a review of *Twice-told Tales* in the *Knickerbocker* made what was to become a standard comparison with Longfellow, Irving and Charles Lamb and remarked upon the "quiet humor."<sup>1</sup> The reviewer of *Mosses from an Old Manse* in *Graham's Magazine* described the work as being "replete with fancy, humor and sentiment" and went on to say that Hawthorne "is even a finer and deeper humorist...than Addison or Goldsmith, or Irving."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this critical praise fostered principally by Longfellow did not serve to distinguish Hawthorne sufficiently to encourage book sales, and this set the stage for a reevaluation of Hawthorne that was to emphasize his "dark side" (which even Longfellow acknowledged) at the expense of his humor.

Critical focus on the "dark side" of Hawthorne seems to have begun with Melville's famous review, "Hawthorne and his Mosses." In his zealous fervor to draw attention to Hawthorne and have his work taken seriously, he was perhaps excessively effusive about the "dark side" in these stories, and his suggestion that Hawthorne embodied Puritan traits was a rather tenuous conjecture without substantial foundation. Actually, although Melville's assertion of Puritanical gloom in Hawthorne's character has had the force of a factual statement, it was phrased with rather casual ambivalence:

Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wonderful effects he makes it produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanical gloom,—this, I cannot absolutely tell.<sup>3</sup>

Melville was an advocate for a nascent American literature, and his assessment of Hawthorne must be taken in this context. He saw an opportunity, by adding a touch of mystery and sensationalism, to have an American author taken more seriously by the public. In his attempt to obviate the prevalent reputation of Hawthorne as a “pleasant writer, with a pleasant style,” Melville unwittingly promoted a narrow, one-dimensional view of the very author whose reputation he wished to enhance. Although it was a masterful public relations move and certainly contributed to the increasing regard in which Hawthorne was held, it has left us with a flawed vision of who Hawthorne was and a distorted, oversimplified conception of his literary legacy.

Ironically, it was Hawthorne’s humor which dominated Melville’s first impression:

What a mild moonlight of contemplative humor bathes that Old Manse...No rollicking rudeness, no gross fun fed on fat dinners, and bred in the lees of wine,—but a humor so spiritually gentle, so high, so deep, and yet so richly relishable, that it were hardly inappropriate in an angel. It is the very religion of mirth.<sup>4</sup>

Having made this acknowledgment of the congenial and comic Hawthorne, however, Melville consigned him to oblivion, obscured by the shadow of the somewhat nefarious and serious Hawthorne created by his unrestrained praise.

A snowball of literary opinion had been set into motion, and there has been little or no resistance to the momentum since, with the fervor of literary bloodhounds, critics began dredging up and highlighting even the most insignificant items in Hawthorne’s personal life that supported the “gloomy

Puritan" theory while ignoring evidence that contradicted it. The fate of Hawthorne's literary reputation was sealed, and future generations of readers were shepherded into narrow and misleading expectations. While the dark side was magnified out of proportion, the light and humorous side was shunted into an undeserved oblivion, and an essential aspect of Hawthorne's art was lost.

As James K. Folsom has noted, the tragic aspect of Hawthorne's art has been thoroughly explored by numerous critics; "Hawthorne as a comic writer, however, has received somewhat too little attention."<sup>5</sup> Folsom quotes extensively from the two "haunted chamber" letters which Hawthorne wrote to his future wife (in October of 1840 and January of 1842).<sup>6</sup> The first of these is often advanced by critics as evidence of Hawthorne's tormented spirit because it is a melancholy reflection on the years he spent writing in that room. Folsom points out that the second letter, obviously written in more ebullient spirits, has been generally ignored. Both letters represent romanticizations of Hawthorne's early writing days, the first portraying the suffering artist and the second imagining the room becoming a literary shrine for his future admirers. As Folsom notes, the two letters, so polarized in attitude, may each represent an aspect of Hawthorne's character, and the question of which should be given greater credence cannot be answered with any certainty. His writings themselves, however, seem to provide as much evidence of an exuberant spirit as of the disconsolate and reclusive Puritan. A literary prejudice that began with Melville's extolling the "dark side" has obscured the evidence, and a reconsideration of Hawthorne from an unbiased perspective is long overdue.

Hawthorne himself was to some degree responsible for the distortion in his reputation. He seems to have been prone to exaggeration concerning that

intensely creative period following his graduation from Bowdoin when according to his own accounts he virtually imprisoned himself in his attic room to write. Edwin Miller, one of his recent biographers, prefaces a quotation from an 1837 letter to Longfellow with the comment: "Hawthorne's later reputation as a recluse was largely attributable to his own self-dramatizations in which he overstated his withdrawal from society."<sup>7</sup> Miller further points out that Hawthorne regularly played whist with friends, that his sister Elizabeth records many afternoon strolls (in direct contradiction to Hawthorne's own assertion that he seldom went out before dark) and that he frequently accompanied his Uncle Samuel on horse-buying trips in Maine and New Hampshire. He also indicates that most of the business on these trips was conducted in taverns, and describes Hawthorne as "preferring the company of middle-class Democrats, alcoholics, party hacks, and even a boozy former clergyman, all of whom he no doubt met in Salem's disreputable taverns."<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising that this effervescent aspect of Hawthorne's character was suppressed. It was not the kind of thing which he would want reported back to his mother. Nor was it the image he wished to project to the reading public.

Disclosing that Hawthorne on occasion frequented taverns in no way implies that he was a roué. The information should serve only to counteract the false notion that he was a somber, solitary artiste, writing only of gloom and evil. It should humanize the image that we have of Hawthorne and leave his work open to broader interpretation.

This more convivial portrait of Hawthorne is reinforced by the fact that it conforms with what is known about his college years at Bowdoin. Unlike his fellow classmate, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hawthorne was apparently fond of drinking and cardplaying. Miller cites Hawthorne's close college

friend, Horatio Bridge, as one who saw a conflict between the artificial literary image and the Hawthorne he knew:

After the early biographers began to delineate Hawthorne's life almost invariably in grays and blacks and readers emphasized the "hell-fired" aspects of his genius, Bridge put together his reminiscences with the intention of revealing that there "was much more of fun and frolic in his disposition than his published writings indicate."<sup>9</sup>

Miller also notes that Hawthorne was repeatedly fined for his behavior at Bowdoin: "\$1.40 as a freshman, \$3.04 as a sophomore, and \$5.91 as a junior." Longfellow, in contrast, "was fined only once in four years, for twenty cents."<sup>10</sup>

Though he could scarcely be classified as an extrovert during his college years, Hawthorne was far from being the reclusive Puritan that was to become a part of literary lore. Perhaps the most objective assessment of his character at this time is one from a fellow student which is quoted by Miller:

His voice was never heard in any shout of merriment; but the silent beaming smile would testify to his keen appreciation of the scene, and to his enjoyment of the wit. He would sit for a whole evening with head gently inclined to one side, hearing every word, seeing every gesture, and yet scarcely a word would pass his lips.<sup>11</sup>

Taking into account all the information that is now available, it would appear that Hawthorne was a relatively normal teenager, tending to be shy but not reclusive or antisocial. He had his moments of melancholy, as does anyone, and was given to exaggeration, a trait not entirely foreign to successful writers of fiction.



If the reader approaches the fiction of Hawthorne with the preconceived notion that his domain is the “dark side” then that is what he or she will find for it is indisputably there. If, however, the reader approaches untainted by the interpretive preconceptions that have been built up by a century of calcified criticism, he or she will find a human landscape balanced between the comic and the tragic. Hawthorne was above all an observer of the human condition, and his art was to portray what he saw in all its ambiguity and irony without direct comment. In doing so, he recorded much that was comic.

Even in *Fanshawe*, Hawthorne’s first published effort, comic elements are readily identifiable. The story is set in the environs of a small rural college bearing a striking resemblance to Bowdoin, and Hawthorne must have smiled as he described Harley College as being nearly as inaccessible as the Happy Valley of Abyssinia, at once showing his erudition with the allusion to Dr. Johnson’s *Rasselas* and poking fun at his Alma Mater. The story is a combination of romance, adventure and mystery which borders on being a parody of college life. A brief review of the plot reveals that Hawthorne’s sense of humor was at work throughout.

The president of the college, Dr. Melmoth, is asked by his old friend Mr. Langton to take in his eighteen year old daughter while he remains out of the country on business. Dr. Melmoth’s shrewish wife agrees to the arrangement, although “by long disuse, she had lost the power of consenting graciously to any wish of her husband’s.”<sup>12</sup> The beautiful Ellen Langton comes to reside with the Melmoths, and a handsome student named Edward Walcott soon becomes enamoured of her. One day while Edward and Ellen are out riding they encounter another rider who appears to be oblivious to what he is doing and where he is going. When Ellen asks if the rider has lost his senses, Edward replies sardonically:

'Not so Ellen—if much learning has not made him mad. He is a deep scholar and a noble fellow, but I fear we shall follow him to his grave, ere long. Doctor Melmoth has sent him to ride in pursuit of his health. He will never overtake it, however, at this pace.' (III, 346)

The rider is, of course, Fanshawe, the hero of the novel, who in modern terms would be described as the school nerd. When Ellen and Edward do him the favor of waking him from his reverie before he ends up in the next county, he too is smitten by Ellen's beauty.

The three young people become constant companions in walks. Some months later while walking by the local stream, they encounter a mysterious fisherman who seeks a private audience with Ellen. Whatever the stranger imparts to her has a strange effect upon her, but she reveals nothing. On the evening of the following day, Dr. Melmoth is returning home in a driving rainstorm when he hears the sound of song and revelry coming from the inn. He stops in thinking to catch some errant students, and there, of course, are Edward and Fanshawe, obviously singing and drinking, but Hugh Crombie, the innkeeper, is readily able to persuade the credulous Dr. Melmoth that the boys were just seeking shelter from the storm. He cajoles him with a sly pun and excessively solicitous manner replete with ironic humor:

'This has apparently been a very merry meeting, young gentlemen,' he [Dr. Melmoth] at length said; 'but I fear my presence has cast a damp on it.'

'Oh, yes! your reverence's cloak is wet enough to cast a damp upon anything,' exclaimed Hugh Crombie, assuming a look of tender anxiety. 'The young gentlemen are affrighted for your

valuable life. Fear deprives them of utterance; permit me to relieve you of these dangerous garments." (III, 390)

As Hugh seeks to usher him on his way, the bumbling Dr. Melmoth opens a door not to the outside, but to a bedroom much to the dismay of the innkeeper:

'Not there, not there, Doctor! It is Dame Crombie's bedchamber,' shouted Hugh, most energetically. 'Now Belzebub defend me,' he muttered to himself, perceiving that his exclamation had been a moment too late. (III, 392)

Dr. Melmoth finds himself confronting an embarrassed Ellen, about to set off on a journey without the knowledge of her guardian. In this awkward moment, however, her explanation of her behavior is postponed, and Dr. Melmoth takes her home.

Another comical scene takes place as Mrs. Melmoth attempts to read to her husband a newspaper account of the sinking of the ship upon which Ellen's father was supposed to have embarked. He fails to listen to what she says and responds to each sentence she reads by reading aloud from the scholarly letter which has his attention. She finally is able to inform him of the death of his friend, and she goes upstairs to break the news to Ellen. Glancing at the mail before him, Dr. Melmoth recognizes the handwriting of Mr. Langton and soon learns that he had missed the boat. He runs after his wife with the following comical result:

He had arrived at the top of his speed and at the middle of the staircase, when his case was arrested by the lady whom he sought, who came, with a velocity equal to his own, in an opposite direction. The consequence was a concussion between the two meeting masses, by which Mrs. Melmoth was seated

securely on the stairs; while the doctor was only preserved from precipitation to the bottom by clinging desperately to the balustrade. (III, 403-4)

Once again the couple fail to listen to each other's explanations causing further comedy. Ellen is gone, and when Dr. Melmoth wonders what he is to tell her father, Mrs. Melmoth exclaims: "Now, Heaven defend us from the visits of the dead and drowned!" She continues: "This is a serious affair, doctor, but not, I trust, sufficient to raise a ghost" (III, 404).

It turns out that Ellen has run off with the mysterious angler who has convinced her that she can only save her father from certain death by doing as he says. He, believing that Langton is dead, hopes to trick her into marrying him so he can acquire her fortune. The story ends with a ludicrous chase scene, worthy of the Keystone Cops, in which the pursuers inadvertently pass by the pursued. Fanshawe, being the slowest of the pursuers is ironically the first to discover the whereabouts of the couple. Following a path through the woods he comes out upon a cliff and spots the villain below, threatening Ellen. He throws a rock and gets the villain's wrathful attention, but:

Within a few feet of the top, the adventurer grasped at a twig, too slenderly rooted to sustain his weight. It gave way in his hand, and he fell backward down the precipice. His head struck against the less perpendicular part of the rock, whence the body rolled heavily down to the detached fragment, of which mention has heretofore been made. There was no life left in him. With all the passions of hell alive in his heart, he had met the fate that he had intended for Fanshawe. (III, 451)

Ironically, Fanshawe has become the hero he had imagined but without having taken any direct action. Ludicrously, he is a hero in intent only.

The novel ends with Fanshawe unselfishly and nobly refusing to press his advantage with the grateful Ellen. Instead of marrying the damsel, he returns assiduously to his scholarly pursuits and, in spite of the warnings of his friends, studies himself to death. In light of Hawthorne's own scholarly record, it is hard to believe that he intended this to be taken seriously. He has Fanshawe's fellow students erect a granite monument to him with the inscription: "THE ASHES OF A HARD STUDENT AND A GOOD SCHOLAR"(III, 460). He states that the inscription was borrowed from the grave of Nathaniel Mather whom Fanshawe resembled because of his death by excessive studying. Miller points out that the actual inscription on Mather's grave reads: "An Aged person/that had seen but/Nineteen Winters/in the World."<sup>13</sup> In spite of Miller's assertion to the contrary, it seems unlikely that Hawthorne was familiar with the actual tombstone since his quote bears little resemblance to the original. It seems far more likely that he was familiar with Nathaniel Mather being held up as an example of what a young scholar should be, or perhaps Hawthorne's youthful playmates recounted the story from local lore as a warning of what too much studying can do to a boy. In either case, it seems that Hawthorne's tone is sardonic throughout *Fanshawe* and in this instance particularly.

Miller, engaging in some amateur psychoanalysis, suggests on rather tenuous evidence that Fanshawe with his "self-willed death" represents a facet of Hawthorne's psyche that is somehow connected to the death of his father.<sup>14</sup> Rather than place a ghost on the analyst's couch, however, it would be much more logical to accept the explanation that Hawthorne, writing to entertain, was poking some fun at college life in general and in particular at the students who had been far more scholarly than himself. Running throughout the story, there is a thread of gentle ridicule toward college life

and scholarly pursuits that is consistent with what one would expect of a recent graduate who had not taken his studies too seriously.

It may even have been Hawthorne's intention to parody the popular romances of his time whose form and elements he so scrupulously emulated. Considering the exaggeration of effects and the other comical elements of the story, it seems quite likely that he did not intend it to be taken seriously. That it was taken seriously by some devotees of the form may actually have been an embarrassment to him. He never was to attempt the form again and in fact would speak disdainfully of it. Hawthorne's intentions, however, must remain a matter of conjecture, for there is no record of any comment by him on the matter. It is a fact, however, that, for whatever reasons, he asked friends to destroy copies of the work and endeavored to suppress any attempt to connect his name to *Fanshawe*.

Whether or not *Fanshawe* was indeed a burlesque, it is an incontrovertible fact that humor played a decidedly conspicuous role in Hawthorne's first published work. The comical bumbblings of Dr. Melmoth and his shrewish wife with their misunderstandings and pratfalls seem modelled on Shakespeare's comedy (the cross-purpose conversations between Juliet and her nurse come to mind), and Fanshawe is a mock-hero reminiscent of Don Quixote in his idealism, ineptitude and pseudo-heroics. Considering what we know about Hawthorne's personality from biographical materials, *Fanshawe* may easily be construed as an expression of the sense of humor of the real Nathaniel Hawthorne.

## CHAPTER 2

### HAWTHORNE SMILES SUBTLY

Much of the humor found in Hawthorne elicits merely a smile from the reader and that only upon reflection. It is a subtle but fundamental humor based on a perception of ambiguity, irony or incongruity and may easily elude the unsuspecting reader. This elusiveness, however, should not be taken as a weakness but rather as a part of his art—there to be enjoyed or ignored as the reader desires. It is a facet of Hawthorne's humor that merely amuses, that makes no comment, other than the triviality of the world, and that makes no great demand upon the reader. It is, as Folsom has suggested, an integral part of Hawthorne's view of reality.<sup>1</sup>

A paradigm of this subtle humor may be seen in "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836), a story which is conventionally interpreted as having malevolent overtones. One has only to examine the absurdity of the premise on which the story is based, however, to expose the humorous undertones which pervade the story. The Reverend Mr. Hooper, an admired and successful minister, astonishes his congregation by donning a black veil for no apparent reason and without explanation. Just as Michael Jackson attracts attention by inexplicably wearing a single glove, Hooper creates a sensation and draws attention to himself by wearing the mysterious veil. Rumors spring up everywhere in attempts to explain the odd behavior and some even

suggest that the minister has gone mad. Yet, in spite of all this curiosity, no one in his flabbergasted congregation is able to summon the courage to inquire why he is wearing the veil. Finally, Elizabeth, his fiancée, confronts him with the rumors and he responds elusively:

He even smiled again—that same sad smile, which always appeared like a faint glimmering of light, proceeding from the obscurity beneath the veil.

“If I hide my face for sorrow, there is cause enough,” he merely replied; “and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?”<sup>2</sup>

The Reverend Hooper maintains the ambiguity and incongruity of his situation, and while the veil is horrific, even Elizabeth falling victim to its terrors, it is at once ludicrous. In refusing to disclose his motivation for wearing the veil, Hooper is keeping everyone in suspense including the reader and playing a kind of perverse joke. Other than madness, what possible rational explanation can there be for his bizarre, self-destructive behavior? At the price of intimacy with his fellow human beings, Hooper gains a tremendous power over the people, a power that is derived from the lack of certainty about why he wears this silly veil. He admits as much on his deathbed:

“Why do you tremble at me alone?” cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. “Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not vainly



shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up  
the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol  
beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo!  
on every visage a Black Veil!" (383-4)

It is no wonder that Reverend Mr. Hooper goes to the grave "with a faint lingering smile on the lips." (384) With a clever ruse, he had catapulted his career from mediocrity to celebrity. The humor comes not only at the expense of the congregation, but also of Hooper himself who has deluded himself into sacrificing so much for so little gain. One would think that he could have made his point with a sermon of under an hour containing a single well-wrought parable.

Another tale with tragic overtones but humorous undertones grounded in a grotesque irony is "The Ambitious Guest" (1835). It is the story of a young man who happens to spend a night at a cottage in a mountain location prone to landslides. In the course of a convivial evening spent with the family, he reveals to them his burning ambition to be famous. They laugh good-naturedly at his determination as he expresses the unbearable notion that, were he to pass away at that moment, his ambition would be unfulfilled as he had as yet accomplished nothing and would remain unknown. "With quick sensibility of the ludicrous," (302) the young man recognizes his foolishness with a statement that ironically foreshadows the tragi-comic ending of the story:

'You laugh at me,' said he, taking the eldest daughter's hand,  
and laughing at himself. 'You think my ambition as nonsensical  
as if I were to freeze myself on th top of Mount Washington,  
only that people might spy at me from the country roundabout.  
And truly, that would be a noble pedestal for a man's statue.'

(302)

The conversation is bizarrely interrupted by one of the children who suggests that they should all abandon the warmth of the cottage to go drink from the basin of the Flume, a brook deep in the notch. They all laugh at this odd suggestion, and at that moment, a wagon is heard to pause outside containing several men singing and laughing. The daughter insists that they are calling the father by name. He doubts this, and by the time he gets to the door they can be heard driving off still singing and laughing. The boy pipes up that they could have gotten a ride to the Flume, and everyone laughs once again at his absurd suggestion for a nighttime ramble in the cold.

The conversation turns toward death, and the grandmother takes the opportunity to express her wish to be buried in a particular bonnet and, bizarrely, to have a mirror held up to the face of her corpse so she can see that it is properly arranged and thus rest easy. Her morbid request prompts the stranger-youth to “wonder how mariners feel , when the ship is sinking, and they, unknown and undistinguished, are to be buried together in the ocean—that wide and nameless sepulchre!” (306) Ironically, in the next moment a deadly slide roars down the mountain:

The victims rushed from their cottage, and sought refuge in what they deemed a safer spot—where, in contemplation of such an emergency, a sort of barrier had been reared. Alas! they had quitted their security, and fled right into the pathway of destruction. Down came the whole side of the mountain, in a cataract of ruin. Just before it reached the house, the stream broke into two branches—shivered not a window there, but overwhelmed everything in its dreadful course. Long ere the thunder of that great Slide had ceased to roar among the

mountains, the mortal agony had been endured, and the victims were at peace. Their bodies were never found. (306)

The tragedy of the Slide is so heaped with irony, incongruity and ambiguity that it becomes humorous in a morbid sort of way. The victims, thinking they are saving themselves, in fact have done just the opposite. The ambitious guest's worst fear is realized, for his presence is smothered in the ambiguity of incertitude while the family with whom he perishes achieves legendary fame: "Who has not heard their name? The story had been told far and wide, and will forever be a legend of these mountains. Poets have sung their fate." (306) In a curiously ambiguous manner, however, he does achieve a kind of anonymous fame like the Unknown Soldier, for the legend surrounding the Slide includes the rumor that there *may* have been a stranger numbered among the casualties. Since the bodies were never recovered, no one will ever know.

While the story is tinged with a vague hint of sadness and a sense of impending doom hangs over it, there is also a fabric of vivacity and good humor that runs through it. It is punctuated with laughter, and the tragic and the comic are intermingled in a strangely satisfying sort of way that allows the reader to both grieve for and smile at the ambitious guest and his ironic fate. In a subtle fashion, the story embodies a kind of *black humor*, a concept that will receive extensive treatment in Chapter 5.

As James K. Folsom points out, one of Hawthorne's favorite subtle uses of humor is to make a situation so ludicrous that the reader is forced to recognize the erroneous perception of it by the character involved.<sup>3</sup> The example he cites is from "Egotism; or, the Bosom-Serpent" (1843) when Herkimer first encounters Roderick who supposes himself to be stricken with a serpent in his breast. Herkimer is shocked by the condition of his friend:

"Elliston! Roderick!" cried he, "I had heard of this; but my conception came far short of the truth. What has befallen you? Why do I find you thus?"

"Oh, 'tis a mere nothing! A snake! A snake! The commonest thing in the world. A snake in the bosom—that's all," answered Roderick Elliston. (782)<sup>4</sup>

Folsom interprets the situation as being intentionally absurdly outrageous:

This passage cannot be read seriously; anyone who thinks it is solemn need only read it aloud to have his doubts instantly dispelled. The passage is an obvious take-off on the stilted dialogue of the melodrama, the "I have you now, my dark beauty!" type of thing later so common in the cheap thrillers. But why would Hawthorne ruin a dramatic moment such as this for the sake of a rather paltry joke? The answer I think lies in the fact that the symbol of the snake in the bosom is so ludicrous in itself that it would be fatal to treat it seriously.<sup>5</sup>

Folsom goes on to contend (I think correctly) that Hawthorne has intentionally based the story on a ridiculous premise in order to humorously portray the detrimental effects of egotism. He argues that by using this comical approach, Hawthorne has shrewdly avoided "the pitfall of pomposity to which all such tales are inherently subject, to make a commonplace point in an unconventional manner."<sup>6</sup>

One of the more obvious instances of Hawthorne's use of subtle humor to treat a serious subject is "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" (1837). While this is certainly a serious tale, the concept for the story seems like something straight out of a Three Stooges movie. Dr. Heidegger, the mysterious, somewhat sinister scientist, uses four of his friends as subjects for an experiment to

determine the side effects of drinking from the Fountain of Youth. He wonders whether they will be able to use the experience they have gained in growing old to handle a second chance at youth with more maturity.

The first results of the elixir are rather comical as it produces an intoxicating effect on the subjects. Mr. Gascoigne begins babbling about political subjects:

...but whether relating to the past, present, or future, could not easily be determined, since the same ideas and phrases have been in vogue these fifty years. Now he rattled forth full-throated sentences about patriotism, national glory and the people's right... (476)

Colonel Killegrew meanwhile is:

trolling forth a jolly bottle song, and ringing his glass in symphony with the chorus, while his eyes wandered towards the buxom figure of the Widow Wycherly. (476)

Mr. Medbourne becomes preoccupied with a fantastic get rich quick scheme "for supplying the East Indies with ice, by harnessing a team of whales to the polar icebergs." (476) The Widow Wycherly gazes at the mirror:

curtseying and simpering to her own image, and greeting it as the friend whom she loved better than all the world beside. She thrust her face close to the glass, to see whether some long-remembered wrinkle or crow's-foot had indeed vanished. (476)

After the second glass, they are reduced in age to teenagers, and they begin laughing loudly and making fun of each other for their dress. Ironically, however, the mirror is said to reflect "the figures of the three old, gray, withered grand-sires, ridiculously contending for the skinny ugliness of a shrivelled grand-dam." (478) They start dancing joyfully around the room,

but the conviviality soon degenerates into a brawl:

Inflamed to madness by the coquetry of the girl-widow, who neither granted nor quite withheld her favors, the three rivals began to interchange threatening glances. Still keeping hold of the fair prize, they grappled fiercely at one another's throats. As they struggled to and fro, the table was overturned, and the vase dashed into a thousand fragments. (478)

Their ludicrous behavior has ironically caused the destruction of the elixir which is its source. Like Larry, Moe and Curly, they have managed to mess up a good thing.

Dr. Heidegger recognizes, from observing this comedic episode, the futility of returning to youth. His four subjects, however, fail to profit from the experience, and, ironically, the story ends with them planning to travel to Florida where they hope to drink continuously from the Fountain of Youth. While the story is open to interpretation on a variety of levels, its essence is comedic—three old men engaging in a youthful brawl over an old lady, all under the delusion that they have somehow been returned to youth. The good doctor's experiment teeters precariously on the brink of being a prank, and we can hardly avoid smiling at the foolishness of the willing victims.

The treatment of a serious theme or themes in a story with pervasive comic undertones is a frequent occurrence in the tales and sketches of Hawthorne. "The Great Carbuncle" (1837) is the story of a group of people driven by greed to seek a mythical gem that is said to be seen shining in the White Mountains. Their avarice and the futility of their quest is ludicrous as, for example, in the case of Ichabod Pigsnot, the humorously but aptly named wealthy merchant, who after giving up the search was kidnapped by Indians and held for ransom in Canada leading to his financial ruin. Each of the

pilgrims meets a similar amusingly ironic fate.

Hennig Cohen even makes a case for the presence of subtle humor in "The Hollow of the Three Hills," a tale of betrayal, witchcraft and destruction. He contends that the "presence of the comic where we do not expect to find it makes it more potent than it would otherwise be, and Hawthorne, with a light touch can achieve a forceful effect."<sup>7</sup> The argument is similar to that posed by Folsom above.

Cohen points out that there is a comic frame surrounding the tragic story of the mother who has abandoned her family and consorts with a witch to learn their tragic fate:

The first and the last words are those of the witch. She initiates the dialogue: "'Here is our pleasant meeting come to pass,' said the old crone...." And, as the lady, overcome by the dream-visions "lifted not her head," the old woman pronounces the final words: "'Here has been a sweet hour's sport!' said the withered crone, chuckling to herself"—Hawthorne for once sparing us the dampening effect of a moral.<sup>8</sup>

Cohen might have added that as the old hag spoke at the beginning "a smile glimmered on her countenance, like lamplight on the wall of a sepulchre." (7) This frolicsome tone of the old witch is "slight comedy indeed" as Cohen admits, but the point is well taken that humor, however slight, is being placed in counterpoint to sadness.<sup>9</sup> Humor for Hawthorne is essential to a vision of reality.

In addition to those tales already discussed, many others may be seen to have humorous undertones. In the *Legends of the Province-House* series, for example, "Howe's Masquerade" (1838) and "Lady Eleanore's Mantle" (1838) both recount supposedly historical incidents that are subtly humorous in a

sinister sort of way, both depending on irony for their effect. In contrast, "The Snow-Image" (1850), one of Hawthorne's late stories, is a light-hearted look at a practical man who fails to recognize the magic that his children have performed in creating a living snow-girl and precipitates her destruction by insisting on her coming in by the fire. While it is sad that the children have lost their playmate, it is laughable when the father finds the little girl replaced by a puddle and still, in his practicality, fails to see the significance.

Story after story can be found to have this elemental humor which elicits, if not outright laughter, at least a gentle smile. It is as if Hawthorne is constantly smiling and winking at the reader, reminding that art like life should not be taken overly seriously. It is this subtle humor, veiled in irony and ambiguity, that anchors the writing in reality, for if the comic element is disregarded the writing loses texture and becomes one-dimensional. If we fail to smile at Mr. Hooper's idiosyncrasy, at the folly of Dr. Heidegger's subjects, at the ironic fate of the ambitious guest, we fail to grasp an essential aspect of Hawthorne's vision. Indeed, the Hawthorne story devoid of any vestige of humor, if one can be found, must in fact be viewed as an anomaly.



## CHAPTER 3

### HAWTHORNE SMILES AT HIMSELF

One of the most frequent targets for Hawthorne's humor was himself, for like most men of genius, he had the strength of self-esteem which permitted him to not take himself too seriously. This ability to laugh or smile at himself began in his youth and is evidenced in many of the tales and sketches. Sometimes he pokes fun at himself as the first person narrator of a piece as in "Passages from a Relinquished Work" where the narrator is a persona devised by Hawthorne as a thinly disguised version of himself. In "Little Annie's Ramble," the travelogues, "My Visit to Niagara" and "Sketches from Memory," and the diary-like "Foot-Prints on the Sea-Shore" and "Monsieur du Miroir," the very personal tone suggests that we may identify the first person narrators with Hawthorne himself. In "The Devil in Manuscript," however, Hawthorne is more closely identified with the exasperated author Oberon than with the narrator, and in the prologue to "Rappaccini's Daughter," we have Hawthorne satirizing himself as the purported French author. In all of these pieces, the common thread is that the self-directed jesting is playful and light-hearted, and its subtlety suggests Hawthorne smiling good-humoredly and winking knowingly at his reader.

Hawthorne's comic sense of himself was not something which developed over his literary career. As Miller points out, writing of the *Spectator*, the newspaper which Hawthorne published as an adolescent, this natural facility

for self-deprecation was present even in his youth:

Two things are immediately striking about the newspaper: the wit and style. Nathaniel revealed a sense of comedy, even an ability to poke fun at himself at the age of sixteen when most youths, including Nathaniel much of the time, view themselves with tiresome seriousness.<sup>1</sup>

A single sentence from the young Hawthorne's "Prospectus" for his publication illustrates the ironic tone with which, even at this early age, he was capable of portraying himself and his effort:

Although we would not insinuate that in commencing this Publication we are guided solely by disinterested motives, yet the consideration that we may reform the morals, and instruct and amuse the minds of our Readers, that we may advance the cause of Religion, and give to truth and justice a wider sway, has been of the greatest weight with us.<sup>2</sup>

Already capable of utilizing the editorial *we*, he has rather deftly satirized both himself and publications of the time with which he must have had some familiarity.

In "Passages from a Relinquished Work" (1834) which was originally projected as a set of framed tales to be called "The Story Teller," Hawthorne devised a narrator who seems to be a thinly disguised version of himself. The Story Teller is an orphan, dependent on his guardian, the humorously named Parson Thumpcushion, who would have preferred to see him adopt some practical profession; in a similar fashion, Hawthorne had been compelled by circumstances to live off the generosity of his mother's family, the Mannings. Operating a stagecoach business, the family was headed by his Uncle Robert who felt that his investment in a Bowdoin education for his

nephew should produce practical fruits. Mocking himself, Hawthorne has the Story Teller say that his chosen profession “was not half so foolish as if I had written romances, instead of reciting them” (176). He flaunts the eccentricity and youthful conceit of the Story Teller, playfully poking fun at his own independent nature, as he has him write boastfully:

I do not over-estimate my notoriety, when I take it for granted, that many of my readers must have heard of me, in the wild way of life which I adopted. (176)

Another humorous instance occurs when Hawthorne has the Storyteller apologize for the coldness of his tales:

Since I shall never feel the warm gush of new thought, as I did then, let me beseech the reader to believe, that my tales were not always so cold as he may find them now. (177)

The humor here, of course, lies in the fact that the stories cannot have changed from warm to cold. The statement implies humorously that the flaw must lie in the perception of the reader who finds the tales cold. It is entirely possible that Hawthorne is here ridiculing some actual criticism that he received concerning his own tales.

As the Storyteller sets out from his home, he romantically and comically compares himself to Cervantes’ wandering hero:

Naturally enough, I thought of Don Quixote. Recollecting how the knight and Sancho had watched for auguries, when they took the road to Toboso, I began between jest and earnest, to feel a similar anxiety. It was gratified, and by a more poetical phenomenon than the braying of the dappled ass, or the neigh of Rosinante. The sun, then just above the horizon, shone faintly through the fog, and formed a species of rainbow in the west,

bestriding my intended road like a gigantic portal. (178-9)

The Storyteller is here either deliberately making fun of his pretentiousness or, as seems more likely from the apparently serious tone, is laughably unaware that he is comparing himself to a comic figure. Hawthorne was certainly aware of the comic nature of Don Quixote and undoubtedly intended the passage to mock his own youthful romanticism at the beginning of his writing career.

The Storyteller seems full of youthful pretentiousness as he receives a letter from Parson Thumpcushion:

I strode twice across the chamber, then held the letter in the flame of the candle, and beheld it consume, unread. It is fixed in my mind, and was so at the time, that he had addressed me in a style of paternal wisdom, and love, and reconciliation, which I could not have resisted, had I but risked the trial. The thought still haunts me, that then I made my irrevocable choice between good and evil fate. (187)

The sheer bravado of this action, coupled with the air of regret in its recounting, create a subtle comic tension between what was and what might have been. Once again, the incident seems to parallel the tension that existed between Hawthorne and his Uncle Robert though it reflects no specific incident that is known of. Unfortunately, we will never know how far or in what direction Hawthorne would have taken his alter ego for the project was terminated at this point.

In "Little Annie's Ramble" (1835) Hawthorne is himself the absent-minded host who bemusedly forgets to tell Annie's mother that he is taking her to the circus. The physical description of the pair makes fun of his own appearance in stark contrast to that of the little girl:

What a strange couple to go their rambles together! One walks in black attire, with a measured step, and a heavy brow, and his thoughtful eyes bent down, while the gay little girl trips lightly along, as if she were forced to keep hold of my hand, lest her feet should dance away from the earth. (228)

Having mocked his somber appearance, he ameliorates it with the following comment:

If I pride myself on anything, it is because I have a smile that children love; and, on the other hand, there are few grown ladies that could entice me from the side of little Annie; for I delight to let my mind go hand in hand with the mind of a sinless child. So, come, Annie; but if I moralize as we go, do not listen to me; only look about you, and be merry! (228)

Having thus gently ridiculed his tendency to moralize in his stories, he moves into a light-hearted description of their ramble through town, perceiving everything from the whimsical perspective of a child. Finally, they arrive at the circus grounds, and as they walk among the animals ,

Hawthorne makes such amusing remarks as the following:

Here we see the very same wolf—do not go near him, Annie!—the self-same wolf that devoured Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. (232)

Suddenly, the delightful adventure is interrupted by the bell and voice of the town crier, shouting out a description of a missing little girl, and Hawthorne is immediately struck by the irony of the situation:

Stop, stop, town crier! The lost is found. Oh, my pretty Annie, we forgot to tell your mother of our ramble, and she is in despair, and has sent the town crier to bellow up and down the

streets, affrighting old and young, for the loss of a little girl who has not once let go my hand! Well, let us hasten homeward; and as we go, forget not to thank heaven, my Annie, that after wandering a little way into the world, you may return at the first summons, with an untainted and unwearied heart, and be a happy child again. But I have gone to far astray for the town crier to call me back. (234)

The story ends with Annie returned to her mother, and Hawthorne rhapsodizing about the joys of childhood. In its celebration of childhood it is one of the best examples of Hawthorne's quiet humor.

Several of Hawthorne's most self-deprecating pieces take the form of travelogues, essays about tourist attractions in the Northeast such as Niagara Falls, the Erie Canal or New Hampshire's White Mountains. Hawthorne was widely traveled there, and the accounts appear to be based on actual incidents, perhaps colored (intentionally or otherwise) by his imagination. The experiences described, however ludicrous they may be, have the ring of authenticity, and it seems the most comfortable to accept them as real, if not in fact, then in spirit.

Hawthorne frequently portrays himself as rather foolish in these travel journals. They seem to satirize the current vogue of that type of writing while, at the same time, playfully deflating the narrator's own ego. In "My Visit to Niagara" (1835), for instance, Hawthorne describes both his reluctance to appear too eager to see the marvel and his ensuing befuddlement at how to feel when the actual sight of the Falls disappoints his built up expectations:

But I had come thither, haunted with a vision of foam and fury, and dizzy cliffs, and an ocean tumbling down out of the sky—a scene, in short, which Nature had too much good taste and

calm simplicity to realize. My mind had struggled to adapt these false conceptions to the reality, and finding the effort vain, a wretched sense of disappointment weighed me down. I climbed the precipice, and threw myself on the earth—feeling that I was unworthy to look at the Great Falls, and careless about beholding them again. (245-7)

Hawthorne is here mocking both his own ludicrous preoccupation with his feelings and parodying the exaggerated awe with which the Falls had been publicized in travel literature. Who can fail to smile at this picture of the eminent author throwing himself on the ground in a fit of despair over his failure to appreciate the view of Niagara Falls? Fortunately, after much contemplation, he does come to enjoy it, but “will not pretend to the all absorbing enthusiasm of some more fortunate spectators, nor deny, that very trifling causes would draw my eyes and thoughts from the cataract” (247). One can only imagine what a predicament the Grand Canyon would have posed for Hawthorne.

In yet another travelogue, “Sketches from Memory” (1835), Hawthorne describes himself in a series of ludicrous situations while experiencing travel in a boat on the Erie Canal. He recounts with amusement an incident in which a preoccupied Virginia schoolmaster fails to heed the helmsman’s warning of an upcoming bridge. Hawthorne describes how, in his own ineptitude, he “had prostrated myself, like a pagan before his idol, but heard the dull leaden sound of the contact, and fully expected to see the treasures of the poor man’s cranium scattered about the deck” (347). Hawthorne has suffered a blow to his dignity, and the schoolmaster has received a whack in the head for his preoccupation. Since neither was permanently disabled, the incident is funny.

Later at the dinner table Hawthorne noticed an Englishman taking notes, probably for a travel book, and himself became lost in imagining, somewhat presumptuously, what sarcastic appraisals the Englishman could be making of everyone:

In this manner, I went through all the cabin, hitting everybody as hard a lash as I could, and laying the whole blame on the infernal Englishman. At length, I caught the eyes of my own image in the looking-glass, where a number of the party were likewise reflected, and among them the Englishman, who, at that moment, was intently observing myself. (349)

The revelation of his rather churlish imaginings coupled with the ironic twist exposes Hawthorne to the derision of the reader, but it is moderated by the fact that he is smiling at this all too human behavior with us.

He does not write what he imagined the Englishman was noting about himself, but he does go on to offer a series of rather embarrassing revelations about the rest of the trip. His sleep that night was disrupted first by snorers:

Would it were possible to affix a wind instrument to the nose, and thus make melody of a snore, so that a sleeping lover might serenade his mistress, or a congregation snore a psalm tune! (349)

Then he was kept awake by his own lurid imagination, excited by the sounds of ladies undressing on the other side of the red curtain which marked the sexual boundary of the cabin:

My ear seemed to have the properties of an eye; a visible image pestered my fancy in the darkness; the curtain was withdrawn between me and the western lady, who yet disrobed herself without a blush. (349)



Once everything has settled down, he still was unable to fall asleep and, in his restlessness, suffered the ignominy of falling out of bed “like an avalanche” (349) and disturbing all of the sleepers. He decided to go up on deck, and, a short time later got off the boat, which had stopped momentarily, to investigate a phosphoric glow in the forest. He remarks sardonically that this “was not the first delusive radiance that I had followed” (351). He reveals the foolish romantic and poetic wanderings of his mind, once again leaving himself open to gentle ridicule:

Being full of conceits that night, I called it a frigid fire; a funeral light, illuminating decay and death; an emblem of fame, that gleams around the dead man without warning him; or of genius, when it owes its brilliancy to moral rottenness; and was thinking that such ghost-like torches were just fit to light up this dead forest, or to blaze coldly in tombs, when, starting from my abstraction, I looked up the canal. I recollected myself, and discovered the lanterns glimmering far away. (351)

He was swept ludicrously from his lofty musings to the realization that he was stranded in the wilderness in the middle of the night. His shouting was futile, and he thought bitterly how “the captain had an interest in getting rid of me, for I was his creditor for a breakfast” (351). The sketch ends with the hapless author setting out on foot:

So thinking aloud, I took a flambeau from the old tree, burning, but consuming not, to light my steps withal, and, like a Jack-o'-the-lantern, set out on my midnight tour. (351)

It is on this comically mock-romantic note that the sketch ends.

In another personal account, Hawthorne describes one of his walks along the beach near Salem in detailed and romantic terms in “Foot-Prints on the

Sea-Shore" (1838). With comical imagination, he compares himself to Robinson Crusoe when he discovers foot-prints in the sand indicating that he is not alone. He continues in this somewhat silly romantic vein as he recommends the pastime of scratching love-verses and other private thoughts and feelings in the sand. A short time later, he surreptitiously observes three girls splashing with their feet in a tidal pool but slinks off before he is noticed. After lunching, he is seized by the magic of the spot and engages in an oratorical debate with a large, shaggy rock in the surf "like him of Athens, who bandied words with an angry sea and got the victory" (568). Savoring his victory over the "gentleman in sea-weed" whose only reply is "immitigable roaring," Hawthorne enthusiastically continues the farcical debate:

Once more I shout, and the cliffs reverberate the sound. Oh,  
what a joy for a shy man to feel himself so solitary, that he may  
lift his voice to its highest pitch without hazard of a listener!  
But, hush,—be silent, my good friend!—whence comes that  
stifled laughter? It was musical,—but how should there be such  
music in my solitude? Looking upwards, I catch a glimpse of  
three faces, peeping from the summit of the cliff, like angels  
between me and their native sky. (568-9)

Hawthorne goes on to remark to the girls rhetorically that they may laugh at him now, but that it had been his turn to smile when he saw their white feet undaintily exposed in the pool earlier. He had caught them in a moment of unguarded, self-revelatory embarrassment, much as they have caught him. In spite of this protest, we can imagine the immense embarrassment that the diffident Hawthorne must have felt on this occasion.

As the sun sets, Hawthorne throws pebbles at his shadow in the ocean

wash:

A hit! a hit! I clap my hands in triumph, and see my shadow  
clapping its unreal hands, and claiming the triumph for itself.  
What a simpleton must I have been all day, since my own  
shadow makes a mock of my fooleries! (569)

Thus smiling at himself, Hawthorne sets out for home relishing the day that he has spent in seclusion and stating that "I shall think my own thoughts, and feel my own emotions, and possess my individuality unviolated" (570). As he walks along the bluff, he encounters the three girls who have joined a party of fishermen cooking their catch on the beach. He approaches and is invited to join them:

Can I decline? No; and be it owned, after all my solitary joys,  
that this is the sweetest moment of a Day by the Sea-Shore. (570)

This response, hardly that of a dour recluse as some have tried to characterize Hawthorne, brings the sketch to a close on an exuberant note.

Among the most amusing of Hawthorne's sketches is the fanciful "Monsieur du Miroir" (1837) which is based on the rather silly conceit that his mirror image is an individual that keeps appearing wherever he goes. Hawthorne, in typical Yankee fashion, maintains a deadpan tone throughout as he relates how this silent figure apparently follows him about, reflecting his every mood from the torment of toothache to the passion of love. Indeed, he finds a great deal of sympathy between them "except that, once in a great while, I speak a word or two" (396). He even emulates Hawthorne's dress though it diverges from fashion:

Such is his confidence in my taste, that he goes astray from the  
general fashion, and copies all his dresses after mine. I never  
try on a new garment, without expecting to meet Monsieur du

Miroir in one of the same pattern. (396)

Monsieur du Miroir appears in the strangest places from a brass kettle outside a hardware store, to the puddles in the street, to a young lady's eyes. Concerning the latter, Hawthorne remarks "Years have so changed him since, that he need never hope to enter those heavenly orbs again" (400). He is a cautious fellow:

If you step forward to meet him, he readily advances; if you offer him your hand, he extends his own with the utmost frankness; but though you calculate upon a hardy shake, you do not get ahold of his little finger. (400)

Though they have been together since birth, Hawthorne would "prefer—scandal apart—the laughing bloom of a young girl, to the dark and bearded gravity of my present companion" (401). This unwanted characteristic of du Miroir is of course also his own, and he is making fun of his own reputation for gloominess.

In contemplating his relationship with Monsieur du Miroir, Hawthorne achieves the insight that du Miroir, as a mere outward manifestation of his appearance, has a right to mourn the ravages of age, while Hawthorne possesses a depth of soul beyond that outward appearance, a soul which has expanded and improved with age. As a result of this philosophizing about physical versus spiritual existence, the sketch acquires a deadly serious tone in the last paragraphs. It is saved, however, from this dreary close by being finally punctuated with a dreadful pun:

Farewell, Monsieur du Miroir! Of you, perhaps, as of many men, it may be doubted whether you are the wiser, though your whole business is REFLECTION. (405)

Hawthorne showed a lifelong fascination for wordplay using puns sparingly

but to good effect in this and the next tale to be discussed.

"The Devil in Manuscript" (1835) is a comical expression of Hawthorne's own frustrations of authorship and publication. The thwarted writer whom the narrator visits is clearly Hawthorne himself, for Oberon was the nickname which his good friend Horatio Bridge called him. He imagines his writings as a devil that has possessed him and which he can only be rid of by burning the manuscripts. This delusion is a manifestation of his frustration at being rejected by seventeen publishers. He accuses one of them of going out of business just so he won't have to publish his submission, and berates another, the only one to have actually read his work, for having the impertinence to criticize it. Still another has told him that no American publisher will publish an American writer except at the writer's risk.

Driven by this frustration, Oberon has resolved to consign his manuscripts to the flame (a fate to which Hawthorne claims he delivered many of his early tales), and the narrator insouciantly states that he did not oppose the decision because he was "privately of the opinion, in spite of my partiality for the author, that his tales would make a more brilliant appearance in the fire than anywhere else" (332-3). They open a bottle of champagne and Oberon clutches the manuscripts to himself "with a mixture of natural affection and natural disgust, like a father taking a deformed infant into his arms" (333). His conversation goes on to evoke the paradoxical love-hate relationship which writers have with their work. He describes writing in a creative fever and in dispassionate toil, and, upon the inquiry of the narrator, admits ironically that he can discern no difference in the quality in which the two opposing states result.

Just as Oberon has worked himself up to the point of following through with his intent, the narrator recalls redeeming features of the writing and

attempts to stop him, but Oberon delivers a speech summarizing the dreadful fate of an author:

Would you have me be a damned author?—To undergo sneers, taunts, abuse, and cold neglect, and faint praise, bestowed, for pity's sake, against the giver's conscience! A hissing and a laughing stock to my own traitorous thoughts! An outlaw from the protection of the grave—one whose ashes every careless foot might spurn, unhonored in life, and remembered scornfully in death! (334)

With this diatribe against the meanness of an author's life, he thrusts the manuscripts into the fire and excitedly watches them burn as if a part of his soul were going up in the flames. as he begins to mourn the loss, a cry of fire begins to go up in the town. With authorial instinct, Oberon ironically begins to imagine what a conflagration this will be and what a wonderful setting for his next...but he stops himself. They go outside to observe and Oberon begins to wax romantic. Suddenly, in a flash of enlightenment, he realizes the cause of the fire—the wind-driven cinders from his manuscript:

"My tales!" cried Oberon. "The chimney! The roof! The Fiend has gone forth by night, and startled thousands in fear and wonder from their beds! Here I stand—a triumphant author! Huzza! Huzza! My brain has set the town on fire! Huzza!" (337)

The story ends with an ironic twist based on this metaphorical pun. Oberon, in his absurd triumph, even more than the Storyteller, represents Hawthorne examining his role as author and finding amidst the pain much to laugh about.

Perhaps the most overt example of Hawthorne poking fun at himself is the brief prologue to "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844). The story is subtitled

"From the Writings of Aubépine," the name being a French translation of "hawthorn" (1492 Note 975.3-976.24). Hawthorne is actually writing about himself as this unknown French writer who "seems to occupy an unfortunate position between the Transcendentalists (who, under one name or another, have their share in all the current literature of the world), and the great body of pen-and-ink men who address the intellect and sympathies of the multitude" (975). He attributes his lack of audience to the fact that he doesn't appeal to either of these large groups. He praises the writings for originality but, tongue firmly planted in cheek, decries an "inveterate love of allegory, which is apt to invest his plots and characters with the aspect of scenery and people in the clouds, and to steal away the human warmth out of his conceptions" (975). He describes his works as being fantasy with a touch of reality and remarks that "Occasionally, a breath of nature, a rain-drop of pathos and tenderness, or a gleam of humor, will find its way into the midst of his fantastic imagery" (975). Finally, he concedes faintly that:

M. de l'Aubépine's productions, if the reader chance to take them in precisely the proper point of view, may amuse a leisure hour as well as those of a brighter man; if otherwise, they can hardly fail to look excessively like nonsense. (975)

Manifestly, in this instance, Hawthorne's intention was two-fold—on the one hand, to ridicule his critics and, on the other, to make light of himself. His deprecation of his own works makes the telling point that his critics take them far too seriously. His primary focus has been to entertain his readers—the "proper point of view" he had referred to, being undoubtedly a less serious one. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the last paragraph of the prologue in which he praises his French persona for his "indefatigable prolixity" (976) and delivers a catalogue of his recent works

with the titles weakly translated into French in order to conform with the charade. His pseudo descriptions of the works exaggerate the length and importance of their contents, and the list is concluded with a deliberately ambivalent recommendation of the author to the American public. The prologue ends with a gibe at his friend John L. O'Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, comically disguised as the Comte de Bearhaven and *La Revue Anti-Aristocratique*. Interestingly enough, Hawthorne deleted the prologue from the collected version in 1846. Critical speculation seems reasonable in asserting that he perhaps did not wish to appear too political as he was seeking an appointment at that time (1492 Note 975.3-976.24).

Although the humorous content discussed in this chapter has varied in quantity, magnitude and style from one piece to another, the common thread has been the self-deprecatory tone that underlies all of them. From "Passages from a Relinquished Work" to the prologue from "Rappaccini's Daughter," the principal source of humor is Hawthorne's exposure of himself to friendly ridicule. The laughter or smiles that we experience, however, serve only to enhance Hawthorne's reputation rather than detracting from it. In the final analysis, there is no better litmus of a man's sense of humor than his ability to laugh at himself, and Hawthorne manifestly passes this test in spite of his literary reputation to the contrary.



## CHAPTER 4

### HAWTHORNE SMILES AT MANKIND

Hawthorne, as an artist, was an observer and recorder of humanity, and he did so, for the most part, without espousing a particular point of view, preferring to offer his reader a variety of options couched in ambiguity rather than his own didactic opinion. Always subtle as he presents the reader with a set of circumstances and encourages him to infer what he may, Hawthorne's tone frequently reveals an insouciant awareness of and amusement at the foibles of mankind. Rather than a railing condemnation of or a gloomy Puritanical resignation for man's weakness, Hawthorne gives us a knowing and understanding smile, a gentle acknowledgment of the flawed nature of man and society with an inference that it is not all that important.

Gilbert Highet describes a form of narrative satire (as opposed to dramatic satire) which involves realistically portrayed travel to an other-worldly place and "criticism of life in this world, with exposures of human vices and weaknesses and bitter or teasing humor."<sup>1</sup> This description neatly fits the stories to be discussed in this chapter, all of which share the common elements of a fanciful setting presented in a realistic tone, an apparently naïve narrator and a gentle mockery of human institutions. Hawthorne's targets are varied—the literary establishment, politicians, speculators, reformers—and the satire tends toward teasing humor rather than the bitter.

In "A Virtuoso's Collection" (1842) an astonishingly unskeptical narrator

happens upon a bizarre museum which houses famous memorabilia from legend, myth and history. At the very beginning of the story, Hawthorne sets up a humorous contradiction between the reader's awareness that the collection is ludicrously irrational and the narrator's unquestioning acceptance of everything that he sees. Among the unique collection of stuffed animals, he finds such diverse and incongruous specimens as the wolf that ate Little Red Riding Hood, Alexander the Great's horse Bucephalus and Dr. Johnson's cat Hodges. Inquiring why the remains of Pegasus are not there, the narrator is informed by the Virtuoso that he is still alive but that he is so hard-ridden that he hopes to soon add his skin and bones to the collection as well. The narrator remains unaccountably credulous as item after item of fictional and legendary source are presented before him: the Ancient Mariner's albatross, Nero's fiddle, a bowl modelled from the curve of Helen of Troy's breast, Aladdin's lamp and Cinderella's glass slipper—it is an all-inclusive collection. The absurdity reaches a pinnacle when the Virtuoso himself is finally identified as the Wandering Jew, the legendary wanderer condemned to eternal life. When the narrator naïvely states his intention to pray for the removal of the curse, the Virtuoso is scornful of this sympathy.

This bizarre collection represents a monument to the human imagination both in its folly and its power. The narrator's unquestioning acceptance of the authenticity of the collection is, for the reader, both ludicrously absurd and touchingly childlike. Hawthorne simultaneously smiles at the gullibility of mankind and approves of the fertile imagination that has invented these artifacts. The satire here is rather vague and ineffectual, but it was to become more pointed in Hawthorne's subsequent works.

In a fashion similar to "The Virtuoso's Collection," Hawthorne has his credulous narrator visit a large edifice which houses mankind's imagination,

"The Hall of Fantasy" (1843). Rather than a museum, however, this ethereal place is represented as an exchange, where those who deal in the abstract world of ideas may "meet and talk over the business of their dreams" (735). As well as being a kind of Wall Street of the imaginary, the hall is a memorial to the men of great imagination, from Homer to Sir Walter Scott, whose busts or statues surround the hall. The narrator remarks, somewhat impishly, that "in an obscure and shadowy niche was repositied the bust of our countryman, the author of *Arthur Mervyn*" (735) in an apparent gibe at Charles Brockden Brown. He also points out that each age erects less durable wooden statues to its own "ephemeral favorites" (735), indicating that not every hero chosen by the people will withstand the test of time.

The narrator is guided through the hall by a mysterious friend with whom he keeps up a dialogue of continuous commentary. They observe a group of persons who drink from an intoxicating fountain of imagination. Somewhat ambiguously, it is implied that these are well-known authors, described by the narrator as a "techy, wayward, shy, proud, unreasonable set of laurel-gatherers" (737). He remarks that he likes their works but not their company. Ironically, the friend defends them saying that in his experience "men of genius are fairly gifted with the social qualities...As men, they ask nothing better than to be on equal terms with their fellow-men; and as authors, they have thrown aside their proverbial jealousy, and acknowledge a generous brotherhood"(737). The narrator counters this with the fact that the world does not seem to concur with this assessment of writers:

"An author is received in general society pretty much as we honest citizens are in the Hall of Fantasy. We gaze at him as if he had no business among us, and question whether he is fit for any of our pursuits." (737)

This dialogue concerning authors is rendered ironic by the fact that Hawthorne is commenting on his own profession with two voices and seems to agree with points made by both the criticizer and the defender. One senses, on the one hand, Hawthorne smarting at criticism of his own sociability, or lack thereof, and, on the other hand, an awareness of petty professional jealousies among the literary elite. There is also a strong hint of the resentment he felt at the lack of recognition for his own talent and, ironically, an awareness of how silly and pretentious that recognition would be were he to receive it.

The next group encountered are the financial speculators, men who would prefer to be thought of as practical rather than imaginative. The friend remarks that they are dangerous “because they mistake the Hall of Fantasy for actual brick and mortar” (738). A backhanded compliment is conferred on the poet who, in contrast, is at least aware that he is dealing in imagination. Better to be a dreamer who is aware of his fantasy than one who takes it for reality.

A related group is the “inventors of fantastic machines” (738). One, for example, has invented a lens for making sunshine out of a lady’s smile. The narrator comments that “most of our sunshine comes from woman’s smile already” (738), and the inventor responds “but my machine will insure a constant supply for domestic use—whereas hitherto, it has been very precarious.” In these last two instances, Hawthorne is poking harmless fun at the wild speculation and the inventive enthusiasm so prevalent in an age of sky rocketing technological advancement. The tone here is one of amusement rather than of scorn.

Still another group found in the hall are the reformers, amongst whom it is difficult to distinguish the crack-pots from the true visionaries. The

narrator claims to be able to make this distinction in the true light of reality, and the friend sardonically suggests that he must be a Democrat in order to believe something so idealistic. Yet, concerning the multiplicity of reformers, the narrator says “there were a thousand shapes of good and evil, faith and infidelity, wisdom and nonsense,—a most incongruous throng” (740). The reformers of Hawthorne’s day clearly formed a labyrinth of contradiction and confusion, and the friend suggests that they flee, commenting humorously: “let us hasten hence, or I shall be tempted to make a theory—after which, there is little hope of any man” (741). The tone here seems to have become more disdainful as the narrator seems to frown disapprovingly at the reformers.

The remainder of the story deals with the “one theory that swallows up and annihilates all others” (741). The Millerites were a fanatical group led by Father Miller who proclaimed that the world would come to an end in 1843. Concerning Father Miller’s apocalyptic theory, the narrator remarks sardonically “It is, perhaps, the only method of getting mankind out of the various perplexities, into which they have fallen” (742). The reasons that various people offer for not wanting the world to end are absurdly trivial (a child, for example, not wishing to miss his Christmas candy and a miser wishing to add a specified sum to his hoard), but, in rebuttal to the friend’s casual attitude toward the supposedly imminent cataclysm, the narrator makes a romantic and emotional statement extolling the natural beauty and innocent enjoyments that will be lost. After this stirring speech, however, they rather matter of factly resolve to leave the matter to Providence, and the friend invites the narrator to share a vegetarian meal, an invitation which he accepts in spite of his obvious distaste for the menu. On the way out of the hall, they pass several people who are entering the hall, amusingly enough,

by means of “magnetic sleep”(now known as hypnosis). The narrator looks back at the hall longingly but concludes that “for those who waste all their days in the Hall of Fantasy, good Father Miller’s prophecy is already accomplished, and the solid earth has come to an untimely end” (745).

Following along the same lines as “The Hall of Fantasy” is “A Select Party” (1844). This party is hosted by the Man of Fancy in one of his castles in the air. Among the *select* guests are the Oldest Inhabitant, a crochety old man who seems to represent a stock character to whom newspapers appeal for comment on such important topics as the weather (his comments are a running gag throughout the story) and a Monsieur On-Dit who is the personification of gossip, the name translating from the French as “They-Say.” From “A Virtuoso’s Collection” we once more meet the Wandering Jew, and from an earlier sketch entitled “A Visit to the Clerk of Weather” (1836) comes the Clerk of Weather himself.

There is also a mysterious unnamed stranger, a “performer of acknowledged impossibilities,” a paragon of perfection in every way. This anonymous character is humorously described as being:

the only mathematician capable of squaring a circle; the only mechanic acquainted with the principle of perpetual motion; the only scientific philosopher who can compel water to run up hill; the only writer of the age whose genius is equal to the production of an epic poem; and, finally—so various are his accomplishments—the only professor of gymnastics who has succeeded in jumping down his own throat. (948)

In spite of all these accomplishments, he is shunned by good society and particularly by “public orators, lecturers and theatrical performers” and has the unique characteristic of casting no reflection in a mirror. Whether

Hawthorne had someone in particular in mind as the target for such pungent sarcasm is difficult to determine, but it probably struck a chord for more than one of the literary figures of the day among whom there were no doubt some enlarged egos. The fact that Hawthorne leaves out any explicit clues to the identity of this character indicates either that he was confident of the ability of his contemporary readers to make an obvious identification or that his sarcasm was directed at a group rather than a specific individual.

Also in attendance at the party of the Man of Fancy are a shadowy group of figures who represent what had been his youthful hopes:

There was something laughably untrue in their pompous stride and exaggerated sentiment; they were neither human nor tolerable likenesses of humanity, but fantastic masquers, rendering heroism and nature alike ridiculous by the grave absurdity of their pretensions to such attributes. (950)

One of these is the dream-girl of his youth whom he now rejects, saying "my taste is changed! I have learned to love what Nature makes, better than my own creations in the guise of womanhood" (950). With a shriek she evaporates into thin air.

These youthful hopes are followed by another shadowy group, his youthful fears:

Here were those forms of dim terror, which had beset him at the entrance of life, waging warfare with his hopes. Here were strange uglinesses of earlier date, such as haunt children in the night time. (951)

One of these is a deformed old black woman who had haunted him with her grin during the crisis of a scarlet fever. Mischievously, she steals up on the Oldest Inhabitant who exclaims "Never within my memory did I see such a

face!" (951).

Immediately after these unrealities, as Hawthorne calls them, there arrives a group whose unifying characteristic is that their very existence is called into question by their excessive perfection—they are too good to be true. They include:

an incorruptible Patriot; a Scholar without pedantry; a Priest without worldly ambition, and a Beautiful Woman without pride or coquetry; a Married Pair, whose life had never been disturbed by incongruity of feeling; a Reformer, untrammelled by his theory; and a Poet, who felt no jealousy towards other votaries of the lyre. (951)

The host does not find these paragons to be that unusual but invited them because society deems them a rarity. Laughably, the Oldest Inhabitant observes "In my younger days, such characters might be seen at the corner of every street" (951). The narrator comments that "these specimens of perfection proved to be not half so entertaining companions as people with the ordinary allowance of faults" (952).

Among the most intriguing of the party guests is another fascinating stranger appears who is termed:

the Master Genius, for whom our country is looking anxiously into the mist of time, as destined to fulfill the great mission of creating an American literature, hewing it, as it were, from the unwrought granite of our intellectual quarries. From him, whether moulded in the form of an epic poem, or assuming a guise altogether new, as the spirit itself may determine, we are to receive our first great original work, which shall do all that remains to be achieved for our glory among the nations. (952)



This immoderately ebullient description of the purported creator of American literature is clearly mock heroic and thus in keeping with the sardonic tone of the sketch; if there are any doubts about the sarcastic tone, they are removed when the narrator notes that the Man of Genius:

dwells as yet unhonored among men, unrecognized by those who have known him from the cradle;—the noble countenance, which should be distinguished by a halo diffused around it, passes daily among the throng of people, toiling and troubling themselves about the trifles of a moment—and none pay reverence to the worker of immortality. (952)

Melville, in writing about this story which he called the “sweetest and sublimest thing”<sup>2</sup> since Spenser wrote “The Fairie Queen,” felt that this Man of Genius conformed perfectly with his conception of what American literature needed but asserted that such a monumental role could not be fulfilled by a single individual. He adds, however, that if any one individual was the Man of Genius it would have to be Hawthorne himself.

Yet, Hawthorne, as has been pointed out, seems excessively effusive about the Man of Genius, and it seems certain that his intention was to humorously lampoon the concept of a savior for American literature. One could hardly picture Hawthorne with a halo about his head, and it is far more conceivable that his tone is sardonic and disingenuous, deriding those who take literary pursuits too seriously, including, no doubt, himself. What is difficult to explain, however, is why Melville failed to observe the sarcasm in the face of all the indications. Perhaps he too is winking at us.

Hawthorne takes another gibe at American literature when he has the Oldest Inhabitant beg to be excused from an introduction to the Master Genius because he had already “been honored with the acquaintance of

Dwight, and Freneau, and Joel Barlow" (953). The inference seems to be that he had suffered enough by meeting these three poets from Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary times who rather presumptuously had endeavored to be the initiators of an American literature.

Humorous guests continue to arrive including Davy Jones (the "distinguished nautical gentleman"), John Doe, a Man of Straw, a "fictitious endorser, and several persons who had no existence except as voters in closely contested elections" (953). A great commotion is caused by the arrival of a man of an age to come—Posterity. Many guests flock around him seeking to find out if they will be remembered in the future, but he fends them off rather brusquely, telling a poet, for example, to read his verses to his contemporaries. He does advise them, however, that the only way to be remembered by posterity is to "live truly and wisely for your own age" (954).

In order to divert his guests from this incident, the Man of Fancy conducts them through a unique gallery that contains all the great statues, but in the form of the sculptors' original ideal conceptions rather than as they finally turned out. As one might expect, the library is equally singular, containing the "works which the authors only planned, without ever finding the happy season to achieve them" (955). Among the numerous volumes were "the untold tales of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims; the unwritten Cantos of the Fairy Queen; the conclusion of Coleridge's Christabel; and the whole of Dryden's projected Epic on the subject of King Arthur" (955). This was a bizarre conception, but even more laughable were the volumes that contain "the unrealized conceptions of youthful poets, who died of the very strength of their own genius, before the world had caught one inspired murmur from their lips" (955).

After a closing banquet, the party ends in a thunderstorm that shatters the

castle in the air, scattering guests everywhere. As with “The Hall of Fantasy,” the story ends on a wry cautionary note: people should think about how they’re going to get back “before they trust themselves on a pleasure-party into the realm of nowhere” (958).

Another story which turns on a conceit of fantasy is “The Intelligence Office” (1844). It is the place where people go to have their fondest dreams fulfilled. Hawthorne gives as examples a faded beauty looking for her lost bloom, a mechanic looking for a cheap apartment and “an author, of ten years standing, for his vanished reputation” (873). The first person to enter is a man seeking his “true place in the world” (874), and he is told that he needs to request something specific, which of course is a catch since he doesn’t know specifically what he wants. He exits despondently and the narrator says derisively of him “if he died of the disappointment, he was probably buried in the wrong tomb” (875). A series of applicants are similarly frustrated, including a demon who had waited upon Dr. Faustus and is told that these days men can perform their own evil actions more effectually than any demon. At that moment, however, Hawthorne—as a humorous comment on the character of political reporters—has an editor of a political paper enter and hire the demon as a writer. In another sarcastic comment on politics, the Man in Red (apparently an unscrupulous politician from the time of Napoleon) is rejected as a politician “as lacking familiarity with the cunning tactics of the day” (881). The final applicant is a seeker of Truth, and it is his sincerity that uncovers the ironic truth of the Intelligence Office—the Man of Intelligence has no ability to fulfill wishes; he can only record them. The Intelligence Office is a kind of practical joke played on mankind.

“The Celestial Rail-Road” (1843) is both a parody of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and a satirical commentary on, what was for Hawthorne,

modern times. The journey to the Celestial City has apparently been eased since Bunyan's time by the construction of a railway. The world has become much more complex, however, and the characters encountered by Hawthorne's narrator, such as Mr. Smooth-it-away, seem far more devious than those encountered by Christian. The railroad bypasses many of Bunyan's stopping places and when the narrator expresses regret at not seeing the lovely young ladies who personify the virtues, Mr. Smooth-it-away informs him that they have become old maids—"prim, starched, dry, and angular" (813). The giants Pope and Pagan in the Dark Valley have long since been replaced by the Giant Transcendentalist, an amorphous, indefinable being, German by birth, that shouts after the train unintelligibly. This comically inept personification makes Hawthorne's attitude towards the philosophy of his Transcendentalist friends humorously apparent.

Mr. Smooth-it-away repeatedly denies the existence of Tophet (or hell) to the narrator who has been informed by Mr. Stick-to-the-right that the railway does not enter the Celestial City and that, in fact, those who try to use this modern short cut are banned from entering the city. Arriving at the end of the line, he finds Mr. Stick-to -the-right's words confirmed as the river still separates him from the Celestial City. Mr. Smooth-it-away is able to delude him once more as he escorts him onto a steam-boat ferry with assurances that all will be right. It is only when Mr. Smooth-it-away stays on shore and laughs at him fiendishly, breathing fire, that the narrator realizes he is on a ferry to hell. As he prepares to jump, a dash of cold spray from the wheel awakens him. It has all been a dream, a humorous incarnation of his fear and distrust about modern life.

No discussion of Hawthorne's attitude toward mankind would be complete without mention of the story "Earth's Holocaust" (1844) which is

probably the best known of his satirical narratives. It is essentially a humorous indictment of the reformers, based on the fantasy concept that mankind decides to rid itself of everything in a giant bonfire in order to begin over (not unlike God's decision to unleash the flood). In his usual fashion, Hawthorne facilitates his expression by setting up a dialogue between his narrator and a knowledgeable bystander.

As a catalogue of earthly things are cast into the bonfire, Hawthorne provides numerous funny touches. The location of the fire on the western prairie has been decided upon, amusingly enough, by the Insurance Companies. When all the liquor in the world is thrown into the fire, causing a great flare-up, the Last Topper harangues morosely at the resultant loss of good fellowship, much to the amusement of the bystanders. When a pipe-smoker bemoans the loss of tobacco and wishes that the "nonsensical reformers" would throw themselves in, a staunch conservative responds "it will come to that in the end. They will first fling us in, and finally themselves" (892). When all the money in the world is consumed in the fire, the bankers and the stock market speculators grow pale and a pick-pocket who has been making a killing in the crowd faints dead away.

When it finally comes to the burning of books, Hawthorne plants his tongue firmly in cheek, describing the flammable characteristics of various works and authors. Shelley's poetry, for example, was thought to emit "a purer light than almost any other productions of his day" (900). A thin volume of poetry by Ellery Channing exhibits "excellent inflammability," although certain parts "hissed and spluttered in a very disagreeable fashion" (900). Hawthorne does not spare himself, writing that he could not find his own works, probably because they must have vaporized immediately. He can only hope that "they contributed a glimmering spark or two to the splendor

of the evening" (901).

With literature gone, the narrator can't believe that there is anything else to be disposed of and is shocked when the reformers add all the trappings of religion to the flames. He takes some heart from the fact that the Bible does not burn, except for the part that is human commentary. The story ends, however, on a note of black humor as a Satanic figure discloses that the reformers' efforts have all been for naught because they have neglected to change the one thing that matters—the human heart. He says with an ominous grin:

And unless they hit upon some method of purifying that foul cavern, forth from it will re-issue all the shapes of wrong and misery—the same old shapes, or worse ones—which they have taken such a vast deal of trouble to consume to ashes. I have stood by this live-long night, and laughed in my sleeve at the whole business. Oh, take my word for it, it will be the old world yet! (905)

Though this hoax perpetrated on the human race might seem a bleak final statement, Hawthorne colors it with hope by intimating that this devil could be lying and that there may, in fact, be a way to purify the heart.

The satirical narratives discussed in this chapter were all written in the relatively brief span of three years from 1842 to 1844. While Hawthorne's sense of humor toward mankind may have been more evident in this period, it should by no means be considered limited to this time span. Hawthorne consistently delineated the folly of the human heart with a humor tinged with sadness from his earliest tales to the last.

## CHAPTER 5

### HAWTHORNE LAUGHS WITH THE DEVIL

From his very first published story, "The Hollow of the Three Hills" (1830), Hawthorne has associated laughter with malevolence and madness, two intangible forces that for him were closely intertwined. It is important to understand, however, that this association was used merely as a vehicle for expression and should not be confused with the Puritan disdain for mirth. As we shall see in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" (1836), Hawthorne's views on merriment do not coincide at all with the dour perspective of his Puritan ancestors. Nor did Hawthorne, in spite of his obvious fascination for the mythology and folklore, believe in some external malevolent force preying upon mankind. To the contrary, as he so plainly expressed at the end of "The Earth's Holocaust," he believed that evil originates not externally, but from within the human heart.

As has already been discussed in Chapter 2, Hennig Cohen points out the slightly comic tone that frames "The Hollow of the Three Hills." Within the story, however, one of the sad visions with which the perfidious woman is confronted through the witch is that of her husband in a madhouse. Having observed the depressing scene, she looks up to see the withered woman smiling in her face:

"Couldst thou have thought there were such merry times in a mad house?" inquired the latter.

“True, true,” said the lady to herself; “there is mirth within its walls, but misery, misery without.” (10)

The laughter emanating from apparently mad and/or malevolent beings which Hawthorne portrays to the reader is a manifestation of the recognition of the absurdity of the human condition, of the central irony that we can only be betrayed by ourselves. While this tale would certainly never be classified as overtly humorous, it does exemplify the subtle way in which Hawthorne uses humor as a counterpoint to evil and sadness.

Before turning to a discussion of other stories that embody Hawthorne’s use of humor in a dark manner, it is necessary to discuss a tale which is pivotal to an understanding of Hawthorne’s attitude toward humor and his Puritan ancestors. “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” is a story of mistaken identity instigated by the Puritan belief that mirth and merriment come only from the devil. Endicott and his Puritan band mistake the mad merriment of the bizarrely costumed revelers of Merry Mount for the rituals of “those devils and ruined souls, with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness” (362). Hawthorne clearly portrays the people of Merry Mount as innocent victims of Puritan repression based on an erroneous conception of evil. The tone of the story is manifestly sympathetic to Edgar and Edith, the Lord and Lady of the May, and from it we can deduce that Hawthorne’s attitude toward the Puritan superstition which tyrannized them was one of disdain. Although the people of Merry Mount wear the fool’s attire, it is ironically Endicott and his fellow Puritans who are the true fools for they are acting out of ignorant superstition.

If the tone of “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” is not convincing enough proof of Hawthorne’s scorn for the Puritan conception of evil, the same attitude is made explicitly clear in the frame story within “Alice Doane’s



Appeal" (1835). Walking with two young ladies near Salem, the narrator pauses on the infamous Gallows Hill, describing the place as "the field where superstition won her darkest triumph" and remarking that "The dust of martyrs was beneath our feet" (205). It is an obvious condemnation and disavowal of the Puritan vision of evil which Hawthorne consistently refers to as superstition. While he had a certain respect for his Puritan ancestors and their accomplishments, he was obviously troubled by their superstition and the horrendous actions which it engendered.

Since Hawthorne did not believe in the reality of such superstitions as witchcraft and devilry, it is reasonable that he would hope to find the same rational attitude in his audience. When he portrayed devils and witches in such stories as "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), he did not intend for them to be taken as true manifestations of evil, but rather as humorous fabrications of the Puritan imagination of Goodman Brown. Viewed in this context, "Young Goodman Brown" is a spoof of Puritan superstition, for the events portrayed, while real enough to Goodman Brown, are, for Hawthorne and any rational reader, too preposterous to be taken seriously.

Looking at the tale from a humorous point of view then, we see a naïve young man whose world is turned upside down by the discovery that all the people in whom he had reposed great trust and respect were in fact sinners. When he is led to believe that his young wife has also gone over to the devil, he cries out with obvious ironic implications "My Faith is gone!" "Maddened with despair," his reaction is to laugh loud and long, and he becomes a part of the ludicrous horror that he has been experiencing:

‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’ roared Goodman Brown, when the wind  
laughed at him. ‘Let us hear which will laugh loudest! Think  
not to frighten me with your devilry! Come witch, come

wizard, come Indian powow, come devil himself! and here comes Goodman Brown. You may as well fear him as he fear you!' (284)

At length he comes upon the devilish gathering and recognizes many familiar faces, including some of the foremost citizens of Salem. When the new converts are called forth, he steps forward and joins Faith before the altar. As they are about to be baptized into the iniquitous group, he cries out at the last second for Faith to "Look up to heaven and resist the Wicked One!" (288). Instantaneously the forest returns to normal, leaving him to wonder whether Faith had heeded him. More to the point, the narrator suggests that he might have "fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting" (288).

Whether reality or dream, the night has deleterious consequences for Goodman Brown who becomes from that time on "a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man" (288). The soul which he had feared to lose to the devil, has ironically been lost to the gloom generated by his own heart. Goodman Brown is the victim of his own ludicrous delusion, the same Puritan hysteria that had resulted in the Salem witch trials but on a personal level. It is both tragic and comic that a person should have his whole life ruined by a preposterously absurd outlook on reality. We can only laugh at the foolishness of Goodman Brown, for only he could have saved himself from the gloom that was to be his self-imposed fate.

Admittedly, the approach which I have delineated here is only one of many interpretations that may be applied to the story<sup>1</sup>, but this perspective has the advantage of fitting neatly with Hawthorne's own attitude toward Puritanism. In Goodman Brown, the tragic and the ridiculous are united, just as they were in the Puritan experience of Hawthorne's ancestors, a memory

with which he wrestled in his writings throughout his life. The tale of Goodman Brown is a tragedy that elicits Aristotle's pity and terror but tempers that response with moderating humor. This blending of the tragic and comic has long been recognized in drama.<sup>2</sup> Though less often recognized in the narrative form, it is just as frequently employed to successful effect, culminating in the twentieth century genre that has come to be termed *black humor*.

The term *black humor*, as it is most commonly used, refers to a genre in American fiction that was first identified in the 1960's, although credit for the phrase is generally assigned to André Breton in his *Anthologie de l'humor noir* (1939).<sup>3</sup> The genre is so diverse that it is difficult to arrive at a consensus definition, but Alan R. Pratt identifies two points of critical agreement:

Black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming or changing the painful realities on which it focuses.<sup>4</sup>

Mathew Winston writes that "first and foremost, it is a tone in literature that combines horror and fun, the unsettling and the amusing"<sup>5</sup>. Both of these definitions sound as if they were written as a description of "Young Goodman Brown." It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of critics have traced the origins of black humor to Hawthorne as well as to other early American writers.

Brom Weber, for example, finds instances of black humor in the writings of Hawthorne and others. He delineates two guidelines which he used for discovering early black humor:

First, many serious, post-Puritan writers not customarily

considered humorous were in fact darkly seriocomic in intention and result. Second, the view that humor focuses only upon trivia and merely provides frivolous amusement is contradicted by the writings of numerous distinguished American authors.<sup>6</sup>

That he had Hawthorne in mind as falling within these guidelines is made clear by the fact that the first example he cites is a chapter from *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Weber's assessment of Hawthorne lends substantiation to Richard Hauck who previously had discerned the existence of black humor in Hawthorne's works. Hauck discussed two of his more prominent tales as examples:

Hawthorne worked in both the serious and comic modes to demonstrate the efficacy of creative action....The instances of absurd humor which appear in Hawthorne occur most often in stories about creators whose attempts to create fail ludicrously or yield a grotesque result. These distortions are functions of a ludicrousness or grotesqueness which characterizes the creator's heart and mind. Rappaccini is comic as well as horrifying, fighting evil with evil. His is a noble effort in its way, but Hawthorne magnifies the inherent paradox of the attempt: fighting poison with poison makes Rappaccini the poisoner. Aylmer's meddling is of the same sort; in trying to create perfection he annihilates a nearly perfect reality. The humor of "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Birthmark" is a humor of the grotesque.<sup>7</sup>

In a bizarre twist of fate, Rappaccini, the consummate mad-scientist, indirectly causes the death of his own beloved daughter. He uses her as the

subject of his own perverted experimentation by imbuing her with poison which, although making her powerful, alienates her from humanity and dooms her to solitude. When Rappaccini seeks to provide her with companionship by secretly making the handsome young Giovanni also poisonous, the young couple attempt to return to normalcy by taking an antidote which kills Beatrice. In an absurd inversion, poison had meant life and the antidote has brought death. The story ends with the derisive taunt of Rappaccini's scientific rival who had provided Giovanni with the antidote:

Just at that moment, Professor Pietro Baglioni looked forth from the window, and called loudly, in a tone of triumph mixed with horror, to the thunder-stricken man of science:

"Rappaccini! Rappaccini! And is *this* the upshot of your experiment?" (1005)

Although there is no laughter here, there is intense ridicule.

In contrast, the ending of "The Birthmark" is punctuated by a kind of cosmic laughter that is elicited by the absurd. Anticipating success, Aylmer opens the curtain to let light into the room:

At the same time, he heard a gross, hoarse chuckle, which he had long known as his servant Aminadab's expression of delight.

"Ah, clod! Ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy. "You have served me well! Matter and Spirit—Earth and Heaven—have both done their part in this! Laugh, thing of senses! You have earned the right to laugh." (779-80)

When Georgiana dies a short time later, there is more laughter:

Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross Fatality of Earth exult in its invariable triumph over

the immortal essence, which, in this dim sphere of half-development, demands the completeness of a higher state. (780)

This kind of vague cosmic laughter at the absurdity of the human condition is a hallmark of black humor, and reaches its fullest expression by Hawthorne in "Ethan Brand" (1850).

Nowhere in Hawthorne's works is laughter more prominent than in "Ethan Brand" which opens with the lime-burner and his son hearing the approaching Ethan Brand:

...they heard a roar of laughter, not mirthful, but slow, and even solemn, like a wind shaking the boughs of the forest.  
(1051)

The father interprets the strange laughter innocuously as:

some drunken man...some merry fellow from the bar-room in the village, who dared not laugh loud enough within doors, lest he should blow the roof of the house off. (1051)

The frightened child is more sensitive than his father, however, and notes that "he does not laugh like a man that is glad" (1051). When Ethan Brand appears, he identifies himself as the person who has been seeking the Unpardonable Sin, and, in response to the query of the lime-burner, he states that he found it in his own heart:

And then, without mirth in his countenance, but as if moved by an involuntary recognition of the infinite absurdity of seeking throughout the world for what was the closest of all things to himself, and looking into every heart, save his own, for what was hidden in no other breast, he broke into a laugh of scorn.  
(1054)

This passage is yet another statement of Hawthorne's assertion of the irony

that evil or sin is not an external force personified by the devil, but rather finds its home in the human heart.

At this point, Hawthorne also makes a brief commentary on the bizarrely sinister characteristics that laughter may sometimes take on:

Laughter, when out of place, mistimed, or bursting forth from a disordered state of feeling, may be the most terrible modulation of the human voice. The laughter of one asleep, even if it be a little child—the madman’s laugh—the wild, screaming laugh of a born idiot, are sounds that we sometimes tremble to hear, and would always willingly forget. Poets have imagined no utterance of fiends or hobgoblins so fearfully appropriate as a laugh. (1054-5)

These comments about the potentially sinister nature of laughter indirectly make a related assertion about humor also having a potential dark side, for laughter may be a natural reaction to even the most dire circumstances. This is the fundamental principle on which the concept of black humor is based, and the humor which inspires Ethan Brand’s laughter at his own tragic yet ironic situation is undeniably black humor. His vaguely malevolent laughter seems to come in response to a sort of cosmic or supernatural joke that has been played on him, for he had been, according to the legend, enticed by his conversations with the fiend of the furnace to seek around the world for the Unforgivable Sin, only to discover it in his own heart.

Ethan Brand reveals that the Unpardonable Sin is a kind of intellectual presumption and that he would accept again without hesitation the awful punishment that goes with it. This pronouncement causes the lime-burner to conclude that Ethan is a madman, and he begins to feel uncomfortable there alone with him. He is rescued, however, by the laughter of the approaching

townspeople:

Laughing boisterously, and mingling all their voices together in unceremonious talk, they now burst into the moonshine and narrow streaks of fire-light that illuminated the open space before the lime-kiln. (1057)

Humor and its attendant laughter are perhaps the only protection available to mankind against absurdity and the unknown.

Another instance of dark humor involves the old German Jew, a mysterious and vaguely sinister character, who seems to confront Ethan Brand. He is a traveling showman who happens along at the same time as the townspeople and puts on a pathetic display of historic pictures with a diorama:

When with much merriment at its abominable deficiency of merit, the exhibition was concluded, the German bade little Joe put his head into the box. Viewed through the magnifying glasses, the boy's round rosy visage assumed the strangest imaginable aspect of an immense, Titanic child, the mouth grinning broadly, and the eyes and every other feature, overflowing with fun at the joke. Suddenly, however, that merry face turned pale, and its expression turned to horror; for this easily impressed and excitable child had become sensible that the eye of Ethan Brand was fixed upon him through the glass. (1061)

Once again laughter has been blended with horror though in an untypical sort of inverted way, for here terror obliterates the laughter.

Later in the story, the absurdity of Ethan Brand's quest is given concrete illustration by Hawthorne's detailed description of a large old dog which



begins chasing its tail:

But, now, all of a sudden, this grave and venerable quadraped, of his own mere notion, and without the slightest suggestion from anybody else, began to run round after his tail, which, to heighten the absurdity of the proceeding, was a great deal shorter than it should have been. Never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained; never was heard such a tremendous outbreak of growling, snarling, barking, and snapping—as if one end of the ridiculous brute's body were at deadly and most unforgivable enmity with the other. (1062)

The bizarre performance ceased as suddenly as it had begun, having caused universal laughter among those present, but the reaction of Ethan Brand disquiets the others:

...moved, it might be, by a perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of the self-pursuing cur, he broke into the awful laugh, which, more than any other token, expressed the condition of his inward being. From that moment, the merriment of the party was at an end; they stood aghast, dreading lest the inauspicious sound should be reverberated around the horizon, and that mountain would thunder it to mountain, and so the horror be prolonged upon their ears. (1062)

In this instance, innocent merriment is destroyed by horrific laughter at the absurdity of the human condition as exemplified by the situation of Ethan Brand and as signified by the ridiculous performance of the dog.

The story ends ironically with the lime-burner awakening to discover that Ethan Brand has disappeared, allowing the furnace to die down. He states

angrily that he would like to have thrown Brand into the furnace. Looking into the furnace, he discovers the heart of Ethan Brand burnt into what appears to be especially good lime. The ending is doubly ironic in that Ethan Brand has fulfilled the threat made in jest by the lime-burner and has also significantly enriched the yield of lime by the contribution of his own body to the furnace. Once again, Hawthorne unites the tragic and the comic in a kind of black humor as he laughs with the devil at the absurd but strangely appropriate fate of Ethan Brand.

The dark side which is so evident in the writings of Hawthorne is not the manifestation of a dour Puritan disposition, but is rather a humorous response to the absurdity of the human condition. From the seriocomic "Young Goodman Brown" to the black humor of "Rappaccini's Daughter," "The Birthmark" and "Ethan Brand," Hawthorne consistently responds to the absurd with an ambivalent smile or outright laughter. Nowhere, not even in "The May-Pole of Merry-Mount," does he affirm the Puritan concept of evil. To the contrary, he repeatedly points to the human heart as the ironic source of evil and balances this sad truth with humor and laughter.

## CHAPTER 6

### HAWTHORNE'S SHAGGY DOG

By one of those inexplicable literary quirks, Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" was largely ignored by critics for over a century before becoming perhaps the most scrutinized of his stories over the last four decades. The story was initially published anonymously in *The Token*, but Hawthorne passed it over when making his selections for inclusion in *Twice Told Tales* (1837) and in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). He finally did include it in *The Snow-Image* (1851), but positioned as the last story in the volume. Without any other supporting evidence, this apparent authorial neglect and terminal positioning were interpreted by some as indicating Hawthorne's dissatisfaction with the story, and this probably helped inspire the critical neglect. The location of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" in the volume, however, was likely the result of its delayed arrival at the publisher, it being one of the last stories located owing to its early original publication date.

There is no recorded commentary by Hawthorne on the story, but he might well have had it in mind when he wrote in the preface to *The Snow-Image*:

In youth, men are apt to write more wisely than they really know or feel; and the remainder of life may be not idly spent in realizing and convincing themselves of the wisdom which they

uttered long ago. The truth that was only in the fancy then may have since become a substance in the mind and heart.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that Hawthorne found increasing satisfaction and pride in his earlier stories, and it would be difficult to argue that "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" was not among the best of those early efforts.

Q. D. Leavis is generally credited with initiating the burgeoning interest in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" in the seminal 1951 essay, "Hawthorne as Poet"<sup>2</sup> which advocates a political/historical interpretation. In the intervening decades, the complexities of the story have been unraveled and examined through diverse approaches which may loosely be categorized as: historical, psychological and mythic/ritualistic (with some overlap among the three). The story has, for example, been variously interpreted as an historical/political allegory for the young America, as a psychological dramatization of the rejection of father by son and as a rite of passage into manhood for a young man.<sup>3</sup> Although each of the approaches has its own validity, the end result, as Robert Abrams has observed, is that "very little has been agreed upon...for Hawthorne has constructed an elusive and ambiguous tale which resists decisive interpretation."<sup>4</sup> The problem, however, is not really that the story "resists" interpretation, but rather that it invites so many different approaches. This is frustrating for those who feel compelled to choose a "definitive" interpretation, but it seems clear that Hawthorne, with characteristic ambivalence<sup>5</sup>, intentionally devised multiple levels of interpretation which he skillfully wove together. It is a distortion, therefore, to assert that one of the approaches should take precedence over the others, for as James Duban has noted, "psychological, mythical and historical factors harmonize in 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux.'"<sup>6</sup> This complex diversity is the genius of the story, though some have categorized it as youthful over-

reaching on Hawthorne's part to bring so many diverse elements to bear in the same story.<sup>7</sup> The fact that undermines this criticism is that the story seems to work on all of these levels and to sustain a richness of meaning that has attracted so much critical attention.

What needs investigation, however, is the method by which Hawthorne achieves harmony among the diverse levels of interpretation. The method by which they coexist and indeed coalesce within the same story has yet to be satisfactorily explained. Duban has suggested that his theory of the origin of Robin's name accomplishes this<sup>8</sup>, but his evidence is circumstantial and has the further disadvantage of working only when the reader has the specialized knowledge about unique connotations of the name. A more viable explanation can be found in the basic structure of the story which has heretofore been overlooked.

While most critics have acknowledged the presence of humor in the story<sup>9</sup>, none has recognized the central role which it plays in its structure. "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is essentially a *humorous tale*<sup>10</sup> structured on a type of joke which we have come to know as a *shaggy dog story*—"a protracted multi-episodic narrative concluded by a non-sequitur or atrocious pun."<sup>11</sup> Viewing the tale as a shaggy dog story, Robin is the butt of the joke as he wanders about the town seeking his supposedly esteemed uncle but meets with hostility and derisive laughter in a protracted series of inquiries. These incidents become increasingly perplexing and serve to create the air of incongruity and frustration that is characteristic of the typical shaggy dog story. After arriving at a high level of suspense and consternation, the story culminates with an unexpected twist, dispelling the incongruity and replacing it with irony. This humorous framework serves as a unifying form into which Hawthorne has woven the other levels of meaning without making

any of them either superior or subordinate to the others. Take away the joke, however, and the entire story collapses.

While the shaggy dog story is a product of the twentieth century, Eric Partridge notes that its roots can be traced back to the ancient Greeks<sup>12</sup>. The principal elements which distinguish a shaggy dog story are length (often to the point of exasperation for the listener) and the unexpected ending. Both of these criteria are unquestionably met by "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and one example of a prototypical shaggy dog story recalled by Partridge bears a notable resemblance to the form of Hawthorne's story. In "The Mysterious Note"<sup>13</sup>, a young officer visiting Paris picks up a note accidentally dropped by a young lady. Unable to catch up with the girl and unable to read French, he makes a series of attempts to have various people translate it for him. In each incident, a friendly person upon reading the note inexplicably becomes extremely hostile toward him, just as Robin is met with hostility when he mentions Major Molineux. For example, at one point the young officer shows the note to his fiancée's father, who upon reading it breaks off the engagement and has him thrown out of his house. The story ends when the note is lost without the contents being revealed, a let-down that, according to Partridge, is not typical of the shaggy dog story's unexpected ending and does not resemble Hawthorne's ending. The structural parallels between the two stories are unmistakable, however, and strengthen the assertion that "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is indeed a humorous tale.

That the story is essentially a humorous piece was recognized in a review of *The Snow-Image* in the *Literary World* by the critic Evert Duyckinck who lamented that the story should have had a "supernatural conclusion" rather than a "broad comic" one. "The joke," he wrote, "winding up this series of beautifully drawn pictures is, that the traveller's distinguished kinsman is

that night to be tarred and feathered. Most lame and impotent conclusion!"<sup>14</sup> It is the kind of conclusion, however, that is characteristic of the shaggy dog story, and Hawthorne has provided numerous signals to the reader to expect a humorous resolution.

Hawthorne begins to signal his humorous intent in the first paragraph when he requests that the reader "dispense with an account of the train of circumstances, that had caused much temporary inflammation of the popular mind" (68). Although this request does not necessarily completely dismiss the historical context of the story, it does seem to de-emphasize and relegate it to the background. The tenuous dating of the adventures as having "chanced upon a summer night, not far from a hundred years ago" (68) seems calculatedly ambiguous, a favorite technique of Hawthorne's. Although the story cannot be divorced from its historical context, it was clearly not meant to be confused with historical fact nor to be associated with a specific historical incident. The opening paragraph's significance is as a foreshadowing device that sets up the punch line and becomes truly meaningful only at the conclusion of the story.

Hawthorne also showed humorous intent in his choice of a name for Robin's uncle. The name Molineux is ironic, for it would have been associated by his readers with William Molineux, a well-known Boston merchant who, in stark contrast to Major Molineux, was a rebel organizer in pre-Revolutionary times (1483, Note 68.1). It is a case of Hawthorne winking comically at his reader, a signal which the modern reader fails to discern.

Another more readily observable signal of the humorous intent is the description of Robin in the second paragraph (68-9) which emphasizes his plain, simple and unpretentious country origins. As Daniel G. Hoffman has pointed out<sup>15</sup>, Robin is modelled on the Yankee bumpkin, a stock comic

character of popular New England tradition. The boatman who has delivered him to the town seems to be sardonically amused as he holds his lantern up to survey the country boy fumbling awkwardly through his pockets to find the fare he has promised. This is obviously the country boy's first visit to the big city. His home-made clothes are worn but well-repaired, and his three-cornered hat probably had belonged to his father. His unfamiliarity with the town and its customs is emphasized by the fact that he carries a heavy oak cudgel<sup>16</sup>, a weapon which is unnecessary and inappropriate. He is the complete naïf from head to toe and the perfect protagonist for a shaggy dog story.

Robin's appearance and his ensuing adventures are incongruous with the formal tone adopted by the narrator. Mark Twain, who identified the humorous story as a uniquely American art form, wrote that it is "told gravely" and that the teller "does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it."<sup>17</sup> The narrator refers to the ferry as Robin's "conveyance," describes his stockings as "incontrovertible handiwork," and notes that his wallet doesn't "incommode" his "vigorous shoulders." The vocabulary is completely incongruous to the subject matter and treats the country lad's first visit to town with the formality due to a head of state visiting a foreign land. It serves to convey the preposterous feeling of self-importance which is to be Robin's undoing. In its incongruity, the formal tone is therefore subverted and made a mock-formal foreshadowing of the impending humiliation of Robin. This excessively formal tone is maintained throughout the story until Robin's self-importance is completely deflated by the sudden revelation of his uncle's actual situation, and the joke has been accomplished.

As has already been noted, a key element of the shaggy dog story is the



protracted series of incongruous incidents which serve to puzzle and frustrate both the protagonist and the audience. Robin's four encounters with the various townspeople certainly fulfill this qualification. Over the course of the incidents, he progresses from comically naïve explanations for the mysterious behavior to outright aggressive hostility on his own part. By the fourth incident, we are no nearer to a rational explanation for the townspeople's treatment of Robin than at the outset, but our patience has been stretched (as has Robin's), and our expectation is that something must happen though we know not what.

Robin's first strange encounter is with the citizen who has the odd habit of uttering two successive hems with a "peculiarly solemn and sepulchral intonation" (70). Robin accosts the man ineptly by tugging at his coat while making a low bow and asking for the whereabouts of his kinsman's dwelling. Overheard by the barbers, whose shop they happen to be outside, Robin's query curiously causes them to immediately stop work and come to the door. The citizen, as Hawthorne terms him, reacts with "excessive anger and annoyance" ordering Robin to let go of his garment, disavowing any knowledge of the person being sought, and threatening to have Robin put in the stocks by daylight. The rebuke is interrupted by his two sepulchral hems "like a thought of the cold grave obtruding among wrathful passions." At once sinister and ridiculous, the incident is punctuated by a roar of laughter from the barber shop. Shaken but indomitable, Robin invents an explanation that verges on the silly—he had, he decides, accidentally picked on a non-resident of the town who was not therefore familiar with his eminent kinsman, and the barbers had laughed at this foolish mistake. Satisfied with this reasoning, Robin continues on his way and soon becomes "entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets" (70). Robin has lost his way

physically and metaphorically although he himself is not yet aware of it.

The second incident involves the innkeeper (72-3) whose professional courtesy Robin foolishly mistakes for recognition of his kinship to Major Molineux (Robin imagines that the innkeeper has detected a family resemblance). When he inquires for directions to Major Molineux's dwelling, the patrons of the inn surge toward him which he again misinterprets as eagerness to become his guide. The innkeeper looks at a wanted poster on the wall and suggests that the description of the runaway servant fits Robin, whose first instinct is to stand and fight with his cudgel. As he becomes aware of a "strange hostility in every countenance" (73), however, he wisely decides to retreat, and the incident is once again punctuated by general laughter emanating from the inn. He rationalizes the incident with another mistaken assumption that the hostility was caused by his admission that he has no money and finds it strange that his being related to Major Molineux does not outweigh this shortcoming. He imagines what he would do to one of the rude patrons with his cudgel if he had him on his own territory out in the woods.

Robin becomes more cautious and tentative after this second incident and wanders through the crowds of dressed up townspeople who are out promenading and showing off their finery. The contrast between their dress and Robin's marks him as starkly out of place, and gawking ludicrously, he suffers "some rebukes for the impertinence of his scrutiny into people's faces" (74). There seems to be an implied scorn for these primping dandies on the part of the narrator, as the contrast also serves to ridicule the meretricious attire and strutting behavior of the townspeople. As he wanders the crowded streets fearful of asking his question, Robin is startled by a familiar sound—the tapping cane and two sepulchral hems—and he immediately

flees. Tired and hungry, his frustration has reached a level where he childishly begins to consider using his cudgel to demand the information he requires.

The third incident involves the woman with the red petticoat whom Robin notices behind a half-opened door. He decides to try his luck here and approaches the door. Charmed by sparkling eyes and a hint of scarlet petticoat, he asks politely for the whereabouts of Major Molineux's dwelling. He is greeted not by immediate hostility but, quite the opposite, by enticement as the beautiful woman announces to him that "Major Molineux dwells here" (75). Though he finds the woman alluring, Robin hesitates (the building with a storefront doesn't fit his image of Major Molineux's dwelling), and he slyly requests that she have Major Molineux come to the door so he can speak to him. She responds that the Major is asleep and cannot be disturbed but that she notes a strong family resemblance and is sure he would want him to come in. She mocks Robin further by ludicrously suggesting that his clothes resemble what the Major wears. She takes his hand and is about to draw him inside when the noise of an opening door startles her. She abruptly closes the door, and the abandoned Robin is soon sleepily accosted by the night-watchman threatening to put him in the stocks if he doesn't get home. He hesitates to ask his usual question and, by the time he gets it out, the watchman disappears around the corner. He does seem to hear, however, the sound of drowsy laughter down the street and "a pleasant titter saluted him from the open window above his head" (76). Hearing footsteps within Robin resists "temptation" and runs away. Once again, however, the episode terminates with hostile threats punctuated by laughter. While psychological critics have had a field day with this particular episode, it need not be read as anything more complicated than another step in the shaggy dog story. As

Hawthorne well knew, nothing could be imagined that is better suited to make a male character appear foolish than a pretty girl.<sup>18</sup>

Exhausted by his wanderings and the three weird encounters with townspeople, Robin's frustration reaches such a desperate level that he almost believes himself to be under an enchantment. His consternation is further magnified when he is twice accosted by men in outlandish dress who initially speak gibberish and then curse him in plain English when he fails to comprehend. He is on the point of knocking on doors when the fourth encounter takes place. He blocks the way of a bulky, muffled stranger with his oak cudgel and recites the now familiar: "Tell me, this instant, whereabouts is the dwelling of my kinsman, Major Molineux?" (77). When the stranger in a gruff but familiar voice threatens to strike him, Robin is insistent. Thrusting the larger end of his oak cudgel into the man's face, he makes the ironic statement "I'm not the fool you take me for" (77), and repeats his question once more. Instead of forcing his way, the man steps back into the moonlight, unmuffles his face and tells Robin "Watch here an hour, and Major Molineux will pass by" (78). The "unprecedented physiognomy" of the man shocks Robin for it is none other than a memorable man whom he had seen earlier at the inn and whose singular appearance consists in a double bulging forehead, a hooked nose, shaggy eyebrows and fiery eyes. The shock is intensified by the fact that the face is now painted half blazing red and half midnight black. With the stranger grinning diabolically at him, Robin can only comment: "Strange things we travellers see!" (78). This time there is no laughter, but only the devilish grin of the stranger. In a few moments, Robin has satisfactorily rationalized the bizarre appearance of the stranger (though we are not told specifically how) as he waits for the appointed time of arrival of his kinsman.

As Robin seeks to amuse himself while waiting, he hears a "murmur, which swept continually along the street" (79) and was punctuated by periodic distant shouts. He tries to stay awake but eventually drifts into a kind of reverie including a vision of his family and home which ends with his being locked out. He is startled awake by this exclusion, unsure of whether it was real. Since he is cut off from his family, both literally and symbolically, it becomes even more urgent that he find his kinsman. He seems to see Major Molineux's face in one of the windows but is not sure he was awake at the time of the apparition. Hawthorne has created an air of ambiguity that revives the frustration and consternation which had been temporarily ameliorated by the promise of his kinsman's arrival. About to fall asleep yet hearing footsteps across the street, Robin shouts in a "loud, peevish, and lamentable" voice: "Halloo, friend! must I wait here all night for my kinsman, Major Molineux?" (81).

This final encounter differs markedly from its predecessors in that the person is normal looking and treats him with concerned kindness as opposed to anger and ridicule. Robin is so befuddled that instead of asking his usual question, he asks whether there really is a Major Molineux or he's been dreaming. The kindly man acknowledges that the name is familiar and asks Robin to tell him his whole story. He does so without going into great detail, and the gentleman then asks him to describe the man who told him that the Major would be passing by there. Confirming that the information is probably accurate, he decides to wait with Robin to see what will happen.

Hawthorne's narrator is a careful story-teller who seems to wink at the reader, hinting that he knows more than is being openly expressed, yet never revealing any humorous intent. He does, however, create an increasingly ironic and incongruous tone through a series of repetitions that signal the

reader without compromising the narrator's seriousness (an essential element to the telling of a humorous tale). Robin is repeatedly described as "shrewd" either by the narrator or Robin himself, in spite of the fact that it becomes increasingly evident that he is in fact not at all shrewd. Each of the incidents involving inquiries about Major Molineux's residence is climaxed by an unexpected and usually violent response and, except for the last, is terminated by some form of laughter directed, for ambiguous and unexplained reasons, at Robin. In each instance, Robin attempts to explain the incongruity with rather fatuous devices of his imagination. These explanatory thoughts are usually posed as direct quotations of Robin, allowing the narrator to remain noncommittal about the validity of Robin's excuses for the behavior toward him. This absence of comment creates an air of objectivity that, coupled with the repeated inadequacy of the explanations, invites the reader's scrutiny and skepticism. Furthermore, in the incident at the inn the narrator uses ambiguity to insinuate doubt: "But the innkeeper turned his eyes to the written paper on the wall, which he read, **or seemed to read**" (73, emphasis added). In the encounter with the woman in the red petticoat, Robin seems curiously oblivious to her sarcasm about his clothing, yet at the same time is astute enough to recognize that Major Molineux likely does not live there. During the strange interlude while Robin is awaiting the arrival of his kinsman, his perceptions are repeatedly called into question by the tricks which shadow and moonlight play on them, and the reader has gradually but conclusively been convinced that Robin is not a reliable interpreter of reality. The narrator's deliberate refraining from commenting on the inconsistencies in Robin's interpretations of reality creates an air of suspense and frustration for the reader that is characteristic of the shaggy dog story which must be related with deadpan demeanor in order to achieve its

optimum effect. The ambiguity contributes to the overall comic effect by helping to string the reader along.

At this point, Hawthorne builds up the suspense even further by having Robin wonder about the distant shouts, music and laughter which seem to be getting closer and closer. Robin expresses a wish to join the party since he has not had much cause to laugh since leaving home, but the gentleman advises him to sit down, reminding him that his kinsman should be by in a very few minutes. Although Robin appears to remain naïvely unsuspecting, the reader has certainly by now begun to infer some connection between the noise and Major Molineux. When the bizarre parade finally arrives, Hawthorne describes a surrealistic carnival atmosphere, filled with chaos and discordant noise. The red and black faced stranger, on horseback and in military dress, appears to be leading the confused procession and stares at Robin as he passes. He commands a halt which causes the crowd to fall virtually silent and:

Right before Robin's eyes was an uncovered cart. There the torches blazed the brightest, there the moon shown out like day, and there, in tar-and-feathery dignity, sate his kinsman, Major Molineux!" (85).

This is the punch line of the shaggy dog story. Before the laughter can begin, however, Hawthorne is careful to describe the disgraced Major Molineux in extravagantly pathetic terms:

His face was pale as death, and far more ghastly; the broad forehead was contracted in agony, so that his eyebrows formed one grizzled line; his eyes were red and wild, and the foam hung white upon his quivering lip. His whole frame was agitated by a quick, and continual tremor, which his pride strove to quell, even in those circumstances of overwhelming humiliation"

(85).

This “head that had grown grey in honor” is indisputably a tragic rather than a comic figure and evokes the appropriate response from his nephew. Robin exchanges a stare with his poor uncle, his knees shake, and he experiences the Aristotelian tragic emotions of pity and terror followed by a catharsis of his emotions that is signaled by “a sort of mental inebriety” (85).

Now that the Major’s tragedy has been acknowledged, Robin’s comedy may resume. The townspeople from his first three encounters reappear in reverse order laughing at him again— the watchman, the lady of the scarlet petticoat, the innkeeper, and finally the old citizen: “Haw, haw, haw—hem, hem—haw, haw, haw, haw!” (86). Contrasting with his “solemn old features,” the old citizen’s laughter is like “a funny inscription on a tombstone” (86). Then Robin seems to hear the voices of the barbers, the inn patrons, and of all who had laughed at him that night. Finally, as the laughter spreads to the multitude and reaches a climactic crescendo:

All at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street; every man shook his sides , every man emptied his lungs, but Robin’s shout was the loudest there (86).

Robin has finally got the joke that has eluded him all night long.

It is critical to understand that Robin’s great laughter is directed not at the pitiable old Major Molineux (as has been erroneously assumed)<sup>19</sup> but at **himself**, the butt of the joke, the naïve protagonist of the shaggy dog story. To imagine that Robin would laugh at his disgraced uncle is inappropriate and unthinkable. Hawthorne has gone to great extremes in his detailed description of the major to indicate that there is nothing funny about him, and Robin’s reaction to his uncle’s situation is pity and terror, entirely



appropriate emotions under the circumstances. Furthermore, the return of the townspeople whom he had earlier encountered refocuses our attention on Robin, and his laughter begins only under these entirely appropriate circumstances. The crowd continues on, returning to its original merriment which does ridicule old Major Molineux, but its behavior is in turn belittled by the narrator who calls it "counterfeited pomp" and "senseless uproar" (86). Robin does not participate in this inanity and is left behind in the silent street with the kindly gentleman.

The story ends here, but a kind of epilogue is appended (a double space indicates the division). The gentleman inquires "Well, Robin, are you dreaming?" (86). Although Robin does not answer, we can provide a rational response by viewing the tale in the context of the humorous shaggy dog story. In this light, Robin has been *dreaming*, for he has been operating under an incorrect set of assumptions, foremost among which is the mistaken belief that Major Molineux is highly esteemed by the townspeople. Once these false assumptions have been corrected by the climactic unveiling of Major Molineux's disgrace, Robin is in effect no longer dreaming. With his self-directed laughter, he has returned to reality and can face the future with a new found self-reliance. Whether he chooses to remain in the town or leave, he has now truly become a "shrewd" youth and may rise in the world without the help of his kinsman, Major Molineux.

Hawthorne's shaggy dog story of a country boy who comes to the city to seek his fortune through preferment provides an ideal framework for the other levels of meaning which he has skillfully interwoven with the humor. Viewing the tale as a shaggy dog story does not interfere with any of the other interpretations that have been assigned to the story, but rather validates all of them by providing a context in which they can coexist. The historical, the

psychological and the mythic/ritualistic elements all coalesce in the joke that fate has played on Robin. It is a tribute to Hawthorne's youthful talent that he seems to have recognized this capacity of humor and utilized it to such clever advantage.

"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is not the only Hawthorne tale that is intentionally and fundamentally comic. Several of his other early stories must also be regarded as humorous tales. The most conspicuous among these are the lesser known "The Haunted Quack" (1831), an uncollected tale that has been authoritatively attributed to Hawthorne<sup>20</sup>, and "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" (1834). Each of these can stand alone on its humorous content and was plainly intended by Hawthorne to be funny. They share the common element of the dead-pan Yankee hero beset by ambiguity. At the end of each, a misinterpretation of reality is reconciled in an ironic twist which highlights the foolishness of the hero and amuses the reader.

As well as being a humorous tale, "The Haunted Quack" is a stinging indictment of certain marginal members of the medical profession. It begins with a narrator who is in the midst of a boring trip on a canal boat. He awakens a fellow passenger who seems to be having a nightmare and is drawn into conversation with the stranger whom he suspects, from his demeanor and appearance, to be some sort of criminal. His name is ironically, as will become apparent, Hippocrates Jenkins and he proceeds to tell how he had chanced to become apprenticed to a Doctor Ephraim Ramshorne. It is soon obvious that, as the village lawyer noted, Ephraim was "no more a doctor than his jack-ass." (53) He makes a fabulous living selling fake remedies, and Hippocrates soon becomes so adept at creating these medicines that he becomes indispensable to his employer.

Dr. Ramshorne meets an untimely end when, after dining with his friend

Squire Gobbledown, he complains of not feeling well, and Hippocrates treats him with his own nostrums, "poured down with unsparing hand" (55). Fittingly enough, Ramshorne is done in by his own fake medicines exorbitantly administered by his own assistant. Given this opportunity, Hippocrates resolves to, as he accidentally puts it, "commence quacking" (55), and determines that "where Ramshorne had given one dose, I would give six" (56). He successfully takes over Ramshorne's thriving practice and, after a period of time, is forced to concoct new remedies to satisfy his patients. Most of these he tests on animals but his most extravagant creation, composed of forty-nine ingredients and given the calculatedly grandiose name "The Antidote to Death, or the Eternal Elixir of Longevity" (56), is untested when he gets a message that his best customer, Granny Gordon, the blacksmith's wife, is in desperate need of a new medication. He sends her a bottle of this latest concoction which she incautiously drains to the bottom causing her condition to rapidly deteriorate. Hippocrates is summoned immediately to her bedside where she harangues against him for her deteriorating condition and threatens to gain revenge by haunting him. At this point she apparently gives up the ghost, and Hippocrates flees into hiding in New York City. Each night, however, at midnight he is haunted by the ghost of Granny Gordon. He has been so tormented by these apparitions that he is in the process of returning to give himself up when they reach the town on the following morning.

That morning as they are disembarking from the canal boat at their destination, the young man spots the local sheriff approaching along with Granny Gordon's husband and is so startled that he falls into the canal. To his total amazement, however, the sheriff and Mr. Gordon are ecstatic to see Hippocrates. After fishing him out of the canal they relate how Granny

Gordon had not really died but just swooned, and Hippocrates, instead of having committed murder, had once again been credited with a miraculous cure. His mysterious disappearance, however, had led them to believe that Mr. Gordon, who had been heard to threaten him over the apparent death of his wife, had killed him. They had been searching for his body and were about to try the blacksmith for murder. Ironically, Hippocrates' "haunting" had been the product of his guilt-ridden imagination, and, just as ironically, the charlatan was now welcomed back to the community and held in even greater esteem than before. Contrary to the expectations that had been created, the story ends absurdly with the "quack" returning happily to his practice, apparently unreformed in spite of the admonishment of the narrator that not all women will have nine lives.

Originally, "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" was published in the second part of the aborted Storyteller cycle. It is a humorous tale, with a shaggy dog type structure, which spoofs the human readiness to believe and spread gossip. Hoffman writes admiringly of it:

We do not often think of Hawthorne as a comic author, yet he had his moments of comedic grace. His peddler Dominicus Pike is an early and masterful representation of the Sam Slick tradition, with his provincialism, inquisitiveness, resourcefulness, and insouciance.<sup>21</sup>

He also notes that this type of tale, "based on exaggeration or misinterpretation of news" must have been quite common in the early nineteenth century and recounts a similar story told by Thoreau, but supposedly based on a true incident, that also involves misunderstanding<sup>21</sup>.

Dominicus Pike, a traveling tobacco-peddler, is an inveterate gossip. Encountering a suspicious looking stranger, who is travelling at a noticeably

determined pace in the opposite direction, Dominicus pesters him for some news. After hesitating, the disreputable looking man whispers in his ear that "Old Mr. Higginbotham, of Kimballton, was murdered in his orchard, at eight o'clock last night, by an Irishman and a nigger. They strung him up to the branch of a St. Michael's pear tree, where nobody would find him till the morning" (189).

In spite of the fact that he is aware that this news could not possibly have reached him so quickly since Kimballton was sixty miles away, he eagerly begins disseminating the story to everyone he meets along the road, embellishing it with each telling. When he stops for the night at an inn, however, he is confronted by a man who has seen Mr. Higginbotham after the time that the murder supposedly took place. Faced with irrefutable evidence that his juicy story is false, Dominicus is devastated at this "sad resurrection of old Mr. Higginbotham" (191).

The next morning on the road, he meets another stranger coming from the opposite direction and asks him if he knows anything about Mr. Higginbotham being murdered by an Irishman and a nigger. The stranger, a mulatto, is curiously affected by this inquiry and issues a combination confirmation and denial:

No! No! There was no colored man! It was an Irishman that hanged him last night, at eight o'clock. I came away at seven! His folks can't have looked for him in the orchard yet. (192)

Dominicus is puzzled by the contradictions in this statement and especially by the change in time for the crime. He is primarily, however, overjoyed that his rumor has been resurrected. He gets to Parker's Falls and does such a good job of spreading the rumor that the local paper comes out with a special edition to cover the story. Basking in the limelight of being the originator of the

news, Dominicus is once again cut down to size when the stage arrives with the supposed victim's lawyer and niece, both of whom testify to Mr. Higginbotham's still being among the living. Once again the story is proven false, and Dominicus is chased out of town rather unceremoniously, being hit in the mouth with a gob of clay. He resolves to be more careful about believing that Mr. Higginbotham is dead.

Extremely perplexed, Dominicus continues on his way and learns from a toll gatherer just outside of Kimballton that Mr. Higginbotham, uncharacteristically incommunicative and looking rather ghastly, is on the road just ahead of him. Reflecting that perhaps Mr. Higginbotham was returning from the dead, Dominicus arrives in town at just about eight o'clock and resolves to go and see with his own eyes if Mr. Higginbotham be hanged or not. Arriving at the pear tree, he finds an Irishman struggling with Mr. Higginbotham and knocks him down. Ludicrously obsessed with his own concerns, he turns to the trembling figure with a noose around his neck and callously asks:

"Mr. Higginbotham you're an honest man, and I'll take your word for it. Have you been hanged or not?" (199)

In case the reader has failed to grasp the situation, Hawthorne explains that Dominicus has prevented a murder which had originally been planned by three men, two of whom successively lost courage and fled, postponing execution of the deed and becoming Dominicus' informers or more properly misinformers. The story ends in a spoof of the typical ending of a romance with Dominicus marrying the niece and the grateful Mr. Higginbotham making their children his heirs. Unlike Robin whose fate was left open-ended, Dominicus has been rewarded with humorously extravagant success.

The humor of the story depends on the incongruity which Dominicus

keeps encountering. In the end, the incongruity is resolved by a simple explanation and, as in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the seemingly absurd becomes perfectly rational. Once again, a dead-pan hero is placed in a situation replete with incongruity which is then resolved with an ironic twist.

"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" overshadows the other two humorous tales in its calculated use of the comic element to support a complex diversity of meaning. The other tales do make effective comment on quackery and rumor mongering, but in a direct and unsophisticated way that pales in comparison to the complexity of Robin's tale. There is no better testament to Hawthorne's sense of humor than the brilliant manner in which he has utilized the comic spirit in this early tale.

## CONCLUSION

The question of the true nature of Nathaniel Hawthorne is not likely ever to be conclusively settled. Too many years have intervened and too many contradictions have arisen for a final position to be arrived at with any certitude. What may be reliably ascertained, however, is that the weight of evidence is against the gloomy, reclusive Puritan handed down to us by literary tradition and toward a more convivial, well-balanced individual. A new, more informed perspective of Hawthorne must therefore humanize his image and draw his character into some semblance of balance. His writings too must be viewed with open-mindedness and without preconception.

Once the evidence is reviewed, the seemingly incongruous assertion that humor plays a significant role in the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne becomes an incontrovertible fact. While much of the humor is subtle, it is readily discernible when reading the tales and sketches with an ear unprejudiced by the traditional conception of Hawthorne. It pervades the fabric of virtually every tale appearing in a variety of guises: kindly and light-hearted self-deprecation, gentle satire, grotesque black humor and the overt joking of the humorous tales. Only the degree to which the comic asserts itself is open to argument on a case by case basis, for there is an overwhelming amount of evidence indicating, contrary to traditional perception, that humor was fundamental to Hawthorne's vision and is therefore essential to our understanding of his writings.

Although Hawthorne clearly evokes an awareness of the tragic in the



human condition, he confronts it with comic stoicism rather than Puritan gloom. To miss this cogent insight is to fail to appreciate the full texture of his prose, robbing it of a vivacity that is its genius. Yet this humor is not something that has just reappeared. On the contrary, it has been there all along and, although unrecognized and untouted, it has contributed unobtrusively to the perception of Hawthorne's genius.

Remove the humor and the tales and sketches become flat and one-dimensional. Without the comic, Mr. Hooper becomes a rather dreary eccentric, Colonel Killegrew and his friends become aged simpletons, and Goodman Brown becomes just another sad, self-deluded young man. Perhaps worst of all, Robin Molineux, stripped of his comic guise, becomes a hopelessly obnoxious teenager. One could go on and on, deflating each tale of its vivacity by distilling the humor and leaving them eviscerated and lifeless.

In the final analysis, it seems that humor, unrecognized and unheralded, has always been present in the works of Hawthorne. Though its impact may be subtle, its influence is essential to the effect which his writings produce upon the reader. Humor is intrinsic to Hawthorne's genius, providing that essential element of hope and allowing the reader to smile and go on, to laugh and to persevere in the face of absurdity. In truth, Hawthorne would be vacuous and drab without his secret smile.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> In his famous treatise on the subject, Henri Bergson acknowledges this fact immediately: "The greatest thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation." Bergson, *Laughter! An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lewis, "Preface," *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) x.

<sup>3</sup> Elder Olson, for example, writes: "The fact is that we have no completely unexceptionable theory of laughter, and this fact is very generally accepted." Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington: The University of Indiana Press, 1968) 7.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, 3.

<sup>5</sup> As examples of the anti-universalist approach, Lewis supplies the following ample list: W. L. Moelwyn Merchant, *Comedy* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1972) 7-12; Walter Sorrell, *Facets of Comedy* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1972) 13; Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare, Jonson, Molière: The Comic Contract* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980)xiii; Paul H. Grawe, *Comedy in Space, Time, and Imagination* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1983) 4 and 8; Harry Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 6 and George

Stuart Gordon, *Shakespearian Comedy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944). Lewis, 164 n4.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Number 125" of *The Rambler*, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969) 300-1.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, x-xi.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Allen, "Smiles and Laughter in Hawthorne," *PQ*, 52 (1973) 119-28.

<sup>9</sup> Allen 119.

<sup>10</sup> Allen 120.

<sup>11</sup> Allen 120.

<sup>12</sup> Allen 119.

<sup>13</sup> Edward H. Rosenberry, *Melville and the Comic Spirit* (New York: Octagon Press, 1979) 116-27. Rosenberry applies the *philosophical-psychological* category principally to *Moby Dick*, and its relevance to Hawthorne seems remote upon reading these pages. The other three phases are *jocular-hedonic* (fun and joking), *imaginative-critical* (literary and ulterior) and lastly *dramatic-structural* (overall pattern of humor).

<sup>14</sup> James K. Folsom, *Man's Accidents and God's Purposes: Multiplicity in Hawthorne's Fiction* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1963) 132-55.

## CHAPTER 1: THE REAL NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

<sup>1</sup> *Knickerbocker* IX (april, 1837) 422-5 as quoted in "Historical Commentary," J. Donald Crowley in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. IX, *Twice-told Tales* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 507.

<sup>2</sup> *Graham's Magazine*, XXIX (August, 1846) 107-8 and XLV (November, 1854) 492 as quoted in "Historical Commentary," J. Donald Crowley in *The*

*Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. X, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 528-9.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," *The Writings of Herman Melville*, The Northwestern-Newberry Edition, Volume 9, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, ed. Harrison Hayford (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1987) 244. The essay was originally published in two installments in *The Literary World* for August 17 and August 24, 1850.

<sup>4</sup> Melville 241.

<sup>5</sup> Folsom 134.

<sup>6</sup> Folsom 132-3. The two letters in question may be found in their entirety in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. XV, *The Letters 1813-1843* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 494-6 and 605-7.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Miller, *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) 87.

<sup>8</sup> Miller 88.

<sup>9</sup> Miller 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Miller 72.

<sup>11</sup> Miller 74.

<sup>12</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. III, *The Blithedale Romance and Fanshawe* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 346. Future references to this work are parenthetical in the text by volume and page.

<sup>13</sup> Miller 81.

## CHAPTER 2: HAWTHORNE SMILES SUBTLY

<sup>1</sup> Folsom 135.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tales and Sketches*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1982) 379. All future references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text. This edition was chosen because it includes all of the tales and sketches in a single volume and arranged in order of their periodical publication. It is an authoritative edition with text based on the definitive *Centenary Edition*.

<sup>3</sup> Folsom 141.

<sup>4</sup> Elliston's response is reminiscent of Mercutio's sarcasm at the failure of his companions to recognize that he is seriously wounded: "Aye, aye, a scratch, a scratch—marry, 'tis enough." *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, scene 1, line 79.

<sup>5</sup> Folsom 141.

<sup>6</sup> Folsom 142.

<sup>7</sup> Hennig Cohen, "A Comic Mode of the Romantic Imagination: Poe Hawthorne, Melville," in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973) 87.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen 89.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen 89.

## CHAPTER 3: HAWTHORNE SMILES AT HIMSELF

<sup>1</sup> Miller 57. The entire run of the publication is transcribed by Elizabeth L. Chandler in "Hawthorne's *Spectator*," *New England Quarterly* 4 (1931) 289-30. Another example of self-directed humor in the paper is given in note 17 for

Chapter 6.

- <sup>2</sup> Miller 57. The "Prospectus" is quoted in its entirety by Miller.

**CHAPTER 4: HAWTHORNE SMILES AT MANKIND**

- <sup>1</sup> Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) 163.
- <sup>2</sup> Melville 252.

**CHAPTER 5: HAWTHORNE LAUGHS WITH THE DEVIL**

- <sup>1</sup> For a different perspective on this tale, see Daniel Hoffman, "Just Married!—In the Village of the Witches" in *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961) 149-68.
- <sup>2</sup> An interesting study in this area is Nicholas Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979). In dramatic tragedy, as in the tragic narrative, there seems to be a critical reluctance to admit the existence of humor as anything more than a dramatic device such as comic relief. Brooke argues effectively against this reluctance.
- <sup>3</sup> André Breton, *Anthologie de L'humor noir* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1966). Breton uses excerpts from a variety of writers, including Poe, Swift and Kafka, to illustrate that black humor is a way of confronting the human condition.
- <sup>4</sup> Alan R. Pratt, "Introduction," *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) xix.
- <sup>5</sup> Mathew Winston, "Black Humor: To Weep with Laughing," *New York Literary Forum*, Vol. 1, 1978, 33.
- <sup>6</sup> Brom Weber, "The Mode of 'Black Humor'" in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973) 369.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hauck, *A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971) 238-9.

## CHAPTER 6: HAWTHORNE'S SHAGGY DOG

<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface," *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. XI, *The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 6.

<sup>2</sup> Q. D. Leavis, "Hawthorne As Poet," *Southern Review*, 59 (1951) 179-205.

<sup>3</sup> For a representative sampling of the critical approaches that have been taken see: James Duban, "Robins and Robinarchs in 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux,'" *19th Century Fiction*, Dec. 38(3), (1983) 271-288.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Abrams, "The Psychology of Cognition in 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux,'" *PQ*, 58 (1979) 346 n11.

<sup>5</sup> Abrams, 336-7 provides an interesting discussion of Hawthorne's deliberate use of ambivalence.

<sup>6</sup> Duban, 288.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Wagenacht, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Man, His Tales and Romances* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989) 66-72.

<sup>8</sup> Duban, 273.

<sup>9</sup> Two studies specifically explore Hawthorne's use of humor in the story: Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 91-3 and Mary Allen "Smiles and Laughter in Hawthorne," *PQ*, 52 (1973) 119-28. Lewis views the humor in the story as part of Robin's socialization process—he progress from being laughed at to laughing with, from being an outsider to being a member of society. This is accomplished, according to Lewis, through changes

in Robin's sense of humor. Allen on the other hand, recognizes the great variety of laughs in the story but interprets them as manifestations of evil (comparable to the laughter in "Ethan Brand" for example). She has failed to detect the unmasking of the ambiguity which occurs at the climax of the story and reveals that what had appeared to be sinister is in reality innocuous.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough discussion of the distinction between a joke and a humorous tale see: Elliot Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, Chapter 7: "Between Jokes and Tales" (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992) 81-93.

<sup>11</sup> Oring, 156, n21.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Partridge, *The 'Shaggy Dog' Story: Its Origin, Development and Nature (with a few seemly examples)* (Freeport: Books For Libraries Press, 1953) 13-15.

<sup>13</sup> Partridge, 38-43.

<sup>14</sup> "Historical Commentary," J. Donald Crowley in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. XI, *The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 393-4.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel G. Hoffman, "Yankee Bumpkin and Scapegoat King," in *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961) 113-25.

<sup>16</sup> The oak cudgel had previously been used for humorous effect by the 16 year old Hawthorne in the *Spectator*, a newspaper that he published and distributed to his family in the months August and September 1820. Hawthorne had apparently been threatened with punishment by his aunt for having published a humorous want ad seeking a husband for her and in a subsequent issue he warned "if any of our Readers, displeased with our



observations, should invite us to a Duel, We must inform them, that...we intend to take a few lessons in the art of Fencing" and that he plans "to produce a stout oaken cudgel." See Edwin Miller, *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: a Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) 57-59. Miller notes that, in the *Spectator* Hawthorne revealed a sense of comedy and an ability to poke fun even at himself.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Twain, "How to Tell a Story" in *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays 1891-1910* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1992) 201. It should be noted that although Twain's comment is made in reference to a spoken humorous story, it is equally applicable to the written humorous tale.

<sup>18</sup> The laughter of the girl in the scarlet petticoat is reminiscent of the laughter in the incident described in "Foot-prints on the Sea-shore." Some girls laughed musically at Hawthorne having secretly observed him shouting at the surf (568-9).

<sup>19</sup> Hauck, for example, interprets the laughter in terms of black humor:

Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"—a story well within the native genre—has grotesque laughter as its subject. To save himself, Robin joins with the crowd in laughing at his kinsman. Robin's laughter is in one way creative; it has the power to save him from the absurd situation and to help him overcome his own absurdity. But in another way his laughter is not possible unless he suppresses his own sense of the wrongness of his kinsman's treatment. Hawthorne was postulating a very bleak possibility: when laughter saves, it may be at the expense of moral feeling. Hauck 43-4.

Recognizing that Robin laughs at himself rather than at his kinsman seems

much more realistic and sensible than this convoluted reasoning.

<sup>20</sup> The basis for the attribution of this tale is fully delineated in "Historical Commentary," J. Donald Crowley in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al, vol. XI, *The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974) 392-3. It was originally published in the 1831 *Token* under the name Joseph Nicholson.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffman, 107.

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