Hawthorne was at heart a Western writer. As early as 1820, at the age of fifteen, he wrote his sister in Maine: "How often do I long for my gun and wish that I could again savagize with you. But I shall never again run wild in Raymond, and I shall never be so happy as when I did." As late as 1853, he was still describing in idyllic terms those happy Leatherstocking years: "I ran quite wild, and would, I doubt not, have willingly run wild till this time, fishing all day long, or shooting
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with an old fowling-piece. . . . That part of the country was wild then, with only scattered clearings, and nine tenths of it primeval woods. . . . I would sometimes take refuge in a log cabin." In 1833 or 1834, Hawthorne apparently made a real Western tour, perhaps as far as Detroit; if so, it was almost certainly for the purpose of refurbishing, consolidating, and confirming the kind of writing that issued from his dismal chamber during his prolonged literary apprenticeship: such tales and sketches as "The Gentle Boy," "Roger Malvin's Burial," "Young Goodman Brown," "Sketches from Memory," "The Great Carbuncle," "The Man of Adamant" (all first published from 1831 to 1836), and so on through "Earth's Holocaust" (1844) and "Main Street" (1849). This line of development culminated in The Scarlet Letter, whose thematic setting is the "roughly hewn street of a little town, on the edge of the Western wilderness," and whose main point is that "perennial rebirth" of which Frederick Jackson Turner was somewhat belatedly to speak. Like many another mid-nineteenth century American writer confined to the Atlantic seaboard, Hawthorne made what he could of what he was born with and what he was able to lay hands on. By a judicious use of the Romantic imagination, and sustained by precious little actual experience, he transformed New England into an available prototype of the West.

From the beginning, nationalistic New World writers and readers had "looked to the West" as the source of a new American literature, but what the phrase meant was more often than not obscure. Such men as Daniel Drake and James Hall naturally thought it referred to people like themselves. This was, of course, absurd; the new literature came out of the West only in the sense of emerging from aesthetic contemplations of the West; and the best contemplations occurred in the East, where the contemplative types congregated. Of these, the most notable (after Cooper) were Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Melville, and
Whitman; and among these notables, Hawthorne was the pioneer. In fact, he was much less simple-mindedly concerned with New England than is generally supposed. In Literary Friends and Acquaintance, Howells tells us that Hawthorne "was curious about the West, which he seemed to fancy much more purely American, and said he would like to see some part of the country on which the shadow (or, if I must be precise, the damned shadow) of Europe had not fallen." At least on that occasion, our romancer's remarks on New England seem to have been fewer and less pleasant.

Yet in a special way he might have spoken of both sections simultaneously. He was repeatedly drawn to unpopulous pockets of the East—such as the "rocky, woody, watery back settlement of New England" mentioned in "The Seven Vagabonds"—which he could reconceive as Western scenes. Alternatively, he was always following the trail of local history backward until it arrived at the wild West. Neither the literal place nor the literal time was in the final analysis controlling; but conjoined, New England and the past yielded an essential synthesis, the frontier, which, not very paradoxically, was also the American future. As Thoreau desired to be a Western writer without stirring from Concord, and in Walden managed to do just that, Hawthorne found it imperative and efficacious to give his writing a contemporary relevance without leaving out, and sometimes without leaving, the past. For Massachusetts, the past was the vanished West; the West was the surviving past. The laterally progressive nature of American historical development made these exchanges ridiculously simple. As James Hall said in a Western story: "... It was such as all new towns in the west had once been; such, perhaps, as the hamlets were on the shores of the Atlantic." And Sylvester Judd explained in a local novel: "The house where Margaret lived, of a type common in the early history of New England, and still seen in the
regions of the West, was constructed of round logs.”

Hawthorne was thoroughly knowledgeable about the popular Western literature of his day, as even a cursory glance at his editing of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* (1836) makes clear; and his Notebooks of approximately the same period show him working hard with eye and mind to solidify and complicate his sensuous apprehension of the standard Western images. His best writing results from the confluence of these two streams, though it is not reducible to either.

“All that night,” he said, in a travel sketch describing Niagara Falls, “as there has been and will be for ages past and to come, a rushing sound was heard, as if a great tempest were sweeping through the air. It mingled with my dreams, and made them full of storm and whirlwind.” This nightmare noise was also the ground bass for “Young Goodman Brown,” in which “a confused and doubtful sound of voices” is intermittently heard, blending “the murmur of the old forest” (West) with the “familiar tones” of Salem village (East). Throughout the story, nature howls, roars, creaks, cries, and yells, “in homage to the prince of all,” the prince being optionally the Devil and the genius of American history. Visual perceptions are perhaps even more conspicuously implicated in America’s Western waywardness. The diabolical baptismal scene simultaneously derives from Hawthorne’s eyewitness account of a fire on the banks of Lake Erie, which he thought “might have been transferred, almost unaltered, to a tale of the supernatural” (“A Night Scene,” in “Sketches from Memory,” Second Series), and from James Hall’s account of a Western camp-meeting in “The Backwoodsmen.”

“Young Goodman Brown” is about American advance to the West, penetration into the dark forest of the unmapped future, which is also the buried past. As broadly hinted in the opening dialogue, the moral issue is bad faith in every conceivable sense, a failure of integrity sufficiently correlative with the American
situation to justify the epithet "national." The hero will journey
"forth and back" between "now and sunrise": Brown's night
journey is not merely psychological but is also the temporal
duration of the national movement through space to the Pacific
Ocean, whose final significance is to be manifest at the end, if
at all. With a nightmare mélange of hidden allusions to the
American dream, and to the grim work of civilizing a virgin
continent, the protagonist plunges darkly into the wilderness.
Wherever he goes is a clearing, the trees magically opening
and closing around his progress. At one point he sits on a stump,
refusing to go farther; plainly, he is not the first pioneer passing
this way. The farther he goes, the faster he goes, which was
also true of the Westward Movement, "until, quivering among
the trees, he saw a red light before him, as when the felled
trunks and branches of a clearing have been set on fire." This
is not the sunrise of arrival, but a lurid Western landscape—
aflame with the conflicting moral passions of actor and author—
betokening a previous advance and an intermediate stage.

Brown's failure to keep faith is a failure not only of his own
but of several generations. The Devil has helped his grand-
father whip a Quaker woman, and encouraged his father to
burn an Indian village during King Philip's War; and these
are the same behaviors which generated the psychic traumas of
"The Gentle Boy" and "Roger Malvin's Burial." Brown's refusal
to believe in the sins of the past, or their present consequences,
is evidently symptomatic of a representative American shortcom-
ing, as evidenced in the disinclination (still widespread) to
examine closely the nature of the Westward Movement. "We
are a people of prayer, and good works to boot," Brown declares,
"and abide no such wickedness." His sudden swing to the op-
posite pole, his easy acceptance of the sins of the past, and his
use of them to justify a continuing malefaction, may by certain
carping critics be thought to hint an equally representative
national inadequacy. Through the pages of "Young Goodman Brown," as through the annals of American history, runs the ethical absurdity of it's always being too late to turn back. Brown enters the forest, thinking that Indians may lurk behind every tree; Indians he associates with the Devil; the minute he does so, the Devil is at his elbow. "Whither, then, could these holy men be journeying so deep into the heathen wilderness?" Into the depth of American humanity, which was also the blackness of darkness.

The tradition of cultural understanding within which Hawthorne worked best was a tradition not merely of substance, as in "the matter of the West," but also of metaphor and its correspondent discursive or narrative forms. "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," for example, is both a story about the West and a formal imitation of the Western frontier. In a headnote citing historical authority for this particular "philosophic romance," Hawthorne says that "the facts, recorded on the grave pages of our New England annalists, have wrought themselves, almost spontaneously, into a sort of allegory." Very likely they did, for the poetic space spontaneously occupied by Hawthorne's tale is simply the magnificent but only vaguely geographical ground down the middle of which the American people ran an imaginary metonymous line—"that admixture of civilization, and of the forest," as Cooper called it, or, according to the sardonic Melville, "the region of the everlasting lull, introductory to a positive vacuity"—in order to give their burgeoning sense of national purpose and destiny a perceptible definition and shape.

"Two hundred years ago, and more, the old world and its inhabitants became mutually weary of each other. Men voyaged by thousands to the West," as, in 1835, they were voyaging still. Hawthorne's story concerns the long weary process through which Old World culture was transported to, and modified by, the existentially stricter environments of the New, where two
representative and antithetical groups, both oriented toward the American frontier, especially command his interest. "It could not be," says Hawthorne of the Merry Mounters (almost as if he wished it were), "that the fauns and nymphs, when driven from their classic groves and homes of ancient fable, had sought refuge, as all the persecuted did, in the fresh woods of the West." Watching the scenes of revelry, the more solidly established Puritans compare their masqued rivals to "those devils and ruined souls with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness." Here the Puritans are making themselves at home, in however appalling a fashion—black wildernesses being second nature with them—as the Merry Mounters are not.

It is thus at first glance surprising that Hawthorne declines to award the Puritans a clear-cut victory, as both common sense and his historical sources must have tempted him to do. The anomaly confirms what the headnote hinted: Hawthorne's controlling source is no New England annalist but the typical American conception of the Western frontier, which divided only to unite, and which robbed all unseemly contradictions of their sting. Hawthorne resolves the issue—that "jollity and gloom were contending for an empire," an issue formulated, as usual, only to be resolved—by providing as the central focus of his story a pair of young lovers who share the best traits of both sides, as Leatherstocking and Henry Thoreau, to name only two of the age's representative heroes, comprehended the virtues of white civilization and Indian liberty. Hawthorne's allegorical action sets the terms of "life as it is", but "life as it is" necessarily depends on a sense of American civilization that turns out to be practically equivalent to a definition of the Western frontier. More subtly, the story also reveals the terms of American writing as it is, or as, in Hawthorne's heyday, it was coming to be: neither jollity (imagination) or gloom (realism) wins the New World, but a blend of the two.
This general pattern of thought repeats itself in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" through a variety of perspectives. The revelers are deliberately located at a point of meeting between the animal and the human; they are "the crew of Comus, some already transformed to brutes, some midway between man and beast, and the others rioting in the flow of tipsy jollity that foreran the change." One youth emblematically wears stag head and antlers, another the "grim visage" of a wolf, a third the beard and horns of a goat. A fourth is disguised as a bear, except that he wears pink silk stockings, and he is mentioned together with a "real bear of the dark forest," who conveniently wanders along, so that his "inferior nature" may ritualistically rise "half way, to meet his companions as they stooped." This mimic metamorphosis also includes a "Salvage man. . . . girdled with green leaves," and "by his side, a noble figure, but still a counterfeit . . . an Indian hunter, with feathery crest and wampum belt." For all the jollity, there is an uneasy air of savagery erupting into civilized conditions, the basic ambiguity of American culture. Civilization in the New World is seen as frail and uncertain, relatively defenseless against raids from either the barbaric wilderness or the befuddled heart of man (in certain of Hawthorne's moods, synonymous). Yet, together with disaster, a saving realism rushes at sunset "from the black surrounding woods," not only in the persons of Puritans but in the actual shadows, which seem to mean, in the following order, death, awareness of death, and a consequent adjustment of wish-fulfillment to fact, as "when waking thoughts start up amid the scattered fantasies of a dream." Even the Anglican priest—"canonically dressed, yet decked with flowers, in heathen fashion"—is figured according to the basic frontier formula, interpenetration of conceptual opposites on some kind of imaginary neutral territory, the same formula found in Turner's classic definition of the frontier as
the meeting point between savagery and civilization. Some of the Maypole flowers are "from English seed," while others are "blossoms of the wilderness." Hawthorne's imagination is so colored by the American notion of the Western border that situation after situation, however indirectly relevant, appears to him in that guise.

So it was in the beginning. A quarter-century later, at the effective end of Hawthorne's career, precisely the same animal-human antithesis and reconciliation turns up in *The Marble Faun*, where jollity and gloom contend for an even larger empire:

A Faun, copied from that of Praxiteles, and another who seems to be dancing, are exceedingly pleasant to look at. I like these strange, sweet, playful, rustic creatures, almost entirely human as they are, yet linked so prettily, without monstrosity, to the lower tribes. . . . Their character has never, that I know of, been brought out in literature; and something very good, funny, and philosophical, as well as poetic, might very likely be deduced from them. . . . The faun [is] a natural and delightful link betwixt human and brute life, and with something of a divine character intermingled.  

So Hawthorne wrote in his Notebook, after a visit to the Villa Borghese. The ultimate germ of his idea was still the conventional Western frontier and the literary Indian ("lower tribes," "link betwixt human and brute life," and so on) with whom he had identified his youthful literary fortunes in "The Seven Vagabonds." Now these tropes are debased and almost totally disencumbered of geographical, historical, or cultural meaning; yet for all the pretty posturing, and the many peripheral matters into which Hawthorne was eventually led, the diction and rhythm of the novel repeatedly point to the original source: "The characteristics of the brute creation meet and combine with those of humanity in this strange yet true and natural
conception of antique poetry and art. . . . Neither man nor animal, and yet no monster, but a being in whom both races meet on friendly ground. The idea grows coarse as we handle it, and hardens in our grasp." This most nebulous of Hawthorne’s novels is shot through with allusions to "tribes" and "wilderness," and naturally so, for the Faun’s narrative progress is from innocence to civilization, through savagery.

"'He is not supernatural,'” Miriam says of Donatello, "'but just on the verge of nature, and yet within it. What is the nameless charm of this idea, Hilda?"’” Hilda does not care to know, and Hawthorne seems to have forgotten—though a creature on the verge of nature and yet within it, like a pioneer happily hovering on the hither edge of free land, would appear to be identified, however confusingly, with the Western frontier.

"'There is something very touching and impressive in this statue of the Faun,'” Kenyon replies. "'In some long-past age, he must really have existed. Nature needed, and still needs, this beautiful creature; standing betwixt man and animal, sympathizing with each, comprehending the speech of either race, and interpreting the whole existence of one to the other. What a pity that he has forever vanished from the hard and dusty paths of life.'” The statue sounds suspiciously like an Indian, or like an Indian trader, which perhaps explains Hawthorne’s puzzled sense of anachronism, for whether he knew it or not, the frontier disappeared some time between the admission of California as a state and the advent of the Civil War, or, in more literary terms, some time between the writing of The Scarlet Letter and The Marble Faun. Hawthorne’s language is the language of a passing era; in almost the same words, Thoreau argued that mankind needed the Indian, and Brownson argued that mankind needed Christ. (In Brownson’s pre-Catholic phase, Christ was a sort of movement-party Natty Bumppo, or reconciler of religious antagonisms.)
In the 1840's and 50's, the process of doubling the metaphorical frontier had become almost automatic with American writers, major and minor. Pathfinders like Cooper and Hawthorne had discovered the trick earlier. In “The Haunted Mind” (1835), Hawthorne may already be seen self-consciously attempting to define a pseudo-metaphysical state of being by compelling the Western frontier, which in American writing was almost invariably a figure of speech in the first place, to transfer from one context to another its all too predictable implications. Except for a rhetorical genius like Poe or Thoreau—and Hawthorne was only rarely a rhetorical genius, besides having no talent for metaphysics—this manner of speaking was seldom impressive. At best, the relation between the Western frontier and those ambiguously Romantic mental conditions was only a loose analogy; at worst, the analogy might conceal serious contradiction, or the writer be tempted to say what he would not otherwise care to have said.

“The Haunted Mind” opens with description of that “singular moment” (pun) between waking and sleep; so Edgar Allen Poe declared that his dearest literary wish was to express intuitions arising in the soul “at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams.” According to Hawthorne, years earlier, “... You find yourself, for a single instant, wide awake in that realm of illusions, whither sleep has been the passport.” He is evidently trying to formulate something about arrested time, whatever that might be, and is meanwhile drifting toward a geographical trope. “Passport” suggests going to Europe, but the realm of illusions soon begins to take shape closer to home. “Yesterday has already vanished among the shadows of the past; to-morrow has not yet emerged from the future. You have found an intermediate space, where the business of life does not intrude; where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the pres-
ent." The realm of illusions is the moving Western frontier displaced onto a pure time model: vanished (or vanquished) past to the East of the line, emergent future to the West of the line, and the present (the only reality) upon the line—precisely the line Thoreau was determined to toe. But for this occasion the metaphor is wrong, or, more accurately, Hawthorne’s motive is inappropriate to the standard metaphor. The frontier fails to specify the intensest cultural reality, the most concentrated meaning, as it was supposed to do; instead, it suggests Hawthorne’s irresponsible abdication from them. Along with other self-indulgences which he elsewhere found so contemptible because he was so prone to them, this intermediate space between sleep and waking is welcomed as an amiably lazy withdrawal from reality in favor of “the sluggish ecstasy of inaction.” Inaction suggests death, and death calls forth a train of young Hawthorne’s ever-ready allegorical creatures. Then he suddenly reverts to a tepid adolescent erotic fantasy, whose initial image reveals the dreamer sinking “in a flowery spot, on the borders of sleep and wakefulness.” The flowery spot is evidently a Western prairie, unlocated but presumably in the general neighborhood of the frontier—which could never be located either, but only poetically evoked through the language of grounds and limits, borders and confines, boundaries and verges, intermediate spaces and neutral territories.

“The Haunted Mind” is an invaluable locus for the kind of doubled frontier metaphor with which Hawthorne’s writing was embellished from first to last, and which, in his happiest moments, was the informing principle of his fiction (as in *The Scarlet Letter*) and of his theory of fiction (as in “The Custom-House”). In these second-stage metaphors, the original figure of the frontier—civilization, nature, and the neutral territory—was applied to generally comparable situations (such as known, unknown, and the neutral territory) with results sometimes
commanding and sometimes calamitous. Especially when too
detached from their Western source, these doubled metaphors
were often perfunctory and implicit—which in itself is an index
to the nature and quality of Hawthorne’s literary thought—and
it is difficult to estimate what kind or degree of vitality lay
behind them, or even whether the author knew they were
there. Most of them involve the typically Romantic obsession
with boundaries of time, sanity, or existence—situations probably
impossible of conception without some sort of spatial language.
The more significant fact is that the spatial language regularly
chosen by Hawthorne and his American contemporaries was
derived from their sense of the Western frontier. In “A Select
Party,” the Man of Fancy calls a castle in the air “a sort of no
man’s land, where Posterity may make acquaintance with us
on equal terms.” Here the frontier is the literary imagination,
or point of meeting between present and future, pragma and
prophecy. Conversely, in The House of the Seven Gables,
“there is sad confusion, indeed, when the spirit thus flits away
into the past, or into the more awful future, or, in any manner,
steps across the spaceless boundary betwixt its own region and
the actual world.” This metaphor is sadly confused: on the one
hand, the neutral territory, or spaceless boundary, is the danger
zone between the soul’s possession and the impinging world,
and, on the other hand, it is the present, defined as the moment
of transition between future and past. The boundary is para-
doxically “spaceless” because the American frontier was; nobody
knew whether it was a line or an area. In such passages as
these, the topics and treatments vary; the metaphor remains
fundamentally the same. Its explicit Western content is almost
always zero; yet its very existence depends upon the prior
existence of the American frontier. In “P’s Correspondence,” it
would be comical “if, after missing his object [literary fame]
while seeking it by the light of reason, he should prove to have
stumbled upon it in his misty excursions beyond the limits of sanity." So Hester Prynne, best of pioneer mothers, and intimately acquainted with every conceivable kind of frontier, recognizes that Dimmesdale stands "on the verge of lunacy, if he had not already stepped across it." The English nobleman in Doctor Grimshawe's Secret, according to Hawthorne's plan, "shall walk on the verge of lunacy, and at last step over."

It sounds like the world of Poe, yet Hawthorne was past master of this particular mannerism before Poe began to publish his tales. In "A Gentle Boy," Ilbrahim "led her by the hand, in his quiet progress over the borders of eternity, [and] Dorothy almost imagined that she could discover the near, though dim, delightfulness of the home he was about to reach." Hester's badge of ignominy throws a "gleam, in the sufferer's hard extremity, across the verge of time. It had shown him where to set his foot, while the light of earth was fast becoming dim, and ere the light of futurity could reach him." Hawthorne's metaphorical frontiers are more appealing when more social and realistic. In "Main Street" he judges the Thursday Lecture an institution worth retaining "as bearing relations to both the spiritual and ordinary life, and bringing each acquainted with the other." The Lecture is neutral territory between spiritual and temporal, imbued with the qualities of both, and thereby empowered to reconcile them. In the local newspaper, Hawthorne wrote how American social conditions offered rude and refined "a common ground of courtesy and kindliness to meet upon." More explicitly, in the Palazzo Barbarini, he noted that the servants of cardinal, prince, and duke used a single domestic hall for "a common territory and meeting-ground." Thus closely do we approach the original frontier whence all the fanciful borders arose.

The largest concentration of such metaphors is probably in The Blithedale Romance, which also contains a host of unin-
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tegrated references to the American West. Zenobia is "on the hither verge of her richest maturity," while Priscilla is "on the outer limit of girlhood." According to Coverdale, "Hollingsworth would have gone with me to the hither verge of life, and have sent his friendly and hopeful accents far over on the other side, while I should be treading the unknown path." The modern mesmerist, "even if he profess to tread a step or two across the boundaries of the spiritual world, yet carries with him the laws of our actual life, and extends them over his preternatural conquests," as if he were administering one of America's Western territories. More reasonably, Coverdale imagines phantoms "that invariably haunt the mind, on the eve of adventurous enterprises, to warn us back within the boundaries of ordinary life," and speaks of "the sense of vast, undefined space, pressing from the outside against the black panes": both of these metaphors accurately and movingly reflect the fundamental American experience, whether of crossing the frontier in the Westward direction or merely of thinking about it at home. Most centrally of all, Coverdale's "hope was, that, between theory and practice, a true and available mode of life might be struck out." Unfortunately, in view of the fact that Blithedale is an obvious paradigm for American civilization, and Coverdale an obvious surrogate for the American writer, "the clods of earth, which we so constantly belabored and turned over and over, were never etherealized into thought. Our thoughts, on the contrary, were fast becoming cloddish. Our labor symbolized nothing." The prosaic world contends with the poetic imagination, not yet entirely at ease in the new environment; the conflict between them was Hawthorne's perpetual problem, as his Notebooks show; or as a character in Doctor Grimshawe's Secret puts it, "'How strangely everything evades me! . . . There is no medium in my life between the most vulgar realities, and the most vaporous fiction, too thin to
Understandably, Hawthorne's most desperately brilliant appropriations of the major American figure were in the realm of aesthetics.

The innermost chamber of the "The Custom-House" is the passage where Hawthorne fancifully pretends to describe the psychology of his composition. The aesthetic background is the ever portentous dualism of fact and fiction; the solution is through the agency of moonlight, or Romantic imagination. Native refinements are furnished by the metaphorical frontier, since the 1820's moving farther and farther from the Eastern writer and perhaps on that account more and more freeing itself from geographical actualities. "Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly,—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility,—is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests." Hawthorne lists some objects in the moonlit room, and proceeds: "All these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect." Precisely what happens to the Western frontier. "Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." Hawthorne continues to refer to wall, ceiling, furniture, but we are already deep in the magic forest where Hester Prynne from time to time resorts. The neutral territory is the meeting point between the facts of American history and the painfully growing American mind. From that conjunction the metaphor of the Western frontier once more arises to effect a significant restatement of imported European thought. Was it evoked by Hawthorne's awareness that the novel to follow was in essence a novel about the West?
Probably. But perhaps Hawthorne had additional motives for modifying the Wordsworthian formula—“to throw over them [incidents and situations from common life] a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.” Wordsworth concentrates on the imagination. Hawthorne’s shift to the frontier metaphor, and to the aesthetics of Coleridge, enables him to concentrate on the intractability of experience, an intractability poor Hawthorne had good reason to know about. In the Coleridgean view, if the imagination colors the facts, the facts in their turn color the imagination. And Hawthorne’s imagination is the perfect case in point; for the modes of apprehension which he imposed on all the dualistic categories susceptible of the imposition—and these were manifold, since he characteristically thought in dualistic terms—were in the first instance derived from the American sense of the Western frontier as somehow a metaphor resolving the inescapable American dualism, Manifest Destiny vs. inferiority complex. Indeed, as we look backward over the tortuous development of our early literature, it seems impossible to determine whether the American mind was primarily formed by the basic facts of American experience or whether these basic facts were primarily formed by the American mind. All we can be sure of is their reciprocity, a reciprocity precisely analogous to the historical situation, as it existed in the imaginations of men, and from which the metaphor of the frontier was born, nature in the neutral territory changing civilization while at the same time being changed by it. “What then is the American, this new man?” Crevecoeur’s troublesome question was answerable only by reference to where the new man lived and what he lived for. Hawthorne’s articulation of an aesthetic so closely revealing the literary situation of his country, and embodied in the central metaphor of the national dilemma, marks the moment of final and self-conscious maturity.
for American literature. What is it but a theory of realism, or imaginative truth, magnificently congruent with the actual conditions of American life?

But this was Hawthorne's high-water mark. His gradual and accelerating decline after The Scarlet Letter conceivably reflects the disappearance of the frontier, and with it the American sense of identity and purpose. It is just as easily attributable to the habit of neurotic withdrawal which plagued him from the beginning, and which he finally blamed on his pioneer life in the Maine woods. As he confessed to former President Pierce in the dedicatory Preface to Our Old Home, his imagination simply gave up. "The Present, the Immediate, the Actual, has proved too potent for me." In fact, he had come to this pass well before 1863. Except in the earliest years, and then again at the time of The Scarlet Letter, the balance he held between private sensibility and public truth was almost unbelievably precarious. In the 1850's, both sides of the equation collapsed. Twenty years earlier, Hawthorne was formed and for a while sustained by his magnificently ironic vision of the horrors and glories being enacted on that ever receding frontier where the newest nation was likewise articulating its uniquely millennial spirit and applying that spirit to the rapid solution of humanity's age-old problems. Then overnight the frontier vanished, the nation began to fall apart, and Hawthorne slowly faded like the Cheshire Cat. The first great phase of American literature was over.