ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

(1804-1864)

"Of Mr. Hawthorne's *Tales* we would say, emphatically, that they belong to the highest region of Art—an Art subservient to genius of a very lofty order….We know of few compositions which the critic can more honestly commend than these *Twice-Told Tales.* As Americans, we feel proud of the book….Mr. Hawthorne is original at *all* points….In the way of objection we have scarcely a word to say of these tales….The style is purity itself. Force abounds. High imagination gleams from every page. Mr. Hawthorne is a man of the truest genius."

Edgar Allan Poe
Review of *Twice-Told Tales*
Graham's Magazine (May 1842)

"There is no man in whom humor and love, like mountain peaks, soar to such a rapt height as to receive the irradiations of the upper skies; there is no man in whom humor and love are developed in that high form called genius; no such man can exist without also possessing, as the indispensable complement of these, a great, deep intellect….The great beauty in such a mind is but the product of its strength….For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black….a touch of the Puritanic gloom…["Young Goodman Brown"] is as deep as Dante….Some may start to read of Shakespeare and Hawthorne on the same page….Not a very great deal more, and Nathaniel were verily William….I declare that the American who up to the present day has evinced, in literature, the largest brain with the largest heart, that man is Nathaniel Hawthorne."

Herman Melville
"Hawthorne and His Mosses"
Literary World (17 & 24 August 1850)

"No one will feel himself ennobled at once by having read one of my novels. But Hawthorne, when you have studied him, will be very precious to you...Something of the sublimity of the transcendent, something of the mystery of the unfathomable, something of the brightness of the celestial, will have attached itself to you, and you will all but think that you too might live to be sublime."

Anthony Trollope
"The Genius of *The Scarlet Letter*"
North American Review CCLXXIV
(September 1879) 203-222

"He writes in the spirit of the artist, he does not force his moral on us in set terms; but if we penetrate to the center of his creations of wonder and beauty we find that in the heart of the romance is hidden a sermon....His interest centers in some moral problem or some spiritual truth, and he tells his story or creates his characters so as to study the problem or illustrate the truth….He…constantly regards the visible and external as a symbol or a manifestation of the obscure world of thought and spirit. Hawthorne may consequently be regarded as the master of a kind of romantic allegory….Such an idealist was Hawthorne, the voice of the deepened life of New England, and perhaps the greatest writer that we have yet given to the literature of the world."

Henry S. Pancoast
An Introduction to American Literature
(Holt 1898, 1902) 190-99

"Here, for once, with Hawthorne we have allegory richly justifying itself, the allegory of literature not that of didacticism, of the imagination not of the fancy, allegory neither vitiated by caprice nor sterilized by moralizing, but firmly grounded in reality and nature...The beautiful and profound story [*The Scarlet Letter*] is our chief prose masterpiece."

W. C. Brownell
American Prose Masters
(Scribner's 1909) 96-103

"These solemn tales of Hawthorne have tremendous force. Their moral intensity…gives them a weight and a dignity scarcely equaled in the short story…Even without the rolling music of Hawthorne's powerful style, it is questionable whether they could be trite. Hawthorne felt these familiar themes too deeply to be anything but impressive in his delivery of them….Like his spiritual ancestors, the religious enthusiasts of the seventeenth century, he struck fire into old truths…The moral stories are finer because they have more of the true Hawthornesque. They alone, because of their sanity, because of their true human nature, but, most of all, because of their intensity, can be ranked with the much more artistic tales of Poe….Hawthorne is one of the few great figures in American literature."

Henry Seidel Canby
A Study of the Short Story
(Holt 1913) 40-44

"He brought to his representation of the theme [of sin] sanity without cynicism and tenderness without softness; he brought also, what is rarer than depth of moralism, an art finely rounded, a rich, graceful style, a spirit sweet and clear."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 63-83

"*The Scarlet Letter* is the completest epitome of Hawthorne's genius....The book is a moving series of symbols within a larger symbol from beginning to end....Even as in the short tales he employs concrete objects to illustrate the most abstract end...It is invidious to assert that these symbols are weakened because of their obviousness, for, after all, Hawthorne's idea of reality differed in great measures from that of today....*The Scarlet Letter* may be a series of pictures, but each picture is so fastidiously related to the one which follows that the mosaic falls into a rounded and reasonable design."

Herbert Gorman
Hawthorne: A Study in Solitude
(Doran 1927) 83-90

"Concerning these moral enthusiasms, heritages of Puritanism, it was wiser, he thought, to remain objective, to write impersonally, in beautiful and enduring prose, of their subtle influences upon character …. Two rank with Hawthorne… The two are Poe and Melville."

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 79, 81, 83

"In the setting which he chose, allegory was realism, the idea was life itself; and his prose, always remarkable for its polish and flexibility…was reduced to the living idea, it intensified pure exposition to a quality comparable in its way to that of great poetry. The compactness and complexity of the allegory will escape all save the most watchful readers."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937, 1947) 157, 165, 168

"Emphasis on allegory and symbolism causes his characters to be recalled as the embodiment of psychological traits or moral concepts more than as living figures."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-1983) 320-21

"Hawthorne described the way in which his own imagination worked when he made one of his characters say. 'Everything, you know, has its spiritual meaning, which to the literal meaning is what the

soul is to the body'….The individual imagination, like the disembodied reflections in the stream, is part of the Divine Mind...The differentiation between symbolism and allegory...is thus seen to be allied to Coleridge's fundamental distinction between imagination and fancy. Using some of Coleridge's terms, it may be said that symbolism is esemplastic, since it shapes new wholes; whereas allegory deals with fixities and definites that it does not basically modify."

F. O. Matthiessen
American Renaissance:
Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman
(Oxford 1941, 1962) 199--312

"With respect to his technical attainments, critics are in substantial agreement. More than with most, his style was a natural gift, recognized even in college. It was, however, perfected by years of conscious effort before any of his finished work became widely known. His vocabulary is superbly adequate without the offensive repetition of pet words encountered in Poe. The contribution of verbal art to the mass effect of his outstanding scenes is not to be denied."

Bartholow V. Crawford, Alexander C. Kern, Morriss H. Needleman
American Literature: College Outline Series
(Barnes & Noble 1945-61) 118-19

"Perhaps the primary virtue of *The Scarlet Letter* is stylistic: its unity and perfection of tone….In the end, our study of Hawthorne leaves us with an abiding sense of the integrity of his mind and art. Few American writers have obeyed so implicitly as he the imperious, unconscious dictates of genius….His art, however narrow, remained supremely natural, without pretense, defying imitation. In the center of his being, deeper even than his passion for perfect expression, lay a microcosm of the New England Puritan mind."

Stanley T. Williams
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 416, 420-25, 439-40

"Flaubert and Hawthorne had not a little in common: the same search for perfection, the same mixture of realism and romanticism."

Malcolm Cowley, ed.
Introduction
The Portable Hawthorne (1948)

"Hawthorne was the first writer of fiction in America to deal profoundly with the most serious problem that confronts man: the problem of good and evil....Hawthorne has an acute ear. The speech of his characters is consistently authentic and dramatic. His eloquence, at times Miltonic, in phrases such as "the smile of welcome gleamed darkly on every visage," ["Young Goodman Brown"] contributes to the action as well as to the tonal effect of the whole. The symbolism is on the grand scale, and that, in the end, is the distinguishing feature of Hawthorne's work. Even when we deplore flaws in the execution of his stories we stand amazed at the loftiness of his conceptions. In him we see the play of a first-rate imagination whose workings remain, in the end, unaccountable."

Caroline Gordon
The House of Fiction
(Scribner's 1950, 1960) 36-38

"We are, or should be, struck…by the mastery Hawthorne achieves in a new form of prose art, by the skill with which he manages to convey ironic inflexions and to control transitions from one layer of meaning to another, and by which he turns, as it was to become his great distinction to do, history into myth and anecdote into parable….These writings of Hawthorne's, to yield all they offer, must be studied as a whole, as a poet's works are, each illuminating and strengthening the rest."

Q. D. Leavis
"Hawthorne as Poet"
The Sewanee Review LIX (1951) 180-205

"His prose is as fine as any we have to show in America….From [Sir Walter] Scott, Hawthorne learned how to tell a story, as we may still see plainly by reference to the experimental *Fanshawe* [1828], where virtually every aspect of the Wizard's technique is dutifully imitated….Hawthorne…soon came to feel that Scott's kind of historical novel had its limitations. He turned to masters who seemed to him better qualified to supply the 'more earnest purpose,' the 'deeper moral,' the 'closer and homelier truth' that the world now required. These he found in Spenser and Bunyan….Melville found in his tales 'a depth of tenderness…a boundless sympathy with all forms of being…an omnipresent love'….The indifference to abstract 'ideas' is as evident in his journals as his great gift for minute and particular observation. He realized the danger of losing touch with life, and he used his notebooks as the source of a thousand scenes and characters which he had actually observed."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 38-39, 41, 53-54, 57

"The light in Hawthorne is clarity of design. He has a classic balance; his language is exquisitely lucid. He gives one the sense of an invulnerable dignity and centrality; he is impenetrably self-possessed. His clarity is intermingled with subtlety, his statement interfused with symbolism, his affirmation enriched with ambiguity….[His] ambiguity was a chiaroscuro effect which deepened the tints of his picture….[He] uses ambiguity structurally to create suspense and retard conclusions, especially in tales where the primary emphasis would otherwise be too clear….Hawthorne judges relentlessly, yet with sympathy, and his ambiguity always leaves room for a different verdict [than his own]….

[His] effects of light—his shadows, his mirror images, his masquerades—all examine the relationships of appearance and reality….He combines sympathy [heart] with a classic aloofness, participation with cool observation [head]. 'My father,' said Julian Hawthorne, 'was two men, one sympathetic and intuitional, the other critical and logical; together they formed a combination which could not be thrown off its feet.' Thus Hawthorne's writing has a tone of exquisite gravity, harmonized strangely with a pervasive irony and humor….

Hawthorne still suffers from our prejudice against allegory. This prejudice comes partly from a false theory of realism, a legacy of the late nineteenth century, and partly from a misconception of what allegory is. We assume that allegory subordinates everything to a predetermined conclusion: that allegory, in short, is a dishonest counterfeit of literary value. But the great allegories, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, possess the literary virtues….Allegory is organic to Hawthorne, an innate quality of his vision. It is his disposition to find spiritual meaning in all things natural and human. This faculty is an inheritance from the Puritans, who saw in everything God's will. To this inheritance was added a gift from nineteenth-century Romanticism, which endowed the natural world with meaning by seeing it as life. In Hawthorne allegory is inseparable from moral complexity and aesthetic design."

Richard Harter Fogle
Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark
(U Oklahoma 1952, 1964) 4-5, 7, 10-13, 212, 221-22, 226, 231, 233-34

"His special quality as a writer is a function of his unique relationship to both the form and the content of traditional Christian allegory on the one hand and to modern symbolism on the other….It meant transforming traditional allegory into a mythopoeic art sometimes close to Bunyan and Spenser, sometimes close to Faulkner, but at its best in an area all its own….All the best of Hawthorne's tales exist in the area bounded by allegory and history, archetype and myth….The Romantic artist creates, Hawthorne thought, by transforming fact into symbol…into *meaningful* fact."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
Hawthorne: A Critical Study
(Harvard 1955, 1963) 204, 261, 264, 266

"Poe was one of the first critics to greet his rival in the prose tale, Nathaniel Hawthorne, as an artist rather than as a moralist. His review of *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842…contains perhaps the best early definition of the short-story form and ranks Hawthorne as the best practitioner of the art….His tales 'belong

to the highest region of Art'…His unified tone is one of repose, he consistently seeks Truth, he observes a necessary brevity, and above all, he has 'invention, creation, imagination, originality—a trait which, in the literature of fiction, is possibly worth all the rest'."

Robert E. Spiller
The Cycle of American Literature
(Collier-Macmillan 1955) 59-63

"Beyond his remarkable sense of the past, which gives a genuine ring to the historical reconstructions, beyond his precise and simple style, which is in the great tradition of familiar narrative, the principal appeal of his work is in the quality of its allegory, always richly ambivalent, providing enigmas which each reader solves in his own terms."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 1, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-67) 506

"His mind was formed pre-eminently by allegorists like Bunyan and Spenser and by the rationalistic mentality of the eighteenth century (his very syntax shows the influence)…His symbols are broadly traditional, coming to him from the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, and Bunyan—the light and the dark, the forest and the town, the dark woman the fair woman, the fountain, the mirror, the cavern of the heart, the river, the sea, Eden, the rose, the serpent, fire and so on."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 77, 79, 81, 83

"His literary reputation has maintained its high place more steadily than has that of any other major American writer….What [Young Goodman] Brown eventually realized was that…everything he saw was but an outward manifestation of his own inner state of mind. When Hawthorne wrote 'The Maypole of Merry Mount,' this method of objectifying inner states of being had become a key to his craft. The forest, the shower of withering rose petals, and the groan of the falling tree are not so much actions in nature as they are signs of what is occurring in the minds and hearts of Edith and Edgar. Indeed, the world 'becomes psychology' for the characters….Hawthorne's artistic excellence is nowhere better demonstrated than in his power of deepening the commonplace, simple truths of human life."

Edward H. Davidson
Major Writers of America 1
(Harcourt 1962) 687-90

"Despite the relative uneventfulness of his life, there are more biographies of Hawthorne than of any other American literary man….Puritan seriousness and its tradition of self-searching led to moral and psychological profundity, and the Puritan habit of looking to natural events for spiritual meaning provided Hawthorne with a method and a way of seeing….Hawthorne also inherited the 18th-century Augustan culture, overlaying the 17th century Puritan in him. He thus exhibited a certain coolness and classic balance, a strong respect for moderation and reason that was at odds with other instincts in him....He differs from contemporary writers in his willingness to state his meanings directly and in general terms, but his 'morals' are integral elements of his art, not substitutions for it nor prescribed interpretations of it; his stories present themselves as imaginative wholes, their life diffused throughout….

Hawthorne's foreshadowings, or…his prefigurations, are extremely artful….Ambiguity…is a device of art for significant emphasis, with a certain Platonic and also Christian distinction between appearance and reality underlying it….As a device of 'alternative possibilities' or of 'multiple choice' Hawthorne's use of ambiguities is also a means of securing density and objectivity….He makes his judgments, but he permits the reader a choice: no less than four interpretations of Dimmesdale's death are proposed in *The Scarlet Letter*, although it is pretty clear which one is Hawthorne's preference. Alternatively, his ambiguities expose a basic caution and skepticism in Hawthorne: skepticism even of his own judgment. His caution, however, seldom leads him into indecision."

Richard H. Fogle
Eight American Writers: An Anthology of American Literature

(Norton 1963) 582, 585-86, 588, 590-92

"Hawthorne experimented extensively with literary forms and techniques, trying out or discovering for himself…a wide variety of possible modes ranging from the whimsical, the legendary, and the allegorical to the panoramic, the pictorial, and the dramatic….A deeply 'American' writer, Hawthorne is also a peculiarly 'modern' writer….He introduced into the art of prose narrative a severe…sense of structure as well as the rigorous economies and concentrations of effect upon which the novel prides itself today but which, before his time, were mostly confined to the arts of drama and poetry."

A. N. Kaul, ed.
Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays
(Prentice-Hall/Spectrum/Twentieth Century Views 1966) 1-3, 5-6

"[Flannery O'Connor] mentions…that she learned something from Hawthorne (to whom she would later refer increasingly), Flaubert, and Balzac."

Sally Fitzgerald
Introduction to *Three by Flannery O'Connor*
(Penguin/Signet 1983) viii

"The most important thing to recognize is that by the early 1830s religious allegory, once a quite rigid genre used for illustration of Puritan doctrine, had become a most flexible and adaptable one, fully available for purely literary manipulation by writers like Hawthorne and Melville."

David S. Reynolds
Beneath the American Renaissance:
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville
(Harvard 1989) 38

PROSE STYLE

Hawthorne's style was an assimilation from the whole literary history of western civilization. By the age of 6 he was deep into the major allegorists of the English Renaissance--Bunyan, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. They nourished his poetic sensibility, enlarged his vocabulary and influenced the rhythms of his prose, making it possible for him to use Elizabethan language and rhetoric in *The Scarlet Letter*. Their allegorical thinking along with the *Bible*, especially the parables of Jesus, shaped his own thinking at an early age, then got reinforced by his exhaustive reading of the allegorical writing of the American Puritans. He was said to have read every book in the Salem Atheneum, his local library.

Also from an early age he read fairy tales and legends that contributed to his rendering of transcendent reality and psychological transformation. At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, for one example, Pearl is suddenly transformed from a wild child into a Victorian woman as in a fairy tale: "A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies." Hawthorne made the supernatural reality evoked by fairy tales and myths a device for evoking the supernatural reality of Christianity. To that end he published two books of Greek myths rewritten with morals for children. Myths and fairy tales contributed to his rendering of wonder and awe: "I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!" "The impudent fiend!...Thank Heaven it was a Dream!" Myths and fairy tales also led him to express the supernatural in what would later be called science fiction, in "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter": "Rappaccini! and is *this* the upshot of your experiment!"

He proceeded to read all the major 18th century writers--Fielding, Smollett, Rousseau, Godwin, Monk Lewis, Mrs. Radcliffe, Lord Byron, and nearly all the works of his favorite, Sir Walter Scott, the romancer of past glory. He aborted his first novel, *Fanshawe* (1828) because it was an unsuccessful effort to blend allegory with historical romance in clear imitation of Scott. The Gothic writers contributed further to his treatment of the supernatural and the rationalists of the 18th century to his balance of the head and the heart. At Bowdoin College he received a rigorous Neoclassical education that included Latin and Greek, which determined his basically Neoclassical prose style. Throughout his life he retained an appreciation for the rationalists Swift and Dr. Samuel Johnson, both of whose works he contributed to Bowdoin after his graduation. The Neoclassicism that balances his Romanticism is also evident in the little periodical he

edited with his young sister Elizabeth called the *Spectator* (1820) after the famous English periodical. Although his style appears mostly Victorian because of its explicit moralizing, his rationalism disciplines his Romanticism with multiple points of view and ostensible ambiguity, the "alternative possibilities" for interpreting his symbolism.

OSTENSIBLE AMBIGUITY

The inability of some critics to interpret Hawthorne led to a casebook called *The Hawthorne Question* based on his alleged ambiguity. Hawthorne is never ambiguous. He was a moralist. He draws the reader into his story with ostensible ambiguity, but he always implies his own judgment. For example, at the end of "Young Goodman Brown" he asks, "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" This is a rhetorical question: He immediately accepts that interpretation himself: "Be it so if you will; but, alas! *it was a dream* of evil omen..." [Italics added.]

Similarly, at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* he offers 4 different answers to the question of whether there was a visible scarlet letter on the breast of Dimmesdale, but the alternatives are not equal: (4) the most obviously false is the last, that there was no letter there at all, but those witnesses are impeached by their denial, contrary to the implications throughout the story, that Dimmesdale has any connection whatsoever to the guilt of Hester. The other three alternatives are arranged in ascending order of probability, which was standard in the traditional Neoclassical rhetoric Hawthorne was taught in school:

(1) The first is given the fewest words: that Dimmesdale "inflicted a hideous torture on himself." This is a merely external physical cause. (2) The second is given more words: that Chillingworth inflicted the letter through "magic and poisonous drugs." This would make Dimmesdale an innocent victim rather than a sinner. (3) The third alternative is the one consistent with the themes and implications of the story as a whole, is given the most words by far, plus argument, plus rhetorical force, plus the *last* position in a series of alternatives, plus the authority of God: "Others, again,--and those *best able* to appreciate the minister's peculiar sensibility, and the wonderful operation of his spirit upon the body--whispered their belief, that the awful symbol was the effect of the ever active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at last manifesting *Heaven's dreadful judgment* by the visible presence of the letter. The reader may choose among these theories." [italics added]

SYMBOLS AND ICONS

Hawthorne uses the archetypal spaces of City/Garden/Wilderness/Sky more consciously, deliberately and systematically than any other writer. His consistent use of these symbolic spaces provides a clear basic structure for his subtle allegories. Location, location, location. This is primary in understanding Hawthorne, as the meaning of everything depends on location, or setting. Nature is always symbolic. Hawthorne grew so frustrated by the inability of his readers to understand his symbolism he resorted to explaining it in the midst of describing the Pynchon garden in *The House of the Seven* Gables: "The evil of these departed years would naturally have sprung up again, in such rank weeds (symbolic of the transmitted vices of society) as are always prone to root themselves about human dwellings."

Also helpful to interpretation is Hawthorne's consistent use of icons--symbolic images with fixed meanings--as thematic motifs, including: Eden, head, heart, cavern of the heart, sunshine, shadow, veil, mirror, iron, prison, rose, weeds, forest, main street, railroad, watch, east, west, hearth, church, fountain, angel, devil, serpent, fire and “magnetic chain of humanity.” Houses appear throughout his fiction variously symbolizing an individual psyche, a collective family heart or soul, colonial government, current society and its customs, and so on. The fixed meanings of his iconic images in allegories give his art an hieratic authority and static beauty like stained glass windows in a church.

ALLEGORY

Hawthorne is exceptional as a master of the most intellectually complex form of narrative, a quantum leap in degree of difficulty for a writer. Traditional allegories of *signs* were so unrealistic they were usually given the form of dreams. Applying the distinction made by Coleridge, *signs* are contrived and manipulated by the “fancy,” whereas *symbols* are generated naturally by "creative imagination" that connects them in

allegorical patterns. What makes Hawthorne and Melville so much greater than most other writers is their ability to create an illusion of reality, the aesthetic value later championed by Henry James the Realist, while at the same time their narratives correspond precisely--image after image--to ideas in an allegory of *symbols*, like a synthesis of Aristotle and Plato.

Hawthorne had a Christian frame of mind and read Nature as the allegorical art of God, revealing human psychology and divine Truth. He and Melville are able to induce vicarious transcendent experience in perceptive readers through holistic allegories of symbols that simultaneously engage both hemispheres of the brain and faculties of the whole psyche--intellect, intuition and imagination--in a union of the concrete and the figurative, the flesh and the spirit, the part and the whole, with religious import comparable to the *Bible*. Hawthorne's idealism is pervasive in all that he wrote, but is most evident in the allegory of his individuation as an artist, "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844).

MORALITY

Although he dislikes appending a moral at the end of a tale as by impaling a butterfly with a pin, Hawthorne makes explicit moral judgments throughout his work, from a Victorian rather than an early Puritan perspective. His Victorianism in values and style is most evident in "The Old Manse," written in his honeymoon cottage soon after his marriage--idealistic, effusive and exclamatory. In his darker fiction, Hawthorne softens his moral judgments with (1) Christian charity; (2) generous pastoral sentiments, balancing the head with the heart; (3) criticism of Puritan excesses of the head and deficiencies of the heart, in particular dehumanizing sign language--the letter A; (4) understanding of moral and psychological complexity; (5) a tone genteel, reserved, humble and sensitive; (6) a Neoclassical style that allows multiple interpretations while making its own modestly, sometimes only by implication; (7) allegory that makes moral arguments indirectly by illustration, like the parables of Jesus.

THE PURITAN AS METAPHOR

The Puritan is a motif in Hawthorne. His ambivalence toward the historical Puritans is expressed in "Main Street," his allegorical panorama of New England history: "Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank Him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages." But as in "The Maypole of Merry Mount" the Puritans are not just literal historical figures credited with having "laid the rock foundation of New England," they also personify the reality principle and the "sternest cares of life." Puritanism is archetypal--in every head--transcending history. The puritan in your head is what says, "That's *not* funny!"

Michael Hollister (2020)