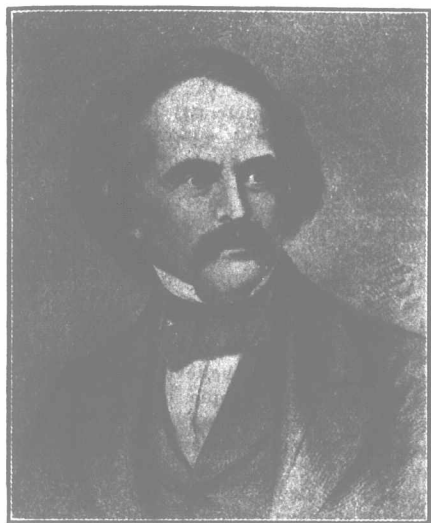




## Life, Literature and Education.



Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Those who have read Hawthorne's weird, fantastic, "moonshiny romances"—as he himself called them—are likely to wonder what manner of man this was who wrote such cold, scintillating, glittering tales; and what manner of life that must have been which he lived. When curiosity is satisfied on these points one finds a singularly barren "dead level," but little enriched by the pleasant things of earth, and in the midst of it one who walked much alone, withdrawing of his own free will from the warm touch of humankind, and retreating, hermit-like, into a seclusion which, one has reason to know, he did not enjoy. From that seclusion, however, emanated those wonderful masterpieces of literature, void of the pulse of life—as might be expected from the fact that they were written by such a recluse—yet gemmed with that exquisiteness of style, and imagery and expression which has ranked Hawthorne as the first novelist of America, and, after Emerson, the first man of letters of his time.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born at Salem, Mass., July 4th, 1804. His father, who was a sea captain, died when the lad was but four years of age, the upbringing of the little son and two daughters thus falling wholly upon a mother who was either careless in regard to or incapable of her charge. Instead of striving, as did the mother of Emerson, to educate her children and bring them into touch with all that would best fit them for noble manhood and womanhood, she appears to have failed even in creating the genial home atmosphere so necessary to child life, and for forty years after the death of her husband she seldom left her room, although before that she had been "much given to walking in the garden." Ordinarily such neglect would have sent the children out upon the streets; and it is, perhaps, significant of a peculiar streak in the little Hawthornes that they developed into recluses and

bookworms rather than into waifs and ragamuffins. Little Nathaniel in especial was shy and reserved, avoiding the society of other boys, and devoting himself to solitary rambles in the woods, and to such literature as came to his hand; and as the poverty of the family was such that books might not be freely purchased, it is not astonishing to find that for long enough he had to be content with reading and re-reading Pilgrim's Progress and Spenser's Faery Queen—by no means despicable literary diet, yet strong meat, perhaps, for so young a child.

In 1821 he entered Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, a provincial institution, among the "pines and blueberries," of which he writes afterwards, and which, with the rushing waters of the Androscoggin, seemed to find a place much nearer his heart than the varied company of students attending the college. Here, however, he seemed to come somewhat out of his shell, for he formed a few warm friendships, in which, rather strangely, neither Longfellow nor any of several students destined to shine later in the literary galaxy of America, figured. While at college he made no especial mark in scholarship, but he wrote some verses, and seems, from certain detailed descriptions written of him at the time, not to have passed unnoticed. "A handsome, bashful youth," one record runs, "with a low, musical voice." From the fact that this "handsomeness" has been dwelt on by those who met Hawthorne at any period of his life, it seems evident that he was endowed with rare physical attractions, which, with his mental brilliance, might have given him any place in the society which he eschewed.

After four years at Bowdoin he joined his mother and sisters at Salem, and fell back upon what he described later as his "cursed habits of solitude," keeping to his room so closely that his meals were often left at his door, and venturing abroad like the owls, chiefly at night.

For ten years he lived thus, devoting himself assiduously to his pen. Then, suddenly, a new motive power came into his life, and the barrenness of thus housing himself up within four bare walls was revealed to him. Writing of this time, with an impulsive air of confidence (for Hawthorne was not usually confidential even to his diary), he soliloquizes: "And here I sat a long, long time, waiting patiently for the world to know me, and sometimes wondering why it did not know me sooner, or whether it would ever know me at all—at least till I were in my grave. And sometimes it seems to me as if I were already in the grave, with only life enough to be chilled and benumbed."

The pathos of the story which glimmers through this is only too apparent, and one is glad to read on: "I used to think that I could imagine all passions, all feelings and states of the heart and mind; but how little did I know! Indeed, we are but shadows; we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream—till the heart be touched. That touch creates us—then we begin

to be." As will be surmised, Hawthorne had just become engaged, and although by reason of poverty he could not hope to marry for several years yet, the necessity of providing a home led him forth from the world of vague dreams to one of more life and reality.

During this long period of seclusion he had published several short stories—collected later as *Twice Told Tales*—and destroyed several more. He had also written a novel, *Fanshawe*, with which he was so disgusted that he recalled and burned as many copies as he could find. Now he was glad enough to obtain a situation in Boston customs house, where, however, the life turned out to be by no means congenial. "I have been measuring coal all day," he wrote once. "Sometimes I descended into the dirty little cabin of the schooner and warmed myself by a red-hot stove among biscuit barrels, pots and kettles. . . . But at last came the sunset, with delicate clouds, and a purple light upon the islands; and I blessed it, because it was the signal of my release."

Being turned out of office by a political change, he joined the rather visionary community at Brook Farm, but left in disgust after a few months' residence, married, and went to the old manse at Concord, where his "*Mosses*" were written. Here the life was idyllic—the charms of the old manse, rows on the river with Thoreau and Ellery Channing, occasional glimpses of Emerson, with whom, however, he never formed a close friendship—all this provided just such a life as Hawthorne loved; but after three years' tenure the prose of poverty forced him out into the world, and once more he found himself in a customs house, this time at Salem. Here, again, he found the life distasteful; yet to the monotonous drone of his experience in the old building may be attributed one of the finest bits that ever flowed from his pen—the prologue to *Scarlet Letter*.

Up to this time Hawthorne had had no marked place as a writer—had, in fact, described himself as the "obscurest man of letters in America." But when *Scarlet Letter* appeared, like a brilliant, baleful meteor on the dull sky of American fiction, the world suddenly realized that a master of English, of wonderful power, had appeared. Straightway all his previously published, hitherto comparatively unnoticed, tales became the fashion, and a few more dollars filtered into his pocket. Before long he left Salem forever, and, relying wholly on his literary endeavors for a living, withdrew to Lenox, Mass., where in a little old house to which pilgrimages are still made, *Tanglewood Tales*, *House of Seven Gables*, *Wonder Book* and *Blithedale Romance* were written, the last suggested by the experience at Brook Farm.

Hawthorne's next work, a *Life of Franklin Pierce*, then a candidate for the Presidency, was written in the interests of politics. Through the influence of Pierce, Hawthorne was subsequently, in 1853, made U. S. Consul at Liverpool, but as usual hated the business, and because of his shy, reserved habits, made little

use of his opportunities of meeting the literary lights of Great Britain. The result of his Liverpool experience was the writing of his *English Note-books*. In 1857 he resigned and went to Italy. Rome he hated; Florence, where he rented a picturesque old castle, was more to his taste, and here he began an Italian story, or, rather, allegory, "*The Marble Faun*," which afterwards became very popular. In 1860 he returned to the United States, and he took himself to an old house, which he had bought and fitted with a tower, from which, it was said, he received warning of approaching visitors, and so gained time to escape before they could intercept him. Here he wrote *Septimus Felton*, *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret*, and *The Dolliver Romance*—all inferior to his earlier works, probably because of the fact that he was now broken in health and weakened in power. In April, 1864, he became suddenly worse, and on the 18th of May, while on a short trip for his health, was found dead in his bed at the big hotel of Pemigewasset, Plymouth.

To begin a criticism of Hawthorne's work at this point would be to prolong a sketch already over-lengthy to a thesis. Suffice it to say that Hawthorne was one of the most "finished" writers of the modern era. He was not a philosopher; he possessed no great power in depicting character—his characters are ever abstractions, types of some state of mind or conscience, rather than living human beings;—he possessed no especial theories, and while endowed by his Puritan ancestors with a deep sense of the problem of sin, does not appear on that account to have been personally troubled either regarding himself or anyone else, and so does not write even on this subject with strong conviction or passionate emotion; although continually dealing with such problems, he handles them as tools, something to make artistic pictures with, rather than forces to be reckoned with.

Ostensibly Hawthorne's charm lies in his vivid imagery, his delicacy of expression, his—but why try to describe that which is indescribable;—no pointing out can suffice for those incapable of "feeling" Hawthorne's delightfulness for themselves. *Scarlet Letter* is gloomy and magnificent; *House of Seven Gables*, *Marble Faun* and *Blithedale Romance*, more light-some, yet, if less striking, not less admirable; and often some of his finest touches are to be found in places the least likely. To many, for instance, the prologue to his "*Mosses from an Old Manse*" is vastly more enjoyable than the *Mosses* themselves. Hawthorne wrote when at his best for the mere joy of writing, not with a commercial eye as to which should be the most dramatic situations for his most finished work. To know him one must read the products of his best years through and through. His fault, perhaps, is too great a leaning toward the allegorical and the mystical; one wishes he had known more and written more of real human life. Nevertheless, he who would familiarize himself with the best that English has to offer will not neglect this first of American novelists.