The traveller by the Eastern Railroad, from Boston, reaches in less than an hour the old town of Salem, Massachusetts. It is chiefly composed of plain wooden houses, but it has a quaint air of past provincial grandeur, and has indeed been an important commercial town. The first American ship for Calcutta and China sailed from this port; and Salem ships opened our trade with New Holland and the South Seas. But its glory has long since departed, with that of its stately and respectable neighbors, Newburyport and Portsmouth. There is still, however, a custom-house in Salem, there are wharves and chandlers’ shops and a faint show of shipping and an air of marine capacity which no apparent result justifies. It sits upon the shore like an antiquated sea-captain, grave and silent, in tarpaulin and duck trousers, idly watching the ocean upon which he will never sail again.

But this touching aspect of age and lost prosperity merely serves to deepen the peculiar impression of the old city, which is not derived from its former commercial importance, but from other associations. Salem village was a famous place in the Puritan annals. The tragedy of the witchcraft tortures and murders has cast upon it a ghostly spell, from which it seems never to have escaped; and even the sojourner of to-day, as he loiters along the shore in the sunniest morning of June, will sometimes feel an icy breath in the air, chilling the very marrow of his bones. Nor is he consoled by being told that it is only the east wind; for he cannot help believing that an invisible host of Puritan spectres have breathed upon him, revengeful, as he poached upon their ancient haunts.

The Puritan spirit was neither gracious nor lovely, but nothing softer than its iron hand could have done its necessary work. The Puritan character was narrow, intolerant, and exasperating. The forefathers were very “sour” in the estimation of Morton and his merry company at Mount Wollaston. But for all that, Bradstreet and Carver and Winthrop were better forefathers than the gay Morton, and the Puritan spirit is doubtless the moral influence of modern civilization, both in Old and New England. By the fruit let the seed be judged. The State to whose rough coast the _Mayflower_ came, and in which the Pilgrim spirit has been most active, is to-day the chief of all human societies, politically, morally, and socially. It is the community in which the average of well-being is higher than in any State we know in history. Puritan though it be, it is more truly liberal and free than any large community in the world. But it had bleak beginnings. The icy shore, the sombre pines, the stealthy savages, the hard soil, the unbending religious austerity, the Scriptural severity, the arrogant virtues, the angry intolerance of contradiction—they all made a narrow strip of sad civilization between the pitiless sea and the remorseless forests. The moral and physical tenacity which is wrestling with the Rebellion was toughened among these flinty and forbidding rocks. The fig, the pomegranate, and the almond would not grow there, nor the nightingale sing; but nobler men than its children the sun never shone upon, nor has the heart of man heard sweeter music than the voices of James Otis and Samuel Adams. Think of Plymouth in 1620, and of Massachusetts to-day! Out of strength came forth sweetness.

With some of the darkest passages in Puritan history this old town of Salem, which dozes apparently with the most peaceful conscience in the world, is identified, and while its Fourth of July bells were joyfully ringing sixty years ago Nathaniel Hawthorne was born. He subsequently chose to write the name Hawthorne, because he thought he had discovered that it was the original spelling. In the introduction to _The Scarlet Letter_, Hawthorne speaks of his
ancestors as coming from Europe in the seventeenth century, and establishing themselves in Salem, where they served
the State and propitiated Heaven by joining in the persecution of Quakers and witches. The house known as the Witch
House is still standing on the corner of Summer and Essex streets. It was built in 1642 by Captain George Corwin, and
here in 1692 many of the unfortunates who were palpably guilty of age and ugliness were examined by the Honorable
Jonathan Curwin, Major Gedney, Captain John Higginson, and John Hathorn, Esquire.

The name of this last worthy occurs in one of the first and most famous of the witch trials, that of "Goodwife Gory", in
March, 1692, only a month after the beginning of the delusion at the house of the minister Parris. Goodwife Gory was
accused by ten children, of whom Elizabeth Parris was one; they declared that they were pinched by her and strangled,
and that she brought them a book to sign. "Mr. Hathorn, a magistrate of Salem", says Robert Calef, in _More Wonders
of the Invisible World_, "asked her why she afflicted these children. She said she did not afflict them. He asked her
who did then. She said, I do not know; how should I know? She said they were poor, distracted creatures, and no heed
ought to be given to what they said. Mr. Hathorn and Mr. Noyes replied, that it was the judgment of all that were there
present that they were bewitched, and only she (the accused) said they were distracted. She was accused by them that
the _black man_ whispered to her in her ear now (while she was upon examination), and that she had a yellow bird that
did use to suck between her fingers, and that the said bird did suck now in the assembly." John Hathorn and Jonathan
Curwin were "the Assistants" of Salem village, and held most of the examinations and issued the warrants. Justice
Hathorn was very swift in judgment, holding every accused person guilty in every particular. When poor Jonathan Gary
of Charlestown attended his wife charged with witchcraft before Justice Hathorn, he requested that he might hold one
of her hands, "but it was denied me. Then she desired me to wipe the tears from her eyes and the sweat from her face,
which I did; then she desired that she might lean herself on me, saying she should faint. Justice Hathorn replied, she
had strength enough to torment these persons, and she should have strength enough to stand. I speaking something
against their cruel proceedings, they commanded me to be silent, or else I should be turned out of the room". What a
piteous picture of the awful colonial inquisition and the village Torquemada! What a grim portrait of an ancestor to
hang in your memory, and to trace your kindred to!

Hawthorne's description of his ancestors in the Introduction to _The Scarlet Letter_ is very delightful. As their
representative, he declares that he takes shame to himself for their sake, on account of these relentless persecutions; but
he thinks them earnest and energetic. "From father to son, for above a hundred years, they followed the sea; a gray-
headed ship-master, in each generation, retiring from the quarter-deck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took
the hereditary place before the mast, confronting the salt spray and the gale, which had blustered against his sire and
grand-sire. The boy also, in due time, passed from the forecastle to the cabin, spent a tempestuous manhood, and
returned from his world-wanderings, to grow old, and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth." Not all, however,
for the last of the line of sailors, Captain Nathaniel Hathorne, who married Elizabeth Clarke Manning, died at Calcutta
after the birth of three children, a boy and two girls. The house in which the boy was born is still standing upon Union
Street, which leads to the Long Wharf, the chief seat of the old foreign trade of Salem. The next house, with a back
entrance on Union Street, is the Manning house, where many years of the young Hawthorne's life were spent in the
care of his uncle, Robert Manning. He lived often upon an estate belonging to his mother's family, in the town of
Raymond, near Sebago Lake, in Maine. The huge house there was called Manning's Folly, and is now said to be used
as a meeting-house. His uncle sent Hawthorne to Bowdoin College, where he graduated in 1825. A correspondent of
the Boston _Daily Advertiser_, writing from Bowdoin at the late commencement, says that he had recently found "in an
old drawer" some papers which proved to be the manuscript "parts" of the students at the Junior exhibition of 1824;
among them was Hawthorne's "De Patribus Conscriptis Romanorum". "It is quite brief," writes the correspondent, "but
is really curious as perhaps the only college exercise in existence of the great tragic writer of our day (has there been a
greater since Shakespeare?). The last sentence is as follows (note the words which I put in italics): 'Augustus equidem
antiquam magnificentiam patribus reddidit, _sed fulgor tantum fuit sine fervore_. Nunquam in republica senatoribus
potestas recuperata, postremum species etiam amissa est.' On the same occasion Longfellow had the salutatory oration
in Latin--'Oratio Latina; Anglici Poetae.'"

Hawthorne has given us a charming glimpse of himself as a college boy in the letter to his fellow-student, Horatio
Bridge, of the Navy, whose _Journal of an African Cruiser_ he afterwards edited. 'I know not whence your faith came;
but while we were lads together at a country college, gathering blueberries, in study-hours, under those tall academic pines; or watching the great logs as they tumbled along the current of the Androscoggin; or shooting pigeons and gray squirrels in the woods; or bat-fowling in the summer twilight; or catching trouts in that shadowy little stream which, I suppose, is still wandering riverward through the forest--though you and I will never cast a line in it again--two idle lads, in short (as we need not fear to acknowledge now), doing a hundred things that the faculty never heard of, or else it had been the worse for us,--still it was your prognostic of your friend's destiny that he was to be a writer of fiction." From this sylvan university Hawthorne came home to Salem; "as if," he wrote later, "Salem were for me the inevitable centre of the universe."

The old witch-hanging city had no weirder product than this dark-haired son. He has certainly given it an interest which it must otherwise have lacked; but he speaks of it with small affection, considering that his family had lived there for two centuries. "An unjoyous attachment," he calls it. And, to tell the truth, there was evidently little love lost between the little city and its most famous citizen. Stories still float in the social gossip of the town, which represent the shy author as inaccessible to all invitations to dinner and tea; and while the pleasant circle awaited his coming in the drawing-room, the impracticable man was--at least so runs the tale--quietly hobnobbing with companions to whom his fame was unknown. Those who coveted him as a phoenix could never get him, while he gave himself freely to those who saw in him only a placid barn-door fowl. The sensitive youth was a recluse, upon whose imagination had fallen the gloomy mystery of Puritan life and character. Salem was the inevitable centre of his universe more truly than he thought. The mind of Justice Hathorn's descendant was bewitched by the fascination of a certain devilish subtlety working under the comeliest aspects in human affairs. It overcame him with strange sympathy. It colored and controlled his intellectual life.

Devoted all day to lonely reverie and musing upon the obscurer spiritual passages of the life whose monuments he constantly encountered, that musing became inevitably morbid. With the creative instinct of the artist, he wrote the wild fancies into form as stories, many of which, when written, he threw into the fire. Then, after nightfall, stealing out from his room into the silent streets of Salem, and shadovy as the ghosts with which to his susceptible imagination the dusky town was thronged, he glided beneath the house in which the witch-trials were held, or across the moonlit hill upon which the witches were hung, until the spell was complete. Nor can we help fancying that, after the murder of old Mr. White in Salem, which happened within a few years after his return from college, which drew from Mr. Webster his most famous criminal plea, and filled a shadowy corner of every museum in New England, as every shivering little man of that time remembers, with an awful reproduction of the scene in wax-figures, with real sheets on the bed, and the murderer, in a glazed cap, stooping over to deal the fatal blow--we cannot help fancying that the young recluse who walked by night, the wizard whom as yet none knew, hovered about the house, gazing at the windows of the fatal chamber, and listening in horror for the faint whistle of the confederate in another street.

Three years after he graduated, in 1828, he published anonymously a slight romance with the motto from Southey, "Wilt thou go with me?" Hawthorne never acknowledged the book, and it is now seldom found; but it shows plainly the natural bent of his mind. It is a dim, dreamy tale, such as a Byron-struck youth of the time might have written, except for that startling self-possession of style and cold analysis of passion, rather than sympathy with it, which showed no imitation, but remarkable original power. The same lurid gloom overhangs it that shadows all his works. It is uncanny; the figures of the romance are not persons, they are passions, emotions, spiritual speculations. So the _Twice-told Tales_ that seem at first but the pleasant fancies of a mild recluse, gradually hold the mind with a Lamia-like fascination; and the author says truly of them, in the Preface of 1851, "Even in what purport to be pictures of actual life, we have allegory not always so warmly dressed in its habiliments of flesh and blood as to be taken into the reader's mind without a shiver." There are sunny gleams upon the pages, but a strange, melancholy chill pervades the book. In "The Wedding Knell", "The Minister's Black Veil", "The Gentle Boy", "Wakefield", "The Prophetic Pictures", "The Hollow of the Three Hills", "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment", "The Ambitious Guest", "The White Old Maid", "Edward Fane's Rose-bud", "The Lily's Quest"--or in the "Legends of the Province House", where the courtly provincial state of governors and ladies glitters across the small, sad New England world, whose very baldness jeers it to scorn--there is the same fateful atmosphere in which Goody Cloyse might at any moment whisk by upon her broomstick, and in which the startled heart stands still with unspeakable terror.
The spell of mysterious horror which kindled Hawthorne’s imagination was a test of the character of his genius. The mind of this child of witch-haunted Salem loved to hover between the natural and the supernatural, and sought to tread the almost imperceptible and doubtful line of contact. He instinctively sketched the phantoms that have the figures of men, but are not human; the elusive, shadowy scenery which, like that of Gustave Dore’s pictures, is Nature sympathizing in her forms and aspects with the emotions of terror or awe which the tale excites. His genius broods entranced over the evanescent phantasmagoria of the vague debatable land in which the realities of experience blend with ghostly doubts and wonders.

But from its poisonous flowers what a wondrous perfume he distilled! Through his magic reed, into what penetrating melody he blew that deathly air! His relentless fancy seemed to seek a sin that was hopeless, a cruel despair that no faith could throw off. Yet his naive and well-poised genius hung over the gulf of blackness, and peered into the pit with the steady nerve and simple face of a boy. The mind of the reader follows him with an aching wonder and admiration, as the bewildered old mother forester watched Undine’s gambols. As Hawthorne describes Miriam in _The Marble Faun_, so may the character of his genius be most truly indicated. Miriam, the reader will remember, turns to Hilda and Kenyon for sympathy. "Yet it was to little purpose that she approached the edge of the voiceless gulf between herself and them. Standing on the utmost verge of that dark chasm, she might stretch out her hand and never clasp a hand of theirs; she might strive to call out 'Help, friends! help!' but, as with dreamers when they shout, her voice would perish audibly in the remoteness that seemed such a little way. This perception of an infinite, shivering solitude, amid which we cannot come close enough to human beings to be warmed by them, and where they turn to cold, chilly shapes of mist, is one of the most forlorn results of any accident, misfortune, crime, or peculiarity of character, that puts an individual ajar with the world."

Thus it was because the early New England life made so much larger account of the supernatural element than any other modern civilized society, that the man whose blood had run in its veins instinctively turned to it. But beyond this alluring spell of its darker and obscurer individual experience, it seems neither to have touched his imagination nor even to have aroused his interest. To Walter Scott the romance of feudalism was precious for the sake of feudalism itself, in which he believed with all his soul, and for that of the heroic old feudal figures which he honored. He was a Tory in every particle of his frame, and his genius made him the poet of Toryism. But Hawthorne had apparently no especial political, religious, or patriotic affinity with the spirit which inspired him. It was solely a fascination of the intellect. And although he is distinctively the poet of the Puritans, although it is to his genius that we shall always owe that image of them which the power of The Scarlet Letter has imprinted upon literature, and doubtless henceforth upon historical interpretation, yet what an imperfect picture of that life it is! All its stern and melancholy romance is there--its picturesque gloom and intense passion; but upon those quivering pages, as in every passage of his stories drawn from that spirit, there seems to be wanting a deep, complete, sympathetic appreciation of the fine moral heroism, the spiritual grandeur, which overhung that gloomy life, as a delicate purple mist suffuses in summer twilights the bald crags of the crystal hills. It is the glare of the scarlet letter itself, and all that it luridly reveals and weirdly implies, which produced the tale. It was not beauty in itself nor deformity, not virtue nor vice, which engaged the author’s deepest sympathy. It was the occult relation between the two. Thus while the Puritans were of all men pious, it was the instinct of Hawthorne’s genius to search out and trace with terrible tenacity the dark and devious thread of sin in their lives.

Human life and character, whether in New England two hundred years ago or in Italy to-day, interested him only as they were touched by this glamour of sombre spiritual mystery; and the attraction pursued him in every form in which it appeared. It is as apparent in the most perfect of his smaller tales, _Rappaccini’s Daughter_, as in _The Scarlet Letter, The Blithedale Romance, The House of the Seven Gables_, and _The Marble Faun_. You may open almost at random, and you are as sure to find it as to hear the ripple in Mozart’s music, or the pathetic minor in a Neapolitan melody. Take, for instance, _The Birth-Mark_, which we might call the best of the smaller stories, if we had not just said the same thing of _Rappaccini’s Daughter_--for so even and complete is Hawthorne’s power, that, with few exceptions, each work of his, like Benvenuto’s, seems the most characteristic and felicitous. In this story, a scholar marries a beautiful woman, upon whose face is a mark which has hitherto seemed to be only a greater charm. Yet in one so lovely the husband declares that, although it is the slightest possible defect, it is yet the mark of earthly imperfection,
and he proceeds to lavish all the resources of science to procure its removal. But it will not disappear; and at last he
tells her that the crimson hand "has clutched its grasp" into her very being, and that there is mortal danger in trying the
only means of removal that remains. She insists that it shall be tried. It succeeds; but it removes the stain and her life
together. So in _Rappaccini's Daughter_. The old philosopher nourishes his beautiful child upon the poisonous breath
of a flower. She loves, and her lover is likewise bewitched. In trying to break the spell, she drinks an antidote which
kills her. The point of interest in both stories is the subtle connection, in the first, between the beauty of Georgiana and
the taint of the birth-mark; and, in the second, the loveliness of Beatrice and the poison of the blossom.

This, also, is the key of his last romance, _The Marble Faun_, one of the most perfect works of art in literature, whose
marvellous spell begins with the very opening words: "Four individuals, in whose fortunes we should be glad to interest
the reader, happened to be standing in one of the saloons of the sculpture-gallery in the Capitol at Rome." When these
words are read, the mind familiar with Hawthorne is already enthralled. "What a journey is beginning, not a step of
which is trodden, and yet the heart palpitates with apprehension! Through what delicate, rosy lights of love, and soft,
shimmering humor, and hopes and doubts and vanishing delights, that journey will proceed, on and on into utter
gloom." And it does so, although "Hilda had a hopeful soul, and saw sunlight on the mountain-tops". It does so,
because Miriam and Donatello are the figures which interest us most profoundly, and they are both lost in the shadow.
Donatello, indeed, is the true centre of interest, as he is one of the most striking creations of genius. But the perplexing
charm of Donatello, what is it but the doubt that does not dare to breathe itself, the appalled wonder whether, if the
breeze should lift those clustering locks a little higher, he would prove to be faun or man? It never does lift them; the
doubt is never solved, but it is always suggested. The mystery of a partial humanity, morally irresponsible but humanly
conscious, haunts the entrancing page. It draws us irresistibly on. But as the cloud closes around the lithe figure of
Donatello, we hear again from its hidden folds the words of "The Birth-Mark": "Thus ever does the gross fatality of
earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence, which, in this dim sphere of half-development, demands
the completeness of a higher state". Or still more sadly, the mysterious youth, half vanishing from our sympathy, seems
to murmur, with Beatrice Rappaccini, "And still as she spoke, she kept her hand upon her heart.--'Wherefore didst thou
inflict this miserable doom upon thy child?'"

We have left the story of Hawthorne's life sadly behind. But his life had no more remarkable events than holding office
in the Boston Customhouse under Mr. Bancroft as collector; working for some time with the Brook--Farmers, from
whom he soon separated, not altogether amicably; marrying and living in the Old Manse at Concord; returning to the
Custom-house in Salem as surveyor; then going to Lenox, in Berkshire, where he lived in what he called "the ugliest
little old red farm-house that you ever saw", and where the story is told of his shyness, that, if he saw anybody coming
along the road whom he must probably pass, he would jump over the wall into the pasture, and so give the stranger a
wide berth; back again to Concord; then to Liverpool as consul; travelling in Europe afterwards, and home at last and
forever, to "The Wayside" under the Concord hill. "The hillside," he wrote to a friend in 1852, "is covered chiefly with
locust-trees, which come into luxuriant blossom in the month of June, and look and smell very sweetly, intermixed with
a few young elms and some white-pines and infant oaks, the whole forming rather a thicket than a wood. Nevertheless,
there is some very good shade to be found there; I spend delectable hours there in the hottest part of the day, stretched
out at my lazy length with a book in my hand or an unwritten book in my thoughts. There is almost always a breeze
stirring along the side or the brow of the hill."

It is not strange, certainly, that a man such as has been described, of a morbid shyness, the path of whose genius
diverged always out of the sun into the darkest shade, and to whom human beings were merely psychological
phenomena, should have been accounted ungenial, and sometimes even hard, cold, and perverse. From the bent of his
intellectual temperament it happens that in his simplest and sweetest passages he still seems to be studying and
curiously observing, rather than sympathizing. You cannot help feeling constantly that the author is looking askance
both at his characters and you, the reader; and many a young and fresh mind is troubled strangely by his books, as if it
were aware of a half-Mephistophelean smile upon the page. Nor is this impression altogether removed by the
remarkable familiarity of his personal disclosures. There was never a man more shrinkingly retiring, yet surely never
was an author more naively frank. He is willing that you should know all that a man may fairly reveal of himself. The
great interior story he does not tell, of course, but the Introduction to the _Mosses from an Old Manse_, the opening
chapter of _The Scarlet Letter_, and the _Consular Experiences_, with much of the rest of _Our Old Home_, are as intimate and explicit chapters of autobiography as can be found. Nor would it be easy to find anywhere a more perfect idyl than that introductory chapter of the _Mosses_. Its charm is perennial and indescribable; and why should it not be, since it was written at a time in which, as he says, "I was happy?" It is, perhaps, the most softly-hued and exquisite work of his pen. So the sketch of "The Custom-house", although prefatory to that most tragically powerful of romances, _The Scarlet Letter_, is an incessant play of the shyest and most airy humor. It is like the warbling of bobolinks before a thunder-burst. How many other men, however unreserved with the pen, would be likely to dare to paint, with the fidelity of Teniers and the simplicity of Fra Angelico, a picture of the office and the companions in which and with whom they did their daily work? The surveyor of customs in the port of Salem treated the town of Salem, in which he lived and discharged his daily task, as if it had been, with all its people, as vague and remote a spot as the town of which he was about to treat in the story. He commented upon the place and the people as modern travellers in Pompeii discuss the ancient town. It made a great scandal. He was accused of depicting with unpardonable severity worthy folks, whose friends were sorely pained and indignant. But he wrote such sketches as he wrote his stories. He treated his companions as he treated himself and all the personages in history or experience with which he dealt, merely as phenomena to be analyzed and described, with no more private malice or personal emotion than the sun, which would have photographed them, warts and all.

Thus it was that the great currents of human sympathy never swept him away. The character of his genius isolated him, and he stood aloof from the common interests. Intent upon studying men in certain aspects, he cared little for man; and the high tides of collective emotion among his fellows left him dry and untouched. So he beholds and describes the generous impulse of humanity with sceptical courtesy rather than with hopeful cordiality.

He does not chide you if you spend effort and life itself in the ardent van of progress, but he asks simply, "Is six so much better than half a dozen?" He will not quarrel with you if you expect the millennium to-morrow. He only says, with that glimmering smile, "So soon?" Yet in all this there was no shadow of spiritual pride. Nay, so far from this, that the tranquil and pervasive sadness of all Hawthorne's writings, the kind of heartache that they leave behind, seem to spring from the fact that his nature was related to the moral world, as his own Donatello was to the human. "So alert, so alluring, so noble", muses the heart as we climb the Apennines towards the tower of Monte Beni; "alas! is he human?" it whispers, with a pang of doubt.

How this directed his choice of subjects, and affected his treatment of them, when drawn from early history, we have already seen. It is not, therefore, surprising, that the history into which he was born interested him only in the same way.

When he went to Europe as consul, _Uncle Tom's Cabin_ was already published, and the country shook with the fierce debate which involved its life. Yet eight years later Hawthorne wrote with calm ennui, "No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land." Is crime never romantic, then, until distance ennobles it? Or were the tragedies of Puritan life so terrible that the imagination could not help kindling, while the pangs of the plantation are superficial and commonplace? Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, and Thackeray were able to find a shadow even in "merrie England". But our great romancer looked at the American life of his time with these marvellous eyes, and could see only monotonous sunshine. That the devil, in the form of an elderly man clad in grave and decent attire, should lead astray the saints of Salem village, two centuries ago, and confuse right and wrong in the mind of Goodman Brown, was something that excited his imagination, and produced one of his weirdest stories. But that the same devil, clad in a sombre sophism, was confusing the sentiment of right and wrong in the mind of his own countrymen he did not even guess. The monotonous sunshine disappeared in the blackest storm. The commonplace prosperity ended in tremendous war. What other man of equal power, who was not intellectually constituted precisely as Hawthorne was, could have stood merely perplexed and bewildered, harassed by the inability of positive sympathy, in the vast conflict which tosses us all in its terrible vortex?
In political theories and in an abstract view of war men may differ. But this war is not to be dismissed as a political
difference. Here is an attempt to destroy the government of a country, not because it oppressed any man, but because its
evident tendency was to secure universal justice under law. It is, therefore, a conspiracy against human nature.
Civilization itself is at stake; and the warm blood of the noblest youth is everywhere flowing in as sacred a cause as
history records--flowing not merely to maintain a certain form of government, but to vindicate the rights of human
nature. Shall there not be sorrow and pain, if a friend is merely impatient or confounded by it--if he sees in it only
danger or doubt, and not hope for the right--or if he seem to insinuate that it would have been better if the war had been
avoided, even at that countless cost to human welfare by which alone the avoidance was possible?

Yet, if the view of Hawthorne's mental constitution which has been suggested be correct, this attitude of his, however
deeply it may be regretted, can hardly deserve moral condemnation. He knew perfectly well that if a man has no ear for
music he had better not try to sing. But the danger with such men is that they are apt to doubt if music itself be not a
vain delusion. This danger Hawthorne escaped. There is none of the shallow persiflage of the sceptic in his tone, nor
any affectation of cosmopolitan superiority. Mr. Edward Dicey, in his interesting reminiscences of Hawthorne,
published in _Macmillan's Magazine_, illustrates this very happily.

"To make his position intelligible, let me repeat an anecdote which was told me by a very near friend of his and mine,
who had heard it from President Pierce himself. Frank Pierce had been, and was to the day of Hawthorne's death, one
of the oldest of his friends. At the time of the Presidential election of 1856, Hawthorne, for once, took part in politics,
wrote a pamphlet in favor of his friend, and took a most unusual interest in his success. When the result of the
nomination was known, and Pierce was President-elect, Hawthorne was among the first to come and wish him joy. He
sat down in the room moodily and silently, as he was wont when anything troubled him; then, without speaking a word,
he shook Pierce warmly by the hand, and at last remarked, 'Ah, Frank, what a pity!' The moment the victory was won,
that timid, hesitating mind saw the evils of the successful course--the advantages of the one which had not been
followed. So it was always. Of two lines of action, he was perpetually in doubt which was the best; and so, between the
two, he always inclined to letting things remain as they are.

"Nobody disliked slavery more cordially than he did; and yet the difficulty of what was to be done with the slaves
weighed constantly upon his mind. He told me once that, while he had been consul at Liverpool, a vessel arrived there
with a number of negro sailors, who had been brought from slave States, and would, of course, be enslaved again on
their return. He fancied that he ought to inform the men of the fact, but then he was stopped by the reflection--who was
to provide for them if they became free? and, as he said, with a sigh, 'while I was thinking, the vessel sailed.' So, I
recollect, on the old battle-field of Manassas, in which I strolled in company with Hawthorne, meeting a batch of
runaway slaves--weary, foot-sore, wretched, and helpless beyond conception; we gave them food and wine, some small
sums of money, and got them a lift upon a train going northward; but not long afterwards Hawthorne turned to me with
the remark, 'I am not sure we were doing right after all. How can these poor beings find food and shelter away from
home?' Thus this ingrained and inherent doubt incapacitated him from following any course vigorously. He thought, on
the whole, that Wendell Phillips and Lloyd Garrison and the Abolitionists were in the right, but then he was never quite
certain that they were not in the wrong after all; so that his advocacy of their cause was of a very uncertain character.
He saw the best, to alter slightly the famous Horatian line, but he never could quite make up his mind whether he
altogether approved of its wisdom, and therefore followed it but falteringly.

"'Better to bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of,'

"expressed the philosophy to which Hawthorne was thus borne imperceptibly. Unjustly, but yet not unreasonably, he
was looked upon as a pro-slavery man, and suspected of Southern sympathies. In politics he was always halting
between two opinions; or, rather, holding one opinion, he could never summon up his courage to adhere to it and it
only."
The truth is that his own times and their people and their affairs were just as shadowy to him as those of any of his stories, and his mind held the same curious, half-wistful poise among all the conflicts of principle and passion around him, as among those of which he read and mused. If you ask why this was so--how it was that the tragedy of an old Italian garden, or the sin of a lonely Puritan parish, or the crime of a provincial judge, should so stimulate his imagination with romantic appeals and harrowing allegories, while either it did not see a Carolina slave-pen, or found in it only a tame prosperity--you must take your answer in the other question, why he did not weave into any of his stories the black and bloody thread of the Inquisition. His genius obeyed its law. When he wrote like a disembodied intelligence of events with which his neighbours' hearts were quivering--when the same half-smile flutters upon his lips in the essay _About War Matters_, sketched as it were upon the battle-field, as in that upon _Fire Worship_, written in the rural seclusion of the mossy Manse--ah me! it is Donatello, in his tower of Monte Beni, contemplating with doubtful interest the field upon which the flower of men are dying for an idea. Do you wonder, as you see him and hear him, that your heart, bewildered, asks and asks again, "Is he human? Is he a man?"

Now that Hawthorne sleeps by the tranquil Concord, upon whose shores the Old Manse was his bridal bower, those who knew him chiefly there revert beyond the angry hour to those peaceful days. How dear the Old Manse was to him he has himself recorded; and in the opening of the _Tanglewood Tales_ he pays his tribute to that placid landscape, which will always be recalled with pensive tenderness by those who, like him, became familiar with it in happy hours. "To me," he writes, "there is a peculiar, quiet charm in these broad meadows and gentle eminences. They are better than mountains, because they do not stamp and stereotype themselves into the brain, and thus grow wearisome with the same strong impression, repeated day after day. A few summer weeks among mountains, a lifetime among green meadows and placid slopes, with outlines forever new, because continually fading out of the memory, such would be my sober choice." He used to say, in those days--when, as he was fond of insisting, he was the obscurest author in the world, because, although he had told his tales twice, nobody cared to listen--that he never knew exactly how he contrived to live. But he was then married, and the dullest eye could not fail to detect the feminine grace and taste that ordered the dwelling, and perceive the tender sagacity that made all things possible.

Such was his simplicity and frugality that, when he was left alone for a little time in his Arcadia, lie would dismiss "the help", and, with some friend of other days who came to share his loneliness, he cooked the easy meal, and washed up the dishes. No picture is clearer in the memory of a certain writer than that of the magician, in whose presence he almost lost his breath, looking at him over a dinner-plate which he was gravely wiping in the kitchen, while the handy friend, who had been a Western settler, scoured the kettle at the door. Blithedale, where their acquaintance had begun, had not allowed either of them to forget how to help himself. It was amusing to one who knew this native independence of Hawthorne, to hear, some years afterwards, that he wrote the "campaign" _Life of Franklin Pierce_ for the sake of getting an office. That such a man should do such a work was possibly incomprehensible to those who did not know him upon any other supposition, until the fact was known that Mr. Pierce was an old and constant friend. Then it was explained. Hawthorne asked simply how he could help his friend, and he did the only thing he could do for that purpose. But although he passed some years in public office, he had neither taste nor talent for political life. He owed his offices to works quite other than political. His first and second appointments were virtually made by his friend Mr. Bancroft, and the third by his friend Mr. Pierce. His claims were perceptible enough to friendship, but would hardly have been so to a caucus.

In this brief essay we have aimed only to indicate the general character of the genius of Hawthorne, and to suggest a key to his peculiar relation to his time. The reader will at once see that it is rather the man than the author who has been described; but this has been designedly done, for we confess a personal solicitude, shared, we are very sure, by many friends of Nathaniel Hawthorne, that there shall not be wanting to the future student of his works such light as acquaintance with the man may throw upon them, as well as some picture of the impression his personality made upon his contemporaries.

Strongly formed, of dark, poetic gravity of aspect, lighted by the deep, gleaming eye that recoiled with girlish coyness from contact with your gaze; of rare courtesy and kindliness in personal intercourse, yet so sensitive that his look and manner can be suggested by the word "glimmering;" giving you a sense of restrained impatience to be away; mostly silent in society, and speaking always with an appearance of effort, but with a lambent light of delicate humor playing
over all he said in the confidence of familiarity, and firm self-possession under all, as if the glimmering manner were only the tremulous surface of the sea, Hawthorne was personally known to few, and intimately to very few. But no one knew him without loving him, or saw him without remembering him; and the name Nathaniel Hawthorne, which, when it was first written, was supposed to be fictitious, is now one of the most enduring facts of English literature.

(The end)
George William Curtis's essay: The Works Of Nathaniel Hawthorne

By George William Curtis