Between 1858 and 1864, Hawthorne tried to write four novels. Two of these he tentatively called "Romances of England" and in their published form were afterward titled *The Ancestral Footstep* and *Doctor Grimshawe's Secret*. They were intended to trace the narrative of a young American who comes on a trip to England and half-whimsically, half-seriously, seeks to locate the place from which his ancestors had emigrated nearly three hundred years earlier. This youthful
traveler has various adventures; he is waylaid and beaten and
taken to a charitable home for twelve indigent men; upon
recovering his strength, he wanders about the countryside and
is particularly drawn to an old castle about which there is a
strange legend. Just three hundred years ago, a young man had
been expelled from the house and, on leaving, had impressed
the indelible print of a bloody footprint at an entrance. The
present owner of the estate invites the traveler to pay him a
visit. Not long after his arrival, the American is drugged and
imprisoned in an underground dungeon where he meets an
old and mysteriously concealed man. There Hawthorne ended
the narrative; we never know what finally happened.

One of the interests of this Romance of England in its several
versions is that it depended almost exclusively on Hawthorne's
own experience as consul to Liverpool. Hawthorne had spent
many days traveling about the English countryside, inspecting
Elizabethan manor houses, peering at gravestones in a half-
humorous attempt to find the name of an ancestor buried in
English soil, and keeping a voluminous notebook in which
these manifold impressions were stored. He was toying with
two themes for that romance he hoped to write once he should
be free of the consulate: one was the meeting and clash of
two cultures, that of the Old with that of the New World.
Indeed, he saw himself as a representative American, strong
in his resolve to keep his native ideas intact and yet feeling
the teasing lure of English costumes, English charm, English
history; thus the Romance of England, in whatever dishevelment
it remains, has a strong personal and autobiographical tone.
The other theme was quite different. During the four years
Hawthorne spent by the grimy Liverpool wharves, he found
himself continually besieged by indigent and foolish Americans
who had such fantastic notions as seeking an interview with
Queen Victoria, or discovering long-lost documents attesting to
claims to an English barony and wealth, or, as with the pathetic Delia Bacon, opening a grave in Stratford and there finding proof that Shakespeare had not written the plays. The theme might allow Hawthorne to write a wry or savage commentary on Americans who wished to abandon their native land and culture. Despite the numerous experimental studies and three long drafts in which Hawthorne tried to set in order the narrative and the characters for the Romance of England, he never brought the two versions, *The Ancestral Footstep* and *Doctor Grimshawe's Secret*, to a conclusion.

Hawthorne abandoned his projected romance just as the guns of the Civil War were sounding in the spring of 1861. The war brought him back to a tale he had heard nearly ten years before from Henry Thoreau. It seemed that sometime during the years of the American Revolution there had lived in Hawthorne's own house, The Wayside in Concord, a young man who thought he would never die. This had been all that Thoreau had known about the deluded youth, but it was enough to set Hawthorne thinking, especially in 1861 and on into 1862 when men seemed to lose their heads in the sheer joy of battle. The tenuous parallels between the Civil War and the Revolutionary War might allow him to write a fable for his own times. He first considered a young man whose aims would be so noble that he would be set apart from the cruelties and madness of the present but who would, quite without his willing, be forced to take a part in the conflict and slowly, steadily, lose his purpose and become, at the last, even contemptible. This "Romance of Immortality," as Hawthorne called it, went through numerous stages, experimental sketches, and large drafts, and was never finished. The Civil War was too pressing to allow Hawthorne the leisure and quiet he needed; his finances were being drained in the necessary expenses for a growing family, and his health began to worsen. By the opening of 1863, he
was showing the effects of a strange illness which baffled Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. In the spring of that year, he took a journey to Washington and to the Virginia countryside in order to see for himself the war which he recorded in his essay "Chiefly about War Matters"; and in that same year, he published under the title *Our Old Home* a series of essays on his travels through and his impressions of England—almost the very stuff which had failed him in the Romance of England. Even so, Hawthorne was haunted by his failure to deal with the young man of Concord who thought he might live forever; as he pressed on and tried to bring the narrative to a conclusion, he oscillated between a vague admiration and an outright contempt for the youthful experimenter in elixirs of life. When he finally put aside the large pile of manuscript later to be known as *Septimius Felton*, he had written many thousands of words and had accomplished nothing.

Yet, in the last months of his life, from the autumn of 1863 to the opening of 1864, Hawthorne tried again to write a Romance of Immortality. Instead of a youth who would lose his high aims in mere self-satisfaction, he created a wise old man, named Dr. Dolliver, who wanted to live beyond the normal term of years in order to see a granddaughter grow to young womanhood. Hardly had Hawthorne written three segments of this story than he died in May, 1864. The opening chapter of this last abortive romance lay on his coffin during the funeral in Concord.

II

In *The Marble Faun*, written just at the beginning of this final phase of his career, one can see that Hawthorne was beginning to sacrifice the real for the conceptual world and that, to an increasing extent as the last years showed, he was adrift in his own artistic speculations. *The Marble Faun*, with
its dreamy discourses on art, its hazy evocations of history stretching from the earliest myths to the present day, and its misty recollections of crimes buried deep in the accumulated waste of centuries, suggests that Hawthorne was more and more posing a set of speculative abstractions against the facts of daily, commonplace existence. This tendency resulted in a loss of immediate and felt particularization, which one can see played out in the relation of Miriam to her model: the real theme of revenge is made to illustrate a conceptual argument concerning the ever-pervasive character of evil in the world. An incident of dramatic importance when Donatello throws the model from the Tarpeian Rock—an occasion when personal morality is able to cast doubt on the sanctity of human life—serves the cause of an antecedent design; that design is nothing less than a principle regarding human guilt and infamy which Hawthorne had decided long before the incident had actually taken place. In the end, therefore, the incident sacrifices the reality of its action and reduces the pain and suffering the sinners are meant to feel. The curious resolution of that pain and degradation is the moment Miriam and Donatello stand before the body of the model, and “a little stream of blood” oozes “from the dead man’s nostrils”: the characters live only to serve the conceptual argument which brought them into being.

In these last writings, the major burden is that of posing the real and the conceptual dimensions of life, between, that is, what a character is actually doing and what Hawthorne, the writer, meant to show in the behavior of that character. The meditative asides, the reminders, and the long conjectures which fill so many manuscript pages of these last writings—all deal with the central problem of Romance: it is the attempt to deal generally and conceptually with human experience and to reach conclusions about experience without first being able to particularize the living details which give rise to that experience. In
the preceding years of great accomplishment, Hawthorne had already discovered and clearly organized in his mind those elements and sources of experience from which a conceptual argument might be derived: in the long “Custom-House” chapter prefatory to *The Scarlet Letter*, we are given a clear disclosure of the working of Hawthorne’s imagination as it moved from the dense world of men, of piles of cargo, of the desultory life of Salem, and of the carved eagle atop the building to the second floor of the custom house, the discovery of Surveyor Pue’s papers and the letter itself, and, finally, the moonlit speculations which resolved all disparities and virtually empowered Hawthorne to write the romance as if he were moved by his own imaginative energy.

In quite extraordinary ways, Hawthorne was capable of bringing great theoretical and imaginative force to bear upon his art; but the force had to be mustered and resolved before the workmanship, the actual composition of sentences, had begun. The speed with which he wrote his four major novels testifies to the planning, the power of thought, and the sheer imaginative dexterity which were his when he was at his best. The solidity of each novel’s argument, the quite resolute detailing of the ambiguous behavior of men and women, and the clarity of design—all show that Hawthorne’s mind, for all its distrust of empty and formal abstractions, moved in a range of speculation which we rightly call moral and philosophical. The true imaginative force Hawthorne brought to his art was in bridging the speculative distance between the real and the abstract, between the commonplace and the conceptualized, and between the trivial and the grand, even the divine; it was a power both of devising an abstract moral idea of experience and of particularizing just those elements and just those human beings which would make that idea vivid and meaningful. In these last romances Hawthorne seems to be, in each of the
four fragments, only at the beginning of that inquiry which, in the major writings, had been accomplished before the action got under way.

His growing incapacity to mediate between these disparate qualities of life, between, that is, life as it is daily lived and life as it is truly known in experience, brought Hawthorne sharply against the theory of romance he had set forth in the prefaces to *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun*. It was not so much a systematic theory as it was a program for imaginative movement between the commonplaces of this known world and the intangible, inscrutable activity of human thought. The pivot for these motions was what he called the “central idea” or the “moral center” of a novel which, despite the vagaries of plot and the inconsistent behavior of men and women, would hold the novel as though by “the vertebrae of the back-bone.” When he was not able to specify what this central idea ought to be—whether the American traveler in England should be lured into subservience to England’s charm or remain stalwartly American; whether the experimenter in elixirs of life should be high- or low-minded—then Hawthorne had to stop, retrace his steps, and try to set down a satisfactory, if provisional, statement of his “moral.” In these last romances, the warnings that he must resolve this initial premise become sharper as the pages of manuscript increase. “I have not yet struck the true key-note of this Romance,” he remarks in *The Ancestral Footstep*, “and until I do, and unless I do, I shall write nothing but tediousness and nonsense. I do not wish it to be a picture of life, but a Romance, grim, grotesque, quaint. . . . If I could but write one central scene in this vein, all the rest of the Romance would readily arrange itself around that nucleus.” In *Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret*, he warns himself: “The narrative must be pitched in such a tone, and enveloped in such an atmosphere, that improbable things shall
be accepted; and yet there must be a certain quality of homely, common life diffused through it, so that the reader shall feel a warmth in it.”  

And as his troubles deepened in Septimius Felton, he noted sadly: “I find myself dealing with problems and awful subjects, which I but partly succeed in putting aside.”

These are indications not so much that a writer is having trouble with his daily stint of work as that a lifetime’s practice in the craft of fiction is breaking down. A writer like Hawthorne may suffer from too great a moral and imaginative sophistication and thereby come to have contempt for the very workmanship which had brought him his earlier success. The breakdown came, therefore, first, because of a method of composition which had served Hawthorne very well throughout his whole career; secondly, because of a method of characterization; and thirdly, because of this rift between real and conceptualized experience—a rift which widened perilously and then disastrously as these last years moved on. We might take these matters in order.

However effectively Hawthorne had thought about and had resolved in his own mind the action for one of his major romances—he brooded for more than a dozen years on the woman who wore a red letter A on the front of her gown—there was, nonetheless, a considerable range of improvisation, of guessing and conjecturing, of trial and supposition in Hawthorne’s craft of writing. On first reading the meditative asides in Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret, one is struck by the apparently hit-or-miss method of planning and workmanship; yet it is not the improvisation of a man who does not know quite where he is going. It is the craft and practice of an artist who knows that life is touched, not forced, that the meaning of an action may lie in the power of the questing imagination, and that, quite without anyone’s knowing how it comes to pass, the “central idea” may release itself by virtue of its own inner
necessity. Nowhere is Hawthorne closer to Melville than in his awareness that both the statement and the form of an idea may inhere in the most jumbled and incongruous exposition of life. It is what he called, in a striking phrase in *The Ancestral Footstep*, "imaginative probability": a moral abstraction, a human action, even a fantastic legend such as the bloody footstep may, Hawthorne noted, "bring its own imaginative probability."

Yet what was that "probability"? One cannot say with respect to these unfinished romances simply because the end of a question in probability rests not on its hypothetical or abstract statement but rather on its fulfilment. Dealing as we must with only portions and fragments, we must be wary of supposing that Hawthorne had in mind a formal and coherent artistic presupposition; the very waywardness of his imagination as he worked through these unfinished drafts testifies both to the improvisation and even to the chance of the moment.

We can suppose, nevertheless, that the central subject of these last romances was, as it had been for *The Marble Faun*, the dependence of modern life, of progress, even of human restoration and redemption, on antecedent decay, corruption, and fall. In order to give this subject a modern cast and to have contemporary implications, Hawthorne must have a modern hero—one freed from the stifling controls of tradition and an eager adventurer into the most daring and effective ideas of his time. Thus the hero of the "Romance of England" would face the rigid ethical system of England's durable past and, all the while admiring it, choose to return to the noisy, troubled world of present-day America. The hero of the "Romance of Immortality," at least in Hawthorne's earliest conjectures, would live at the time of great unrest when the ethical order of the past would virtually disappear, thus the young experimenter would be forced to create a moral system which would serve him and his contemporaries until such a time as the re-establish-
ment of enduring codes of ethics. The subject of the romances would be, accordingly, on the theme of the Fall—the fall of a single traveler and then his restoration or, conversely, the fall of a whole society in the upheaval of war.

Yet the Fall is not, in Hawthorne's fiction, an incident in a man's life or a single event in history; it is a continuing, pervasive condition of nature and of the whole of mankind whereby human beings are permitted, if they are privileged to be enlightened, to understand themselves in their degradation and in their truth. The Fall is, therefore, a crisis in individual comprehension: it allows Goodman Brown, Parson Hooper, Hester Prynne, or Miriam the moment which brings sympathy and profound understanding of themselves and their world, and yet it can leave them perilously adrift in the irresolute domain of their own speculations.

The conceptualized idea of the Fall was, for Hawthorne, both a principle and a method of workmanship. When he got into trouble, as he did so frequently in these fragmentary romances, he tended to improvise on the question of the Fall; he sought to work backward in the lives of his characters; he tried to deepen the "imaginative probability" by construing any number of ancillary events as rightly pertaining to the "central effect" and to the main action. The Fall took him ever toward that antecedent corruption and decay by which he sought to invest his characters with the vivid lineaments of Romance. Indeed, the Fall and the idea of Romance joined: one equaled the other in the logic of imaginative probability.

Nowhere is Hawthorne's habit of improvisation more clearly evident than in his reaching backward in time in order to draw a connection between present living and past life. Over and over again he told the legend of the bloody footstep as though, quite on its own, it would bring up the links between past crime and present-day guilt. He longed for some emblem of
buried evil which, festering through centuries, might darken the sunlight of the contemporary world: he conjured up a coffin supposedly full of gold which, on being opened, contained only masses of golden hair into which a woman's body had been transformed. Hidden documents, secret nostrums promising eternal life, relics long buried in the earth or a tomb—these might be the embodiments of man's perpetual sharing in the world's core of evil. Hawthorne had a similar way of studying or "deepening," as he called the method, his characters: generally speaking, he devised his protagonists by going backward. He began with a man or woman at the last and dramatic occasion of the romance; then he worked his way through the earlier life of that person until, as in Doctor Grimshawe's Secret, he was at the very beginning of his hero's story. When, as they sometimes did, these two modes of improvisation crossed or overlapped, Hawthorne found himself in a double peril: the Fall had its twin versions, in the world and in individual life, and he was unable to extricate himself from the dilemma.

Yet to accuse Hawthorne of merely playing with one of his central themes and of crudely piling up incidents is to falsify a great writer's craft. The difficulty was not that Hawthorne's method of composition was failing him; indeed, it was the very force of his improvisation which gave him so many directions to follow and so many variations to play on his central theme. The difficulty in these last expositions of the Fall was that Hawthorne's imaginative and critical faculty was being brought to bear, with really too great emphasis, on men and women who were somehow outside or freed from the implications of the very Fall in which they were supposedly involved. This issue brings us to the second supposition concerning Hawthorne's breakdown.

Hawthorne's method of characterization was based in large part on his embodying in human form certain abstract moral
truths such as Innocence, Hardness of Heart, Sympathy, Ambition, and so on. Hawthorne was, however, intelligent enough to consider these somewhat shadowy human figures ambiguous for the very reason that an abstraction can never be fully informed with human life. Yet he was enough of a moralist, and a Puritan, to confer on these abstract characters a certain causal power: they were part of a vast and mysterious ethical system in existence long before they were created, and their actions through the course of an invented narrative achieved dignity and power by reason of that antecedent system. In the last romances, however, Hawthorne essayed both to invest his characters with the dark lineaments of the past and yet somehow to bring them into the light of a new day which had none of the implications of that age-old system, or of the Fall. Indeed, the movement of human life might come from individual impulse, as if men were finally freed from the tragic imputation of original sin; experience could now be presented as though it were lived now and as though the new privilege of life were that it could be self-sufficient, self-contained, and self-understanding.

Yet Hawthorne’s characters who have enjoyed the most experience are ever afterward prevented from further experiencing. As we meet them in the major writings—Goodman Brown, Parson Hooper, Covrdaclc, Miriam, and Kenyon—they have already done virtually everything they will do in life, and life has put on them that mark which we the readers are required to interpret. Thus, having passed through experience, they are endowed with the power of rendering experience abstract.

In these fragmentary romances, Hawthorne’s characters are not yet privileged to have experience; they have not begun to experience anything but are forced by the unwitting and heedless world of conjecture and possibility to assume a simple, temporary guise and thereby to exclude the many-sided values
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which might lend them interest and importance. Thus these romances pose the good-heartedness, sometimes the whimsical and stubborn recalcitrance, of self-asserting human beings against a proven, a durable ethical system—against, that is, the Fall. Of one of his heroes, Hawthorne wrote: “young America shall show a promising blossom in him—there shall be a freedom of thought, a carelessness of old forms of things, which shall sometimes . . . contrast oddly with his imaginative conservatism in other respects.” Throughout the narrative, Hawthorne sought to cast real doubt on “old forms of things” and to present a modern, self-reliant hero, even a radical man, who would disavow any hold of the past on the present. Yet, when we come upon them, these characters have not lived at all nor have they been granted enough experience and leisure to view the many moral possibilities which face them; they live and move as though they were thrown suddenly and loosely upon the world and must make their way until, in good time, their experience will be sufficient to be turned into an abstraction. “Do not stick at any strangeness or preternaturality,” Hawthorne advised himself; “it can be softened down to any extent, however wild in its first conception.” In the end, Hawthorne’s characters in these unfinished novels cast serious doubt on the validity of an ethical system which had remained unchallenged throughout Hawthorne’s literary career; these seekers of ancestral wealth and magical nostrums pursue most high-minded aims and yet, at every turn of the action, countermand the moral principles which allow them their only right to exist.

The meditative asides in Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret are full of Hawthorne’s concern for the appropriateness of events to his characters or, conversely, of the characters to the events. When everything was askew, Hawthorne broke out in self-excoriation: “This wretched man, still. . . . A propensity for drink? A tendency to feed on horse-flesh? A love of toads?
A badge of the mud which has clung to him in the depths of social degradation in which he has been plunged? Surely, there is some possible monster who would precisely fit into this vacant niche. . . . Amen. The thing! The thing?" Sometimes Hawthorne tried to cast experience in the form of a dream, as though the hazy intangibility of dream would mediate between the disparate claims of life; the American traveler in England continually feels himself "in a dream." Hawthorne advised himself quite frequently, "Make all dream-like," as though the very mystery of dream would solve the difficulties which a hero, bent on destroying the fixed ethical system, imposed on the narrative. When, as it so often happened, the hero could not be budged farther than the most sedate, or intransigent, flatness of the commonplace, then Hawthorne again had recourse to the strange and the spectacular—to the bloody footprint, the coffin filled with golden hair, the unraveling of a long-buried mystery; and when they refused to yield their secret and thereby limn the dark underside of human consciousness, Hawthorne felt only contempt for his creatures and broke out into such self-condemnatory remarks as "What unimaginable nonsense!" He had events, more than he could ever employ; he had human beings, some copied from men he had known in England and Italy, others, like the old pensioner of the charity in England, modeled directly on his neighbor Alcott. Experience was there to be lived; yet he had no one fit to live it. On the one side was "the reality," the commonplace existence which is the lot of most of mankind—"the point of view where things are seen in their true lights." On the other side was "the true world . . . like dark-colored experience," "the absolute truth . . . all outside of which [is] delusion." The narrative and the characters must join these two visionary possibilities; when they failed, then the romance failed utterly. The pathos and the tragedy of these last romances is that, as
his problems deepened and the confusion worsened, Hawthorne's characters were no longer capable of those discriminations, of tenuous or profound moral judgment, or of those dark, ambiguous probings of their own sensitive minds; they were moral incompetents in a morally incompetent world; and their creator's vengeance on them was dire and terrible.

III

Even in their disarray and confusion, the imaginative habits of a lifetime could not be put aside, and thus the workmanship in these last romances conformed to the artistic deployments of more than thirty years' experience. The main habit of a lifetime's writing was to follow the way of Romance, with its marvelous and supernatural elements: the bulging English notebooks demanded some release of their lode. Yet this impulse met head-on a counter tendency—that peculiarly moral cast of Hawthorne's mind and imagination which saw men and women as having already passed through experience and, therefore, as being proper figures in Romance only to the extent that they were capable of looking on and judging their experience. Thus Hawthorne's power of invention, his "Gothicism," which conjured strange and suggestive events, was forced to yield to the form of the action in which the characters should move and have their being: that "form" was a lifetime's habit of conceptualizing, of thinking abstractly about the otherwise common exigencies of life, and then of adding, as though in an afterthought, the elements and particulars out of which concepts are made. The interest of these posthumous fragments is that, while he had tentatively resolved the marvelous and the moral requirements, Hawthorne was trying to make clear to himself just those minute particularities out of which concepts are made. He kept reminding himself that he must "Specify, specify"; it was not the marvelous and the supernatural which
were lacking; it was the simplest investment of the common
day, those most ordinary details that writers like Dickens and
Trollope made the very stuff of their writings.

In attempting to mediate between the marvelous and the
commonplace, Hawthorne effected a curious and almost im-
perceptible transformation in the heroes of these fragmentary
novels. They began as creatures in a world of Romance, whether
in Salem, in a midland county in England, or in Hawthorne's
own Wayside in Concord during the opening months of the
Revolutionary War; and they became more and more recogniz-
able as men in the busy world of the present, of Liverpool, of
American military and political life. As he went on tirelessly
and painfully, Hawthorne abandoned his theory of romance
and tried to write a moral fable for his own time.

It was the protagonist of the projected novel who wrought
the change. He was not, even in his beginnings in the pre-
liminary studies, quite that Hawthornesque character who, like
Parson Hooper or Coverdale, had lived all the life he would
ever know and was, therefore, having experience after the event.
This young man was, by contrast, a very modern hero, whose
unbending desire for self-satisfaction and for worldly success,
both in England and in America, is set grotesquely amid the
peaceful relics of a long-past time. Middleton, Etherege, Red-
clyffe, Septimius Felton, or whatever the provisional name this
young man bears is the new middle-class hero of Dickens or
Trollope—a young man with no parentage, with meager begin-
nings, with a rude, canny intelligence, and with an over-
weening passion to get ahead in the world; yet he is for a
time inhabiting a special place in which commercial greed,
modern industry, and the moral advantages of poverty do
not exist.

The Ancestral Footstep and Doctor Grimshawe's Secret re-
quired that this commercial hero should come upon a long-
established ethical system, be quite unaware of his own moral incompetence, and never understand the havoc he may be causing by reason of his researches into his family history. Yet, instead of setting a self-reliant hero against an intractable ethical system and allowing that system to come under harsh surveillance such as would be the hallmark of the bourgeois romance from Defoe through Dickens to Orwell, Hawthorne made the ethical establishment the final moral authority and thereby tried to effect, in his own words, "a bitter commentary" on the presumption of a man to be a claimant for anything in this shifting and fallible world. Melville had already treated the same theme in *Pierre*: there, of course, "the ambiguities" make the difference, for Melville's hero is an introspective, demon-driven man whose reckless adventure is into dark byways of self-understanding and for whom the outside world of commerce and bourgeois advantage is a ring of horror. The misadventure of Hawthorne's counterpart to *Pierre* is that Middleton, Etherege, or Redclyffe succumbs to the very lure of greed and vanity he was meant to loathe; the shambles his creator makes of him is one of the most frightening in American literary history.

In the "Romance of Immortality," the premise is reversed. Instead of sending a commercial man across the ocean and having him confront or fall victim to an established ethical system, Hawthorne placed a most moral young man in a time of moral disarray, even collapse. Thus human virtue abides only in this young man, Septimius Felton; he seeks not for wealth or a lost patrimony but for some relief from that most dread burden of existence, namely death: life is not lived long enough, so this young man reasons, and each age repeats the insensate follies of the past. If given a chance, mankind might enter a truly perfectible world wherein the lessons learned in one age of history can be carried over into succeeding ones.
The difficulty was not that the youthful experimenter in elixirs of life lifted himself far beyond society's power to control or subdue, but that Hawthorne tried to draw a metaphysical rebel, one who sought to overthrow everything that sustained society, and in doing so fashioned once again the man with the diabolized heart—the cold-blooded villain whose very excellence of mind and motive is his own and others' doom. Hawthorne might have been devising a bitter commentary on nineteenth-century meliorism, Utilitarianism, and the illusion of earthly progress. Perhaps he was: the Blithedale community of an earlier time revealed the corruption which lies just beneath the ruminative surface of man's most exalted intentions. Septimius Felton reveals, more suggestively, that when he had not clearly informed himself of the moral theme for his romance—the fragments reveal a distressing improvisation with almost palpably felt ideas—Hawthorne sought refuge in the most errant inventiveness or "romancing," as if the very piling up of incident and detail would magically solve the difficulty. In the last fragment, The Dolliver Romance, Hawthorne tried to invest his hero with all goodness and sweetness of temper; the projected narrative would not risk a protagonist who should become a fool. Here, for the last time in his career, Hawthorne would again have that distinctly moral man whose life is all in the past and who has the power to invest experience with those glowing colors which moral insight can give it.

In these unfinished romances, Hawthorne was less interested in the way the story moved and more concerned with what at every turn the narrative might reveal. This is not to say that in his major writings Hawthorne had not been the allegorist; it is to say that, in the earlier writings, he brought greater imaginative and moral force to the action, to the symbolic
design, and to the human beings who should exemplify the subject of the romance than to the subject itself. In the posthumous romances, Hawthorne directed his very considerable imaginative power, not toward disclosures of his ideas in the lives of men and women, but toward the themes themselves; he took them with profound seriousness; he felt oppressed by them; and, when he could not effect that "imaginative probability" in the lives of his characters, he turned on them with ruthlessness and contempt. Thus, when they failed him, as they did every time, Hawthorne made them the victims of a critical intelligence which was scrupulous, exacting, and severe. The scorn he poured out seems, in the following instance, to be directed against a villainous English lord, but it is really against himself: "Something monstrous he must be, yet within nature and romantic probability—hard conditions. A murderer—'twon't do at all. A Mahometan?—pish. . . . A monkey? A Frankenstein? A man of straw? A man without a heart, made by machinery. . . . A cannibal? a ghoul? a vampire. . . . Ye Heavens! A man with a mortal disease—a leprosy?—a eunuch?—a cork leg?—a golden touch?—a dead hand?—a false nose?—a glass eye?—A crossing-sweeper?—a bootblack? . . . 'Twon't do."

The failure of these last romances would be only a minor incident in American literary history and of interest only as a coda to Hawthorne's great career if that failure were merely of biographical and personal moment. The failure is, however, an occasion in the continuous history of the American imagination and bears striking relevance to events in the lives of other writers—Melville, Mark Twain, and Emily Dickinson, to name only a few. The issue was fundamentally that of the artist and his subject. In order to function properly, the artist in American letters had three gaps to fill: through knowledge and experience he must discover the past, the evil in the world, and those
people who would illustrate for him the ideas he considers imaginatively probable. He must show his men and women as losing their innocence and then becoming purified by their recognition of, and their triumph over, sin and corruption. And the artist, together with his creations, must emerge with the capacity to deal, if not profoundly, at least cogently with the basic issues of his art.

With almost unvarying frequency we find that American writers of the nineteenth century are marvellously competent to deal with the first two of these provisions; it is the question of art itself which so often defeats or frustrates them. Melville, as an example, moved from the sturdy, muscular world of *Typee* to that of *Moby-Dick*, wherein he cast his vision of life in the form of a metaphysical adventure from the known to the unknown; along the way are the increasing signs that the journey is less reasonable and meaningful as it proceeds. In *Billy Budd*, his final testament, he turned to the merest, the virtually absolute simplicity of the past, of evil, of human life, and disavowed all concern for the artist and his art; *Billy Budd* is the art of an artist who has ceased to exist; he has become only a transcriber. In his last years Hawthorne found himself cut off from his central subject, namely, the peril and the wonder of moral man finding his way to, and his place in, a God-ordained and, therefore, ethical universe. When he set this presumably moral man in a time very close to the present—the English romance would be as contemporary as Hawthorne’s own life in Liverpool—Ihawthorne became painfully aware of his impotence and unworthiness to understand his hero’s destiny.

The difficulty was not really with the subject, or with the times, but with art itself—that continuing and pervasive difficulty with which American writers of the nineteenth century struggled. Hawthorne may not be adequately representative of them all; yet, behind his questions concerning his shadowy
characters and their futile dreams of wealth and elixirs of life, he does reveal that the imaginative power he had formerly expended on the display of moral ideas in the lives of men and women was now turning inward and being brought directly to bear on the issue of art and the imagination. The question was not so much, What is the writer doing when he writes?, as it was, What must be the writer’s ethical warrant and place in the diffuse and indeterminate life of his world and time? Perhaps the only nineteenth-century American writer who found a satisfactory answer to this question was Henry James, one of whose distinctions was that he admitted his debt to Hawthorne.

It has already been supposed that Hawthorne lived and wrote most vitally between the seemingly opposite imaginative poles of the Romance and the Moral and that, in these last years, the separation between the two became so disastrously widened that Hawthorne presents the uncomely picture of a writer tormented by his unwillingness to yield to or to abandon one or the other. This was not an uncommon situation with writers who were troubled by questions of their art: from Dickens to Mark Twain, to speak most generally, writers either yielded to the demands that their art come fully to the front of their age or that their art dispose the trials of the time behind the mask of irony, even deceit. As an example of the one is Dicken’s revised and happy ending to Great Expectations, in which Pip and Stella are presumably united at last; as an example of the other is the inconclusive ending of Huckleberry Finn, wherein the hero starts for some land of Nowhere.

The parallel is not intended to be a bland witticism in the history of fiction; it is meant to suggest that, through the nineteenth century, there was a pervasive discontinuity in the art of fiction of such proportions that Dicken’s Pip could inhabit the Gothic world of Mrs. Radcliffe and that Twain’s Huckleberry Finn could be the moral picaresque of a heedless Every-
man. In either case, this lack of any logical congruence in modern life lies at the moral center of much American, and for that matter English, fiction of the nineteenth century: it was that the artist sought to work through his creations in order to deal cogently, perhaps profoundly, with certain quite well-defined moral issues but that, especially with American writers, the larger problem of art itself eventually triumphed over and submerged those men and women who should have been the living representatives of ethical ideas. Hawthorne ended with the inconclusive commentary of his last years; Mark Twain ended with the ethical abstraction lodged in a title and a question, *What Is Man?*

The case of Hawthorne is not, of course, typical of his generation or of the times which followed his own; yet because he was, as James correctly pointed out, America's first truly serious and comprehensive novelist, he can be taken as an example. Human life had to be brought under the controlling force of certain well-defined, sometimes almost tritely phrased, moral ideas such as were scattered from Hawthorne's earliest journals to the last English and Italian notebooks. These statements were the aftermath of experience already lived: thus Hawthorne's expositions of moral ideas came as a result of very considerable and concentrated thought, not on the particular lives his characters might lead, but rather on abstract forms of living which would somehow lift these transitory lives of men and women above the commonplace requirements of daily existence. Human life did not give dignity and vividness to moral ideas, quite the contrary: moral abstractions bestowed distinction on life. "Imaginative probability" was the infinite calculus of possible relevance between the world's timeless law of good and evil and the energetic, haphazard, and oftentimes futile actions of human beings. Thus the effective moral thought of the writer grants to life more than it deserves to have; even
in the fragmentary romances of the final years, we can see these people beginning with the most trivial self-deceits and then be almost mysteriously lifted up by the impelling power a moral idea can bestow on them; and when Hawthorne could not decide what this “central effect” or "moral center" ought to be, the characters disintegrate or become the objects of his scorn.

The failure of any writer is a mystery; it does not help to explain another writer’s loss of power and decline. Hawthorne’s artistic collapse, even if it should offer backward glances to the time of his great accomplishment, is virtually a self-contained narrative. Yet even in these final years of despair, Hawthorne well knew the state of his mind; he did not have the effrontery to blame the troubled times in which he lived. If he did turn on his half-formed characters the venom of his frustration, he knew that he alone was the cause of his trouble. That trouble was too great for contempt, for pathos, even for understanding. It was fortunate that Hawthorne died before he had said his own last word on it; that word might have been the bitterest of all.