

Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Canon of American Literature

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Hawthorne worried that his “writings do not, nor ever will, appeal to the broadest class of sympathies,” and this, he was convinced, meant they would “not attain a very wide popularity.” In this estimate he was too modest, for his work has been at the center of the American canon since the first copies of *The Scarlet Letter* came off the press.

In this overview of Hawthorne’s place in American literary history, Bridget Marshall sketches the broad outlines of Hawthorne’s career, from his difficult beginnings to his ultimate canonization. She sees an idealistic author buffeted by the unpleasant realities of nineteenth-century politics. Her essay describes some of the ways Hawthorne managed to translate his own biography into fiction, and along the way provides a useful starting point for thinking about Hawthorne as a uniquely American author. — J.L.

Born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne would eventually become known as a key figure in American letters. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction—particularly his short stories “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)—are some of the most well-known pieces of writing in American literature of this period; however, during his lifetime, Hawthorne struggled to make it as a professional writer and was often uneasy about his place in American literature. According to Stanley Bank, Hawthorne “may stand as a symbol of the nineteenth-century American author and his predicament” (8). Hawthorne struggled throughout his career to make a living as a writer and to create an American literary tradition. Bank explains that he “struggled with the problem of the relevance of the artist to the world and the meaning of art to America” (8). Hawthorne’s sometimes ambivalent feelings about the literary

life and the literary market are apparent throughout his journals and letters.

Hawthorne was descended from New England Puritans; his was the fifth generation of the family in America. Among his most notable ancestors was John Hathorne, who served as one of the judges in the Salem witch trials of the 1690s. Lore has it that Hawthorne added the “w” to his name to disassociate himself from this ancestor’s legacy; however, the reason for the name change is not clear. He did in fact publish two stories under the name “Nathaniel Hathorne” in 1830—“Sights from a Steeple” in *The Token*, and “The Hollow of the Three Hills” in *The Salem Gazette*. He frequently used a variety of pseudonyms for his early writings, but after these two stories in 1830, he never used “Hathorne” again and gave his name as “Hawthorne” from that point on.

Despite what some have called his isolation, Hawthorne led a life filled with connections to the prominent literary and political minds of his day. During his years at Bowdoin College in Maine, where he was a student from 1821 to 1824, he developed friendships with poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and future fourteenth United States president, Franklin Pierce. Later in his life, he enjoyed friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville. His letters and journals tell us much about the pleasure he gained from these relationships, and the reviews that these authors wrote of his work also show that he benefited professionally from his alliances with this circle of writers.

While in college, Hawthorne was concerned about his future ability to support himself (and a family) financially. He was disdainful of a variety of professions. In an 1821 letter to his mother, Elizabeth Hathorne, he dismissed a variety of potential careers—minister, lawyer, physician—for which he felt himself unsuitable, and lamented “Oh that I was rich enough to live without a profession” (295). He further queried his mother, “What do you think of my becoming an Author, and relying for support upon my pen” (295). He suggested (we must assume jokingly) that his qualification to the job was mostly that he