

# *A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE*

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# CHAPTER 1

## “THE MAGNETIC CHAIN OF HUMANITY”

### An Introduction to the Life and Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne

When John Hathorne served as a judge in the Salem Witch Trials in 1692, he had no idea the influence this would have on the course of American literature nearly two centuries later. John Hathorne was the great-great-grandfather of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The role Hathorne played in the trials—which resulted in many innocent people being put to death due to blind superstition—caused such guilt and shame in his great-great-grandson that Nathaniel eventually changed the spelling of his last name to “Hawthorne.” In this way, Nathaniel Hawthorne sought to separate himself from any connection to his ancestor. Still, the guilt and shame persisted.

Thomas Jefferson had just been re-elected president of the United States when Nathaniel Hawthorne was born at 27 Union Street in Salem, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1804. His parents were Nathaniel Hathorne and Elizabeth Clarke Manning. The second of three children, Nathaniel was their only son.

When Nathaniel was only four years old, his father—a Salem sea captain and a poet of sorts—died of yellow fever in Surinam, Dutch Guinea. His father’s death left Hawthorne’s mother in a state of grief from which she never recovered. Her grief strongly affected her sensitive son and triggered a sadness that lasted his entire life and colored his writing with dark melancholy. This melancholy, along with the shame Hawthorne felt in regard to his ancestry, would be two key influences on the themes of Hawthorne’s later works of literature.

### COMMON THEMES

Chief themes of Hawthorne’s fiction include alienation, ancestral sin, guilt, pride, appearance vs. reality, and isolation and its effects. His writings often illustrate the tragedy that occurs when a person is isolated from the human community. In his short story “Ethan Brand,” Hawthorne describes this isolation as losing one’s “hold of the magnetic chain of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> It is this hold on the “magnetic chain of humanity” that gives meaning to life. Those characters who maintain this hold find happiness. Those who lose hold of it find only misery.

### CHARACTER TYPES

Basically, Hawthorne's characters are of two main types: those who follow their head (or intellect) and those who follow their heart. Among those characters who follow their intellect are Ethan Brand in the story by the same name, Aylmer in "The Birthmark," Rappaccini in "Rappaccini's Daughter," and Reverend Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil." Those who follow their heart include Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Owen in "The Artist of the Beautiful." The message that Hawthorne conveys through these two broad groups of character types is that those who put the intellect above the heart end in tragedy, whereas those who put the heart above the intellect find true life.

## LITERARY DEVICES

Hawthorne employs a variety of literary devices in his works. Among the most common are *symbolism*, *irony*, and *ambiguity*.

***literary device***—A formula in writing for producing a certain effect, such as a figure of speech (for example, a metaphor), a narrative style (first person, second person, etc.), or a plot mechanism (such as a flashback).

Perhaps the most powerful of these devices is symbolism. In *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, the red letter A on Hester's dress is intended to mark her as an adulteress, but for the reader, the letter will come to represent much more. Its meaning will, in fact, change several times over the course of the novel. Hawthorne's deep and complex symbolism allows for a wide variety of interpretations on many levels.

***symbolism***—The literary device of using one thing or person to represent another thing or person.

These various interpretations signal Hawthorne's use of another literary device called *ambiguity*. Many of Hawthorne's works, particularly his short stories, are left open-ended. In other words, the reader is left to decide the actual meaning, as is the case with Hester's red A. Another example of a story employing ambiguity is "The Minister's Black Veil," where the minister's reasons for taking up the veil are never directly explained.

***ambiguity***—A literary device that leaves the ultimate meaning of the story up to the reader.

Some of the stories in which Hawthorne uses irony include *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Marble Faun*, and "The Celestial Railroad." In each of these stories,

some superficial action belies a deeper meaning. For example, in *The Scarlet Letter*, although Chillingworth becomes Dimmesdale's physician, the reader knows that Chillingworth's intention is not to heal but to do harm.

***irony***—*A literary device used to express an idea that is normally opposite that of the words' literal meaning.*

## NARRATIVE STYLE

Hawthorne wrote primarily in third person and often engages the reader through his use of a narrator. His descriptions are detailed and evoke vivid images in the reader's mind. His sentences are sometimes long, and his language, although colorful, often requires close attention in order to be understood. Hawthorne's narrative style may appear somewhat difficult for the modern reader, but it is certainly worth the effort to apply oneself to understand it.

## HAWTHORNE'S EARLY LIFE

When Nathaniel was nine years old, he injured his leg while playing ball. The injury left him an invalid for almost three years. It also impacted his writing. During the long period of confinement following his injury, Hawthorne developed a great love of reading. He devoured the classics, including Paul Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Shakespeare, John Milton, and James Thomson. A favorite work was Thomson's *The Castle of Indolence*. Nathaniel also read the great literature of the Bible, which profoundly influenced his work.

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