The Tales and Romances
Hawthorne's primary concern as a writer was to gain access to what he once called "the kingdom of possibilities." Repeatedly, he speaks of his need to attenuate the American insistence on actuality. The burden of the prefaces to his major romances is that he requires a latitude for his imagination, a "neutral ground" set metaphorically between the real world and the imaginary. His romances take form—he would have us believe—in the context of poetic precincts and fairy lands, part of the geography of the "neutral ground." Hawthorne's effort
to dilate reality for the purposes of his art ends only with the significant admission in his introductory letter to Our Old Home in 1863 that “the Present, the Immediate, the Actual, has proved too potent for me.”

What all such statements signify is that Hawthorne needed a fiction to create fiction. And long before he turned his energies to the romance, he had confronted the problem of how to bring his fiction into being in the form of the tale. The method of Hawthorne’s tales reveals the achievement of a writer who had to establish the conditions of his fiction in the very act of creating that fiction itself. As he himself acknowledged, Hawthorne did not improve steadily as a writer of tales. Some of his best work came surprisingly early: “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” “Young Goodman Brown,” and “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” were first published in 1832, 1835, and 1836, respectively. Slight tales appeared in the same year with major tales. Twice-Told Tales (1837) was considered superior as a collection to Mosses from an Old Manse (1846) by Poe, Melville, and most later critics. Yet “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844) and “Ethan Brand” (1850) clearly attempt and achieve more than do, say, “The White Old Maid” (1835) and “Mrs. Bullfrog” (1837). The movement of Hawthorne’s tales, indirect and often unsure, is toward The Scarlet Letter. But it took twenty years of striving before Hawthorne’s triumph in The Scarlet Letter exhausted the tale for him as a working form even as it transformed the tale into the romance. During those years Hawthorne tried continually to set the proper conditions for his fiction as a way of resolving his most fundamental problem as a writer.

THE CONDITIONS OF FICTION

Hawthorne opens “The Hollow of the Three Hills” (1830) with an abrupt evocation of a mysterious past: “In those strange
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old times, when fantastic dreams and madmen’s reveries were realized among the actual circumstances of life, two persons met together at an appointed time and place.” He begins, that is, by equating the real and the fantastic. If there were such a time, we see immediately, when dreams and reveries existed as a part of actual life, then surely there could be no more congenial setting for his tale. As the condition of his fiction, Hawthorne postulates the existence of “strange old times,” then uses the immense latitude he thereby acquires to relate a tale of domestic tragedy from a thoroughly non-domestic point of view.

By means of the crone’s powers, with their suggestion of Satanic darkness, the lady of the tale can look back into her life to see the tragic consequences of her actions. She has wrung the hearts of her parents, betrayed her husband, and “sinned against natural affection” by leaving her child to die. Amid a setting redolent of witchcraft and evil, she experiences her visions of society. After each vision, Hawthorne makes a studied transition back to the hollow, thereby reinforcing the reality principle of the tale. For this is where the lady’s sins have led her. She must consort with witchcraft and devilry if she is to have even a glimpse of society. To measure the distance of her fall, she must make use of powers antithetical to heart and home. Taking advantage of the latitude assumed in (and achieved by) his abrupt opening sentence, Hawthorne has turned the world as we ordinarily know it inside out—we see society only in momentary visions from the standpoint of the marvelous. He has managed the form of his tale so that it embodies in a unique way a theme characteristic of his work.

The opening sentence of “The Hollow of the Three Hills” constitutes a Hawthornesque variation of the time-honored opening of the fairy tale. It was a method of getting his fiction immediately under way which Hawthorne would use repeatedly. “The Great Carbuncle” (1837), for example, begins, “At night-
fall, once in the olden time. . . .” In “The Lily’s Quest” (1839), this has become “Two lovers, once upon a time. . . .” And in “Earth’s Holocaust” (1844), “Once upon a time—but whether in the time past or the time to come is a matter of little or no moment. . . .” By adopting the convention of the fairy tale, Hawthorne achieves at a stroke the imaginative freedom he requires. And most often he shapes the ensuing tale into a modern fable complete with a moral regarding human wisdom or folly. The lesson of “Earth’s Holocaust” is that reform will fail if the human heart is not first purified. “The Great Carbuncle” points up the wisdom of rejecting a jewel which would dim “all earthly things” in favor of the “cheerful glow” of the hearth. “The Lily’s Quest” spells out laboriously the idea that happiness is predicated on eternity. Wrought with greater discipline, “The Hollow of the Three Hills” does not offer a moral refrain. What it says about human guilt and woe is implicit in the achieved drama of the tale, which stands as the best evidence of what Hawthorne could realize in fiction by adopting the method of the fairy tale to the uses of the imagination.

Emerson complained that Hawthorne “invites his readers too much into his study, opens the process before them. As if the confectioner should say to his customers, ‘Now, let us make a cake.’” With his usual shrewdness, Emerson was right; though one need not endorse his criticism, there can be no doubt that Hawthorne frequently assembles the materials of a tale and prescribes the proper recipe before the reader’s eye. Both “David Swan” (1837) and “Fancy’s Show Box” (1837), for example, move explicitly from the statement of an idea to its illustration. Of numerous events that might have had a momentous influence on our lives we are totally unaware, says Hawthorne in “David Swan”: “This idea may be illustrated by a page from the secret history of David Swan.” Are we guilty in thought as
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well as in act?, Hawthorne asks in “Fancy’s Show Box”: “Let us illustrate the subject by an imaginary example.” In “The Threefold Destiny” (1838), Hawthorne’s workshop method is even more clearly exemplified. “I have sometimes produced a singular and not unpleasing effect,” he begins,

so far as my own mind was concerned, by imagining a train of incidents in which the spirit and the mechanism of the fairy legend should be combined with the characters and manners of familiar life. In the little tale which follows, a subdued tinge of the wild and wonderful is thrown over a sketch of New England personages and scenery, yet, it is hoped, without entirely obliterating the sober hues of nature. Rather than a story of events claiming to be real, it may be considered as an allegory, such as the writers of the last century would have expressed in the shape of an Eastern tale, but to which I have endeavored to give a more life-like warmth than could be infused into those fanciful productions.

Such a paragraph obviously serves as an unannounced preface. (The first paragraph of “Roger Malvin’s Burial” [1832] has a similar function.) Indeed, Hawthorne’s later prefaces are extensions of his workshop method, which typically defines the mode of fictional creation at the outset as a way of making what I have called the conditions of his fiction understood.

Any writer who faces the necessity of establishing the conditions of his fiction will feel a concomitant need to explain processes and intentions to his reader. And such a writer will pay a price for doing so much by himself; he will necessarily expend much creative energy experimenting to gain “effects”; he will, perhaps, endeavor to blend the old with the new, the strange with the familiar, sometimes (as in “The Threefold Destiny”) to little purpose. To succeed as an artist, he will have to do the work of generations in a single lifetime and incorporate the mistakes, false starts, and indirections that ordinarily dwarf
careers into the broad investment of his genius. Hawthorne would probably have written fewer slight tales had he worked with the legacy of an older literature. Alternatively, he might well have achieved less; for there would simply have been less to do.

In keeping with Hawthorne’s stated intention, “The Threefold Destiny” is subtitled “A Fairy Legend.” And it is among a number of Hawthorne’s tales having this kind of subtitle. “Fancy’s Show Box” is “A Morality”; “David Swan” is “A Fantasy.” Such subtitles are neither elaborations of the main title itself nor do they function as alternative titles in the manner of subtitles in many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels. In “Night Sketches: Beneath an Umbrella” (1838) and in “Egotism; or, the Bosom Serpent” (1843), to take but two examples, Hawthorne did use subtitles in these conventional ways. But “A Morality” and “A Fantasy,” as well as “A Parable” (for “The Minister’s Black Veil” [1836]), “An Imaginary Retrospect” (for “The Village Uncle” [1835]), “An Apologue” (for both “The Man of Adamant” [1837] and “The Lily’s Quest”), and “A Moralized Legend” (for “Feathertop” [1852])—such subtitles are attempts to describe the form of the tales. They tell not what the tale is about, but what the tale is. They are explicit indications of the kind of fiction Hawthorne is endeavoring to write. And it is always a kind which will allow him latitude.

Characteristically, Hawthorne uses twilight as an analogue of the “neutral ground” to achieve his imaginative effects. “The white sunshine of actual life,” he says in “The Hall of Fantasy” (1843), is antagonistic to the imagination, which requires access to a region of shadow if it is to function creatively. Young Goodman Brown begins his shattering journey into the forest at sunset. “The Great Carbuncle” begins at nightfall. After the prefatory paragraph in “The Threefold Destiny,” Hawthorne
begins the tale proper with "the twilight of a summer eve." And the settings of "The White Old Maid," "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," and many other tales depend heavily on twilight, shadow, and Gothic effects.

Twilight is the middle time, between the noon of actuality and the midnight of dream. It corresponds to the point between yesterday and tomorrow that constitutes the setting of "The Haunted Mind" (1835), that profoundly metaphorical sketch in which Hawthorne presents a musing dramatization of the creative process. On the borders of sleep and wakefulness, dream and reality meet and merge. The actual and the imaginary each partake of the nature of the other; the conditions of fiction are displayed in paradigm. But just as it is difficult to remain on the borders of sleep and wakefulness, so the twilight atmosphere can be difficult to sustain. Before the legends themselves are told, the narrator of "Legends of the Province House" (1838-39) draws "strenuously" on his imagination in an effort to invest a contemporary tavern with an aura of the past. While concerns of historical grandeur and plebeian actuality remain with Hawthorne's narrator in the framework, the inner tales move expansively in a twilight of legend. At the end of a tale, the narrator strives to maintain the illusion it has created; but a spoon rattling in a tumbler of whiskey punch, a schedule for the Brookline stage, and the Boston Times—couriers of "the Present, the Immediate, the Actual"—quickly defeat his efforts. "It is desperately hard work," he concludes, "to throw the spell of hoar antiquity over localities with which the living world, and the day that is passing over us, have aught to do."

In his legends of the province house, and in other tales as well, Hawthorne equates revolutionary tendencies with the democratic aspirations of the people; colonial history comes to prefigure the spirit of the American Revolution. Wearing old Puritan dress, the Gray Champion (1835) answers the cry of
an oppressed people. Typically, as a figure evoked onto a historical neutral ground by the imagination, he stands between the colonists and the British soldiers in an "intervening space," with "almost a twilight shadow over it"; when he disappears, some think he has melted "slowly into the hues of twilight." But he will be at Lexington in the next century, says Hawthorne, "in the twilight of an April morning." For the Gray Champion "is the type of New England's hereditary spirit," opposed equally to domestic tyranny and to the step of the invader.

Endicott's defiance of English authority in "Endicott and the Red Cross" (1837) is presented explicitly as a rehearsal for the American Revolution. "We look back through the mist of ages," writes Hawthorne, "and recognize in the rending of the Red Cross from New England's banner the first omen of that deliverance which our fathers consummated after the bones of the stern Puritan had lain more than a century in the dust." Brooding over the meaning of American colonial history, Hawthorne's imagination came to see and to formulate a continuity in the American Revolutionary spirit. At a time when American writers labored under the constraints of a lack of tradition, Hawthorne employed the colonial past as one effective way of achieving the imaginative latitude he required. His sense of the past is not at all simplistic. If the Puritans embody a spirit that was to find fullest expression in the American Revolution, they are also, in Hawthorne's presentation, harsh, cruel, blind to all liberties but their own. Endicott can resist oppression in one breath and show himself a raging zealot in the next. "Let us thank God," Hawthorne writes of the Puritans in "Main Street" (1849), "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." In his tales of colonial times, Hawthorne makes
Americans see what they had been as a way of showing them more fully what they are.

"... WHAT PRISONERS WE ARE."

During the years immediately following his marriage in 1842, Hawthorne wrote a number of tales distinct in form from his previous work. In these tales—which include "The Procession of Life," "The Celestial Railroad," "The Christmas Banquet," "A Select Party," and "The Hall of Fantasy"—he examines subjects such as reform, social organization, human folly, and modern religiosity. "The Procession of Life" supplies a term to describe the group as a whole. They are, in one way or another, processionals. They are set perhaps in a vague banquet hall, on an undefined prairie, or in a castle in the air; they deal with assemblages of people who are characterized and moved about collectively. In his processionals, Hawthorne assumes such largeness of treatment that he necessarily confronts general human problems in a general way. No personal drama of guilt or suffering could be portrayed effectively by means of such a form, which explores subjects in themselves and achieves latitude by the expedient of perspective. Surely not among his best tales, the processionals do show Hawthorne striving for the kind of effect that only experimentation with the form of the tale would yield.

Among the subjects considered in the processionals is the role of the imagination in human life. "A Select Party," for example, describes an "entertainment" given by a man of fancy at "one of his castles in the air." Many on earth lack "imaginative faith" and are unworthy to attend. But among the admired guests are the Master Genius of the age, who will fulfil the literary destiny of his country, and Posterity, who advises all to live for their own age if they would gain lasting recognition. During the festivities, a sudden thunderstorm ex-
tistinguishes the lights and reduces the party to confusion. "How, in the darkness that ensued," writes Hawthorne, the guests got back to earth, or whether they got "back at all, or are still wandering among clouds, mists, and puffs of tempestuous wind, bruised by the beams and rafters of the overthrown castle in the air, and deluded by all sorts of unrealities, are points that concern themselves much more than the writer or the public." He concludes with the admonition that "people should think of these matters before they thrust themselves on a pleasure party into the realm of Nowhere."

Innocuous as it might seem, "A Select Party" teaches a complex lesson about the imagination. "Imaginative faith," as defined by Hawthorne, would seem to be a highly desirable trait; those who lack it are bound heavily to the earth. The presence of the Master Genius and of Posterity seems to add ballast to the more fanciful "creatures of imagination"—such as a cadaverous figure who is in the habit of dining with Duke Humphrey (that is, not eating at all). The tone of the piece is at once serious and sportive. Yet there is the final doubt that the party-goers can get back to earth. In a context of frivolity, Hawthorne's admonition comes as a joke. And it is indeed a joke—on the reader as well as the party-goers. We begin to laugh, then realize that the guests, bruised and misled, may be trapped in the realm of the imagination. But there is more to our realization; for in reading the tale, we, too, have been trapped, artistically sandbagged (for it is, after all, Hawthorne's party), forced to enact the foolishness of the party-goers and to share, in some surprise, their fate.

In "The Hall of Fantasy," Hawthorne ponders the "mystic region, which lies above, below, or beyond the actual." The Hall has its obvious dangers: some mistake it for "actual brick and mortar"; others live there permanently "and contract habits which unfit them for all the real employments of life." Still,
for “all its dangerous influences, we have reason to thank God that there is such a place of refuge from the gloom and chillness of actual life.” Those who never find their way into the Hall possess “but half a life—the meaner and earthlier half.” But the imagination has a final value, crucial and unambiguous. In “The New Adam and Eve” (1843), Hawthorne’s thesis is that we have lost the means of distinguishing between the workings of nature and those of art. “It is only through the medium of the imagination,” he goes on to say, “that we can lessen those iron fetters, which we call truth and reality, and make ourselves even partially sensible what prisoners we are.” Implicit here, in its largest and most general manifestation, is the motif of withdrawal and return basic to Hawthorne’s fiction. One withdraws into the realm of imagination, views the rigorous confinement of life, then returns to the world with a fuller understanding of the human condition. The ultimate function of the imagination is thus to serve as a unique and judicious critic of reality.

The role of fiction is the product of the role of the imagination. At their best, Hawthorne’s tales—public proof that the author has returned from a private journey into the imagination—lessen the fetters of reality so that we may see “what prisoners we are.” At their best, the tales invite us to consider the difficulties man faces because he cannot face his humanity. The tales tell us that man must acknowledge his dependence on (even as he should rejoice to participate in) “the magnetic chain of humanity.” The alternative is abstraction, a preference for idea, which breeds pride, isolation, and ultimate self-destruction.

The cancer of obsession threatens any Hawthorne character—scientist, man of religion, artist—who prefers an idea to a human being. Aylmer and Rappaccini; Richard Digby (Hawthorne’s “man of adamant”), the Shakers, and the Puritans and Quakers
in “The Gentle Boy” (1832); the painter in “The Prophetic Pictures” (1837)—all seek to exist on the high, desolate plane of idea beyond the slopes of compassion and love. In historical tales, too, Hawthorne’s concern for humanity is evident. The terms of his presentation change: tyranny and oppression represent abstraction, the insistence on idea; the will of the people—democracy—represents humanity. The Gray Champion, a people’s hero, resists oppression, which Hawthorne defines as “the deformity of any government that does not grow out of the nature of things and the character of the people.” For all his irritability and iron nature, Hawthorne’s Endicott stands likewise for the people; thus, he can legitimately oppose any force which seeks to abrogate the rights of the colonists as human beings. And in “Edward Randolph’s Portrait” (1838), Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson risks the terror of a “people’s curse” by allowing British soldiers to occupy the fort.

If the oppressor seeks to abuse man in history, the reformer seeks to disabuse man of history; both dehumanize. To make mankind conform to the good as he sees it, the reformer wields his one idea like a flail. He repudiates history as the record of man’s imperfection and seeks to destroy human foibles by the purity of his idea. The spirit of reform that spreads wildly in “Earth’s Holocaust” seeks to burn away the follies and fric­ep­eries of the past. But all reformers overlook the nature of the heart (which is to say, the nature of man). Unless the heart is purified, says the dark stranger in the tale, “forth from it will reissue all the shapes of wrong and misery” which the reformers have burned to ashes.

In “Ethan Brand,” Hawthorne articulates most explicitly the theme of a man of idea that had run through his fiction for almost twenty years. The definition and focus of the tale are precise; an obsession with one idea has completely vanquished the heart, turning it to marble. “Ethan Brand” bears the subtitle
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“A Chapter from an Abortive Romance,” and there are several references in the narrative to episodes that have supposedly taken place at an earlier time. Hawthorne presents us with a conclusion, a final chapter. And incomplete as it may be with reference to his original conception, it has a ring of finality, the authority of a literary work that embodies a theme simply and precisely.

Ethan Brand commits a mighty sin of presumption which prefigures his final despair. The quest to commit a sin so vast that God cannot forgive it becomes itself the Unpardonable Sin. In the hour of his greatest despair, Ethan Brand stands revealed as a success; his quest becomes a parable of how to succeed at spiritual self-destruction. And his triumphant suicide is a final gesture for many a Hawthorne character who has destroyed his humanity over a period of years. The unlettered and earthy, however, are given an anti-climactic dividend in the tale. When Bartram finds the bones of Ethan Brand in the lime kiln, he decides that “it is burnt into what looks like special good lime; and, taking all the bones together, my kiln is half a bushel the richer for him.” By half a bushel, the bones of Ethan Brand contribute to Bartram’s well-being. By half a bushel, Ethan Brand serves the mundane purposes of a humanity he has scorned.

To repudiate humanity, in Hawthorne’s fiction, is to fail spectacularly; to accept humanity is to succeed domestically. Throughout the tales, heart and hearth are intimately related. The bantering praise of the open hearth in “Fire Worship” (1843) has its serious counterpart in “The Vision of the Fountain” (1837), in which the fireside domesticates the vision. Ralph Cranston in “The Threefold Destiny” discovers that home is where one’s destiny awaits. Dorothy Pearson, the bringer of love to the gentle boy, is like “a verse of fireside poetry.” Both “The Great Carbuncle” and “The Great Stone
"Face" (1850) draw morals concerning the futility of searching abroad for values inherent in domesticity. In "John Inglefield's Thanksgiving" (1840), home is a stable institution of the heart which beckons even to the errant daughter, whose fall is measured in terms of her moral distance from home. Wakefield (1835) is an apostate from home; whimsy, stubbornness, and a creeping paralysis of will transform him into the "outcast of the Universe." The characters in "The Ambitious Guest" (1835), unsettled by the young man's contagious thirst for fame, are killed by a rockslide when they rush out of their house in search of shelter; their home stands untouched. Home, clearly, is of the heart. To be heartless is to be homeless.

The great importance of Sophia and a home in Hawthorne's personal life suggests the value he attached to domestic resolution in his tales. Yet it proved difficult to counter a profound vision of evil with a peaceful portrait of the fireside—especially in the tale, by definition a relatively short fictional form which promoted intensity rather than scope. In his romances, Hawthorne would strive more explicitly for a redemptive vision (though his blonde maidens, with their indestructible frailty, might seem to promise captivity rather than redemption). In the tales, however, he could do little more than assert the value of domesticity. His greatest achievement would come from his treatment of those who—for one reason or another—have become homeless.

Such, as the world knows, is the case of young Goodman Brown, who is exposed to the mightiest vision of evil Hawthorne ever imagined. Goodman Brown's journey into the forest is best defined as a kind of general, indeterminate allegory, representing man's irrational drive to leave faith, home, and security temporarily behind, for whatever reason, and take a chance with one (more) errand onto the wilder shores of experience. Our protagonist is an Everyman named Brown, a "young" man
who will be aged by knowledge in one night. In the forest he goes through a dreamlike experience marked by a series of abrupt transitions and sudden apparitions. From the devil he learns that virtue is a dream, evil the only reality. And once Goodman Brown sees that idea in all its magnitude, he can never see anything else. He has withdrawn into the dream world of the forest, there to find a reality steeped in guilt that makes his return to the village a pilgrimage into untruth and hypocrisy, into what he now sees as a flimsy community dream. From his vision in the forest, Goodman Brown receives a paralyzing sense of the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of the devil. The thrust of the narrative is toward a climactic vision of universal evil, which leaves in its aftermath a stern legacy of distrust.

Robin Molineux also leaves home—for a different reason and with a different conclusion, of course, though he, too, encounters the fantastic and confronts a shocking vision. In “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” Hawthorne blends a personal theme of initiation with the historical movement of the colonists against royal authority. To begin the tale, he invites the reader briefly into his workshop; his opening remarks serve quite frankly “as a preface to the following adventures, which chanced upon a summer night, not far from a hundred years ago.” The reader is asked to dispense with details and assume a historical situation “that had caused much temporary inflammation of the popular mind.” In the context of such a situation, Robin Molineux, a country-bred youth of eighteen, makes his first visit to town, looking for his kinsman, who, childless himself, has indicated a willingness to help Robin make a start in life. As the story unfolds, however, Hawthorne employs a double context; for it also becomes true that the popular fervor which culminates in the Major’s disgrace swells to its climactic point in the context of Robin’s consciousness. The strategy of the narrative
employs Robin-in-history as a way of making us see history-in-Robin. Thus introjected, history affords the latitude of dream.

For Robin, the town takes on the aspects of a nightmare, a world of senseless laughter, temptation, and caricature in which no one seems willing or able to answer his straightforward question about where his uncle lives. Robin's unrelenting "shrewdness," however—emphasized throughout with benign irony—repeatedly offsets the fantastic quality of appearances around him; he blindly makes sense out of what, to him, ought to be senseless. The bizarre appearance of the man with the red and black face intensifies the quality of general and mounting incoherence in the tale. And Robin's ability to account "shrewdly, rationally, and satisfactorily" for this wild and grinning figure disposes even the most sympathetic reader to join the town in laughing at him, to participate, that is, in the drama of his initiation. For how Robin explains "rationally" to himself a man running around with his face painted a grotesque black and red we are not told; that he does so, however, evidences a depth of faith in the dimensions of his own (in-)experience which it would have been difficult otherwise to suspect.

In "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," as in "Young Goodman Brown," Hawthorne sets the conditions of his fiction so that they serve the purposes of his tale with maximum effectiveness. Robin's mind vibrates between "fancy and reality." A feeling of homelessness accentuates his confusion. Locked out of the house of his memory, he has not yet been admitted to the house of his expectations. Thus, he occupies a middle ground, to which (as he sits in front of the church) "the moon, creating, like the imaginative power, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects, gave something of romance to a scene that might not have possessed it in the light of day." The procession that passes in front of him has "a visionary air, as if a dream had broken loose from some feverish brain, and were sweeping
visibly through the midnight streets." The nightmare has indeed broken loose; Robin can no longer avoid seeing it for what it is. At the center of the wild procession, enshrined in "tar-and-feather dignity," sits the Major. The two look at each other in silence, "and Robin's knees shook, and his hair bristled, with a mixture of pity and terror."

The identity Robin had hoped to establish by claiming kin has been swept away beyond recall. His laugh, cathartic and sanative, signifies that the passage from dream to nightmare to waking reality has been accomplished. Significantly, he does not repudiate the Major; to do so would be to succumb to the nightmare through which he has lived. But perhaps, as his new friend suggests, he may wish to remain in town and try to "rise in the world" without the Major's help. To succeed, Robin must put away the cudgel he has brought with him from the forest, dispense with the anticipated patronage of his kinsman, and establish his own identity in a society restively intent on doing the same.

A sense of homelessness likewise underlies the issues confronted in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount." "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire," says Hawthorne in introducing the opposing forces in the tale. Most immediately at stake is the empire of two young hearts, which is, at the moment the Puritans rush forth, in a state of sadness and doubt. For the love of Edith and Edgar has wrought their moral and emotional estrangement from the community. The former Lord and Lady of the May have "no more a home at Merry Mount"; they have become subject to "doom, . . . sorrow, and troubled joy." It is as if their graduation from folly has evoked a stern adult world; the clash of Puritans and Merry Mounters becomes an imperial context for their emotional initiation into life. Again, the conditions of fiction are made functional to the tale: at twilight, from concealment, emerge the Puritans, whose "dark-
some figures were intermixed with the wild shapes of their foes,” making the scene “a picture of the moment, when waking thoughts start up amid the scattered fantasies of a dream.” The dream of Merry Mount—the period of youth and play—is over; Edith and Edgar must now confront the waking—and adult—world. And again, as in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” a double context: Hawthorne has played out a private drama of maturation in the context of tensions inherent in New England history—just as he has played out a drama of New England history in the more intimate yet more expansive context of awakening love.

A MODE OF CREATION

“Young Goodman Brown,” “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” and “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” demonstrate that Hawthorne’s need to establish the conditions of fiction could be made to serve the fiction itself. But if the requirements of Hawthorne’s imagination called for a neutral ground as a way of conceiving the tale (which traditionally allowed for a heightened presentation of reality), they called also for a mode of creation that would impregnate his work with relevance for the moral condition of mankind. What Hawthorne had to say about sin, isolation, and the desiccating effects of idea came from his conception of a blemished human nature. To articulate his vision of “what prisoners we are,” he frequently made use of an allegorical mode, shaping his materials so that they would suggest the contours of an outer and moral reality.

Although his tales reflect an allegorical tendency, Hawthorne was not a master allegorist. In later years he looked with disfavor on his “blasted allegories” (among which he probably included his processions), the thinness of which caused Melville to say that Hawthorne needed to frequent the butcher, that he ought to have “roast beef done rare.” He made use of
conventional devices, giving his characters such names as Gathergold and Dryasdust, conceiving them generically as the Cynic and the Seeker, and envisioning his material so that it would illuminate a general truth of the moral world. Typically, he makes apparent his allegorical intent. He asks specifically, we recall, that "The Threefold Destiny" be read as an allegory; he notes that "Egotism; or, the Bosom Serpent" and "The Christmas Banquet" come "from the unpublished 'Allegories of the Heart'"; and he constructs "The Celestial Rail-Road" on the classic allegorical foundation bequeathed by Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress. An allegorical tradition afforded Hawthorne a means of access to the moral world. Because the moral world was essential to his vision of humanity, he brought features of that tradition to bear on the form of the tale.

Hawthorne's most significant adaptation of an allegorical mode can be seen in his habit of presenting bifurcated or fragmented characters who complement each other in the totality of an individual tale. Such characters require, even as they contribute to, the kind of latitude which Hawthorne constantly strove to attain. More than this: by means of the configuration of such characters, Hawthorne confronts themes that define the specific nature of his work. He suggests in a number of tales, for example (and in a manner distinct from that of his processionals), the uncertain relationship between the man of imagination and the man of practicality. In "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844), the scorn, practical strength, and shallow sensibility of the world (represented respectively by Peter Hovenden, Robert Danforth, and Annie) victimize the artist who must work, if he is to work, out of a determined mésalliance to society. As an artist Owen Warland succeeds; he succeeds even more significantly by being able to transcend the destruction of his creation. But he is forced into, even as he willingly adopts, a position of asociality or even anti-sociality if he is to create
at all. In "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" (1838), the man of business saves the man of fancy from utter ruin. At one (ideal?) time, Peter Goldthwaite and John Brown have been in partnership; after the partnership dissolves, Peter goes through years of foolish hopes and financial disasters, finally tearing down his house in a vain effort to find legendary wealth. John Brown, meanwhile, prospers unspectacularly. No doubt John Brown is dull, unexciting, and basically unimaginative; but he rescues Peter Goldthwaite, arrests a career of sterility and self-destruction, and promises to protect the man of deluded imagination from his own fantasies. When John Brown plays the role of Mr. Lindsey in "The Snow-Image" (1850), however, he is blind to all but common sense. In caustic language, Hawthorne tells us how Mr. Lindsey completely overrides the high imaginative faith of his wife. Unable to withstand his bleak, unknowing, factual stare, the marvelous melts away before his eyes without his realizing that he has played the role of antagonist in a diminutive tragedy of the imagination. In each of these tales, and in others—such as "The Birthmark" (1843)—as well, a configuration of fragmented characters defines the theme and constitutes a wholeness of effect.

Hawthorne found aspects of an allegorical mode useful in articulating his sense of the complexities of the human condition. But the symbolic mode could also involve moral considerations and at the same time offer great flexibility and economy to the writer of tales. Inheriting a penchant for symbolism from the Puritans, disposed, too, toward symbolic expression by the exigencies of the creative situation in his society, Hawthorne came to place dramatic emphasis on the symbol as a way of achieving effective form in the tale. By means of the symbol he could portray the ambivalence of motive and the ambiguity of experience that defined for him the texture of the human
condition. Mr. Hooper's black veil, for example, isolates the minister, who sees, simply and profoundly, that all men wear such veils. Feared by his parishioners, shunned by children, Mr. Hooper nonetheless preaches with power and efficacy. The veil is Mr. Hooper's "parable"; it proclaims the truth that all men hide the truth. But Hawthorne's parable suggests the divisive nature of such a truth and the ultimate failure of an eloquence that can illuminate everything but its source.

The symbol for Hawthorne promoted narrative focus and intensity even as it allowed for economy of presentation. Moreover, and with significant formal consequences, it proved possible to organize a tale effectively in terms of one central symbol. One symbol dominates "The Minister's Black Veil." The Maypole commands the focus of "The May-Pole of Merry Mount." And other well-known tales (written between 1836 and 1850) are structured in a similar way, among them "The Great Carbuncle," "Lady Eleanore's Mantle," "The Birthmark," "The Artist of the Beautiful," and "The Great Stone Face." Finally, of course, there is The Scarlet Letter, the culmination of Hawthorne's efforts to adapt the form of the tale to the special purposes of his imagination.

According to his publisher, James T. Fields, Hawthorne's original plan was to include "The Scarlet Letter" together with several other tales in a volume entitled "Old-Time Legends: Together with Sketches, Experimental and Ideal." After reading the first chapters of the story, Fields persuaded Hawthorne to "elaborate it, and publish it as a separate work." How much Hawthorne "elaborated" his tale of the scarlet letter we do not know; if a central symbol was to give meaning and coherence to the whole, however, he could hardly give it the expansiveness of his later romances. He wrote to Fields wondering if a book consisting entirely of "The Scarlet Letter" might not be too
somber; the tale, as he called it, keeps close to its point and simply turns “different sides of the same dark idea to the reader’s eye.”

With its sustained tone and rigid economy of presentation; its use of the past and concern for the “great warm heart of the people”; its ambivalence, mode of characterization, and exploration of the protean nature of pride; and, above all, its use of a central symbol to generate narrative coherence, *The Scarlet Letter* is the master product of the method of Hawthorne’s tales. In *The Scarlet Letter*, he extended the form of the tale until the suppressed imaginative energy of the narrative threatened to make it into something different. *The Scarlet Letter* marks Hawthorne’s final accomplishment in the tale even as it signals the beginning of his achievement in the romance; it marks the point at which Hawthorne transformed the tale into the romance in his effort to adapt that form once again to the purposes of his imagination.

The presence of “The Custom-House” in *The Scarlet Letter* is of crucial importance. Afraid that his tale of the scarlet letter would prove too somber by itself, Hawthorne included “The Custom-House” as a way of lightening the tone of his volume. As a form, the sketch had been extremely useful to Hawthorne; it had long given him a way to deal with the present, the immediate, the actual—the very things he had to evade or attenuate for the purposes of his fiction. Hawthorne tended to sketch what was recalcitrant to his imagination. In turn, the sketch became an avenue to the world around him. This we can see in (among other sketches) “Sights from a Steeple” (1831), in “Night Sketches: Beneath an Umbrella” (1838), and in his extremely effective “The Old Manse” (1846). The narrator of “Night Sketches,” having given a day to fancy, finds “a gloomy sense of unreality” depressing his spirits and impelling him to venture out in order to satisfy himself “that the world is not entirely made up of such shadowy materials as have
busied me throughout the day." Through the medium of the
sketch, he re-establishes contact with the world.

The world of the Salem Custom House, Hawthorne tells
us, was stultifying to his imagination. He could neither write
fiction while he worked there nor treat fictionally of the Custom
House afterwards. But he could and did sketch the life of the
Custom House in a memorable way. And he wedded the sketch
and the tale, the present and the past, by his claim of having
found the scarlet letter in the attic of the Custom House. In
“The Old Manse,” Hawthorne had told of exploring the garret
of the Manse, which was “but a twilight at the best,” and find­
ing manuscripts and other records of former generations. In
“The Custom-House,” he develops the fullest possibilities of
the idea of finding a document and becoming an editor. And
his sketch now served the purposes of his fiction; it provided a
way to reflect prefatorily on the past, to define the neutral
ground as the basis of imaginative creation, and to introduce
the fiction by claiming to have found it shunted aside into a
corner of the present world. Uniquely and memorably, the
sketch established the conditions of fiction in The Scarlet Letter.

In later years, Hawthorne's method of integrating past and
present in The Scarlet Letter must have appealed strongly to
him. He planned, for example, to preface The Ancestral Foot­
step with a sketch of his consular experiences at Liverpool in
which he would hear from a visitor the legendary story that
would constitute his romance. Septimius Felton was to be pre­
faced with a sketch of Hawthorne's residence at the Wayside
(similar to “The Old Manse”) which would introduce the
legend Hawthorne had heard from Thoreau of the man who
would not die: “I may fable that a manuscript was found,”
wrote Hawthorne in a preliminary study of Septimius, “con­
taining records of this man, and allusions to his purposes to
live forever.” Finally, Hawthorne intended that The Dolliver
Romance would begin with a prefatory sketch of Thoreau,
during the course of which Hawthorne would mention the legend that was to be the theme of the romance.

During these years, when he was writing with difficulty and indecision, Hawthorne thus attempted to blend past and present as he had done so brilliantly in *The Scarlet Letter*. The form of the sketch, he hoped, would again contain and yield his fiction, as “The Custom-House” had contained and yielded the scarlet letter. But Hawthorne in the 1860's was working at cross purposes: in the late romances, potentially symbolic objects remained devoid of meaning or else labored under a significance arbitrarily assigned to them; bursts of inventiveness lacked direction and were followed by periods of acute dissatisfaction; “the Present, the Immediate, the Actual” could not be made to accommodate the past, the remote, and the imaginary—and no sketch could of itself bear the full burden of creation. *The Scarlet Letter*, in which after more than two decades as an author Hawthorne made his greatest sketch serve the purposes of his greatest tale, remained a unique achievement, one not to be duplicated.