Hawthorne: Heavy Handed?

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Nathaniel Hawthorne, most notably known for his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, is also known for his strong symbolism not only in *The Scarlet Letter* but in his short stories as well. Stories such as “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “The Birthmark” all have obvious symbolism throughout. This paper will take on a formalist stance and dig deeper into the symbolism in the novel as well as the selected short stories, the differences in the symbols Hawthorne uses, how those symbols affect or relate to the characters, and how they affect or alter the stories as a whole.

In *The Scarlet Letter* one of the first symbols readers see is the rose bush that is growing strong outside the dismal prison door: “on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in…” (Hawthorne 36). The rose-bush can be read in many different ways, one of which could be for Hawthorne’s protagonist, Hester Prynne. Hester is often described as beautiful and has a “burning blush” (40) as she rebelliously steps out of the prison doors. The rose-bush is seemingly the only beautiful thing around the prison as it and the people around it are described with words such as “sad-colored,” “gray” and “iron spikes” (36). In “The Obliquity of Signs: *The Scarlet Letter,*” Milicent Bell briefly discusses the rose-bush as a symbol and the way Hawthorne
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describes it. Bell says that it is, “a reminder that such symbolizing may be only the result of the human imagination” (19). While it is possible that Hawthorne did not intend for the rose-bush to be a central symbol, it is still an important one to link to Hester. Bell’s statement also alludes to the fact that different readers can find different meanings in symbols used by the author.

Hester’s daughter, Pearl can also be read as a symbol throughout the novel. Darrel Abel states that “she [Pearl] is so much more important as symbol than as agent” (50). Abel’s statement is important because readers tend to forget that characters and their mannerisms can be symbolic as well. Pearl can be seen as many different symbols throughout The Scarlet Letter, one being the living product of her parent’s sin. It is said many times throughout the novel that Pearl is a “demon offspring” (67). However, Hawthorne chooses to refer to Pearl as, “lovely and immortal flower” (61). Abel compares Hawthorne’s Pearl to Wordsworth’s Lucy poems and calls Pearl a “Child of Nature.” Abel offers a few stanzas from Wordsworth’s poems which talk about Lucy “growing in the sun and shower” (50) and comparing her to a flower. Hawthorne paints a beautiful scene in chapter XVIII “A Flood of Sunshine” with Pearl in nature. Hawthorne says that the wild animals did not fear Pearl and instead, wondered at her and that the “mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child” (131) and “the flowers appeared to know it; and one and another whispered as she passed, “Adorn thyself with me, thou beautiful child, adorn thyself with me!” (131). Pearl is referred to as beautiful multiple times throughout The Scarlet Letter and Abel assert that Pearl is “the reincarnation of the best human possibility of her ancestors” (54). It is important that Pearl is seen as not only a symbol within herself but a symbol for both her parents, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale as well, “and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between those two” (101). Without “little Pearl” The Scarlet Letter would not be the outstanding novel
that is still being taught in classrooms everywhere nearly two hundred years later. Without Pearl, Hester and Dimmesdale more than likely never would have been found out and there would be no need for the scarlet “A” that adorns Hester’s bosom.

Another symbol that is easily overlooked in *The Scarlet Letter* is Dimmesdale’s seemingly innocent black glove that is left on the scaffold. Darrel Abel addresses the glove in his article, “Black Glove and Pink Ribbon: Hawthorne’s Metonymic Symbols.” Abel also discusses one of Hawthorne’s short stories, “Young Goodman Brown” and the pink ribbons that adorn Faith’s hat. Two miniscule pieces of clothing, yet strategically placed and described by Hawthorne himself, call for deeper attention. Abel says,

> The black glove in its proper place on the minister’s hand is an unnoticed item in his customary suit of solemn black; but detached from this ensemble of conventional significance, and found in an unhallowed place after a night of supernatural doings, the black glove arouses suggestions which disturb piety. Black suggests evil and concealment; the use of a glove suggest concealment and perhaps gingerliness and caution. (163-164).

When readers realize that Dimmesdale is Pearl’s father, it is clear that Dimmesdale is doing everything in his power to keep that secret concealed. The black glove symbolizes not only the desire for concealment but the deterioration of that concealment over the course of seven years as well as Dimmesdale’s own corruptness and loss of innocence.

Much like Dimmesdale’s black glove, Faith in “Young Goodman Brown” has pink ribbons on her hat which are symbolic of her loss of innocence. Readers are told about the pink ribbons in the first paragraph of “Young Goodman Brown,” “And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of
her cap” (178). These pink ribbons later come back to haunt Goodman Brown as they flutter down from the sky, “my Faith is gone!” (184) cries Goodman Brown as he realizes that his wife is in the dark forest as well. It is interesting that Abel compares these two pieces of clothing because that leads Abel into a more in depth discussion of how Goodman Brown’s Salem Village is similar to that of Arthur Dimmesdale’s Boston. Abel says that they are “alike in their reality as Puritan communities in which the orthodox dwelt secured by faith against the diabolic terrors which haunted the dark wilderness around them” (171). Abel’s statement brings up another symbol the two stories, The Scarlet Letter and “Young Goodman Brown” have in common, the forest which surrounds them. Repeatedly, the forest in The Scarlet Letter is referred to as a foreboding place with statements like, “mystery of the primeval forest” and “stood so black and dense on either side” (118) where the “Black Man” (119) resides. Pearl pleads with her mother to tell her a story as they are headed for the forest, “O, a story about the Black man, how he haunts this forest, and carries a book with him” (119). In “Young Goodman Brown” it is possible that we meet this elusive Black Man from The Scarlet Letter. Goodman is walking in to the forest when he sees a man that resembles himself and the only thing “that could be fixed upon as remarkable was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake” (179). The serpent like staff is referred to multiple times in the short story and is even used to startle Goody Cloyse, “the traveler put forth his staff, and touched her withered neck with what seemed the serpent’s tail. ‘The devil!’ screamed the pious old lady. ‘Then Goody Cloyse knows her old friend?’ observed the traveler” (181). It seems to be that Hawthorne connects the setting of forests with evil which is interesting considering the fact that in The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne allows Pearl to have such an intimate and beautiful connection with the wildlife in that same
forest. Perhaps the forests in both stories only negatively affect the adults that are guilty of some sin and guilt that the sin has caused.

The forest, the pink ribbons, the serpent like staff and the traveler himself are not the only symbols that Hawthorne offers in “Young Goodman Brown.” Underlying hints of witchcraft are present, and David Levin explains Hawthorne’s connection and interest with the Salem Witch Trials in his article, “Shadows of Doubt: Specter Evidence in Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown.’” The first supernatural clue that readers get is the time in which it took Goodman Brown to enter into the woods near Salem Village. Goodman was coming from Boston and is running late when the mysterious traveler says, “the clock of the Old South was striking as I came through Boston; and that is a full fifteen minutes agone” (179). The distance between these two places are, according to Levin, “at least fifteen or twenty miles” (350) apart which raises the question, how did the traveler get from point A to point B in such a short amount of time, witchcraft, perhaps? Levin discusses that Hawthorne “knew the facts and lore of the Salem witchcraft ‘delusion’ and used them liberally in this story as well as others” (345). Perhaps the best evidence readers get is when Goodman Brown is in the forest and sees the “dark figure” “welcoming” his “children” (186) and exclaiming to them “It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicket arts…” (187). If readers are not yet convinced that this dark figure being worshipped by the common people in Goodman Brown’s life is in fact Satan, Hawthorne gives his audiences another imbedded clue in the narration about the voice of the demon, “in a deep and solemn tone, almost sad, with its despairing awfulness, as if his once angelic nature could yet mourn for our miserable race” (187). “His once angelic nature” is the crucial portion of this sentence. Satan was once an angel in Heaven with God, Isaiah 14:12-14 tells of Satan’s fall from heaven, “How you have fallen
from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” Hawthorne never directly states that the dark figure is indeed Satan but the hints of witchcraft in the depths of the dark forest as well as describing the dark figure as once angelic alludes to the fact and twists the symbolism even more. Young Goodman Brown the character is directly affected by the symbolism of the devil in this story because he is lead into hell, essentially, but a man that resembles him tremendously. This can be seen as symbolic for the fact that Goodman Brown is a sinful man. Readers are never directly told what Goodman Brown has done to sin but the symbols in this short story point to a life of sin for the young man. Hawthorne makes the fact that Goodman is as guilty as the people in cohorts with Satan obvious through the symbolism that Hawthorne chose for “Young Goodman Brown.”

Perhaps Goodman Brown’s sin of thinking himself superior to his fellow men and women is less ambiguous than the sin of Mr. Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil.” Yet again, another seemingly innocent piece of clothing is an important symbol in one of Hawthorne’s stories, this time going back to the color black for a minister. In E. Earle Stibitz article, “Ironic Unity in Hawthorne’s ‘The Minister’s Black Veil’” Stibitz makes a statement in regards to this particular short story, “one way of understanding “The Minister’s Black Veil,” as with any Hawthorne tale, is to read it not only as the unique work of art that it is, but as a tale comparable to others by Hawthorne, viewing it in the context of his essentially consistent thought and art as a whole” (184). A common theme in Hawthorne’s work seems to be guilt, sin, the realization of the two and how they impact his characters. The veil that Mr. Hooper shrouds his face with can be seen in different ways depending on the person reading the short story. One way it can be seen is the minister, Mr. Hooper is guilty of something, he is hiding his face because he does not want to impose his sin on his congregation. Hawthorne alludes to this possibility with the
narration, “this was what gave plausibility to the whispers, that Mr. Hooper’s conscience tortured him for some great crime, too horrible to be entirely concealed, or otherwise than so obscurely intimated” (196). Hooper’s possible hidden sin is comparable to that of Arthur Dimmesdale. Both “holy” men can be seen as concealing a hidden truth about themselves, a sinful truth, that they are doing their best to keep hidden from their congregation. Both men are less worried about their lovers and doing what is right than they are about their position in the church. Mr. Hooper’s “plighted wife,” (194) Elizabeth, confronts him and simply asks that he show her his face once more, “life the veil but once, and look me in the face” (195) to which Mr. Hooper replies, “Never! It cannot be!” (195) and Elizabeth tells him her goodbyes. Much like Dimmesdale’s blatant alienation of Hester, Mr. Hooper is making it clear to Elizabeth that he plans to alienate everyone, including her, from his life with this black veil. The black veil as a symbol in this short story is pertinent to the theme of the story because as Stibitz says in his article, Hooper “thus unintentionally dramatizes the very sin of secrecy that he intentionally sets out to symbolize” (182). However, it is also a possibility that Mr. Hooper has no personal sin and the veil simply represents “a common human failing: man’s refusal to show anyone his inner heart with its likely load of private guilt” (183) as Stibitz explains. Once again, similar to Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” and The Scarlet Letter, a seemingly irrelevant piece of clothing is used to highlight the downfall of humanity.

Another short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birthmark” is rife with symbolism. Although Hawthorne does not use clothing as a bigger symbol in this short story, there are some connections between Aylmer and Roger Chillingworth in The Scarlet Letter and their line of work. Aylmer is “a man of science” (199) much like Chillingworth who is attempting to “cure” Dimmesdale with his homemade herb elixirs. Alchemy can be seen as a symbol in not only “The
Birthmark” but The Scarlet Letter as well. Both male characters, Aylmer and Chillingworth are obsessed with their work, to the point that one kills his wife and the other possibly prompts the death of a “friend.” Another symbol in “The Birthmark” is the birthmark on Georgiana’s cheek that is the shape of a tiny hand which Aylmer claims is an imperfection that takes away from Georgiana’s beauty. Aylmer stays in his lab long hours at a time trying to perfect the “Elixir of Life” (206) in order to fix this imperfection which can be read symbolically as “the hand of God.” From that point of view, this short story could be read as a warning for scientists, perhaps that they are not to attempt to do God’s work or to undo God’s work, a theme of science versus religion. This theme can be seen in The Scarlet Letter with Chillingworth, a scientific man feverishly working to “cure” a religious man, Dimmesdale. While alchemy is mentioned a handful of times in The Scarlet Letter, Charles Swann argues in his article, “Alchemy and Hawthorne’s “Elixir of Life manuscripts” that “The Birthmark” has a much bigger connection to alchemy. Swann discusses that Aylmer is connected to the actual world of alchemy and science, perhaps more so than Chillingworth, “his library places him in a long tradition” and goes on to discuss how the famous “philosophers” such as Cornelius Agrippa and Albertus Magnus “were all thought to be alchemists who believed in the transmutation of metals of the elixir of life” (374). Swann goes on to say that “Hawthorne clearly intended an analogy between these “philosophers” and Aylmer” (374). However, the possible analogy between Aylmer and Chillingworth is far murkier. There are many different readings of the “Crimson Hand” (202) and what exactly it symbolizes. An author of only great magnitude could create such dimensional, ambiguous and discussion worthy symbols in a short story.

Symbolism is a fundamental aspect of any form of literature, whether it is in novels, short stories or poetry, symbolism is what gives literature meaning. In The Scarlet Letter it is the rose-
bush, the angelic character Pearl, the ominous black glove and the “A”. In “Young Goodman Brown” it is the girlish fluttering pink ribbons, and the assumingly sinister forest. In “The Minister’s Black Veil” it is precisely the black veil covering Mr. Hooper’s face and in “The Birthmark” it is alchemy and the hand shaped mark on Georgiana’s cheek. Interestingly enough, each of these symbols can somehow be connected to one another, even from entirely different stories with entirely different plots. Symbols help to create the certain theme that an author is trying to purvey and it is necessary to look at those symbols from a formalist point of view in order to fully understand them. With comparing the symbols in multiple different short stories and a novel, one must contrast them as well. The differences in the symbols within literature by the same author shows that a famous author such as Hawthorne had the ability to speak on many different issues through his work and using symbolism to do so makes a work accessible to different audiences. Symbolism is necessary for forwarding the plot as well as simply making the story interesting and worth the read. Nathaniel Hawthorne is an author who is able to create meaningful ambiguity with the symbols that he strategically places in his writings. Hawthorne’s stories have remained prevalent in today’s classroom for that reason, because Hawthorne’s stories speak to a multitude of audiences through his symbolism.
Works Cited


“Hawthorne's Pearl: Symbol and Character.” *ELH*, vol. 18, no. 1, Mar. 1951, pp. 50–66. JSTOR.


