Biography On Nathaniel Hawthorne Essay, Research Paper

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804 into an old Puritan family. Hawthorne graduated from Bowdoin College in 1825. He thereafter returned to his Salem home, living in semi-seclusion and writing. His work received little public recognition, however, and Hawthorne attempted to destroy all copies of his first novel, Fanshawe, which he had published at his own expense in 1828. During this period he also contributed articles and short stories to various periodicals. Several of the stories were published in Twice-Told Tales in 1837, which, although not a financial success, established Hawthorne as a leading writer. These early works are largely historical sketches and symbolic and allegorical tales dealing with moral conflicts and the effects of Puritanism on colonial New England.

Because Hawthorne was unable to earn a living by literary work, in 1839 Hawthorne took a job as weigher in the Boston, Massachusetts, customhouse. Two years later he returned to writing and produced a series of sketches of New England history for children, Grandfather’s Chair: A History for Youth, which was published in 1841. The same year he joined the communal society at Brook Farm near Boston, hoping to be able to live in such comfort that he could marry and still have time to devote to his writing. The demands of the farm were too great, however, and Hawthorne was unable to continue his writing while doing farm chores, and after six months he withdrew from the community. In 1842 he married Sophia Amelia Peabody of Salem and settled in Concord, Massachusetts, in a house called the Old Manse. During the four years he lived in Concord, Hawthorne wrote a number of tales that were later published as Mosses from an Old Manse, published in 1846. They include Roger Malvin’s Burial, Rappaccini’s Daughter, and Young Goodman Brown, tales in which Hawthorne’s preoccupation with the effects of pride, guilt, sin, and secrecy are combined with a continued emphasis on symbolism and allegory. His literary works are deeply concerned with the problems of ethics, of sin, and punishment. Hawthorne’s exploration of these themes was related to the sense of guilt he felt about the roles of his ancestors in the 17th-century persecution of Quakers and in the 1692 witchcraft trials of Salem, Massachusetts.

To survive, Hawthorne returned to government service in 1846 as surveyor of the Salem customhouse. In 1849 he was dismissed because of a change in political administration. By then he had already begun writing The Scarlet Letter, published in 1850, a novel about the adulterous Puritan Hester Prynne, who loyally refuses to reveal the name of her partner. Regarded as his masterpiece and as one of the classics of American literature, The Scarlet Letter reveals both Hawthorne’s superb craftsmanship and the powerful psychological insight with which he probed guilt and anxiety in the human soul.

In 1850 Hawthorne moved to Lenox, Massachusetts, where he enjoyed the friendship of the novelist Herman Melville, an admirer of Hawthorne’s work. At Lenox, Hawthorne wrote The House of the Seven Gables, in which he traced the decadence of Puritanism in an old New England family, A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys, and Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys, which retold classical legends. During a short stay in West Newton, Massachusetts, he produced The Snow-Image and Other Twice-Told Tales, which show his continuing preoccupation with the themes of guilt and pride, and The Blithedale Romance, a novel inspired by his life at Brook Farm.

In 1852 Hawthorne returned to Concord, where he wrote a campaign biography of his college friend Franklin Pierce. After Pierce’s election to the United States presidency, he rewarded Hawthorne with the consulship at Liverpool, England, a post Hawthorne held until 1857. In 1858 and 1859 Hawthorne lived in Italy, collecting material for his heavily symbolic novel The Marble Faun.

In 1860, on the eve of the American Civil War, Hawthorne returned to the United States. His political isolation is indicated in his dedication of Our Old Home to Pierce, who had become highly unpopular because of his support of the Southern slave owners. Hawthorne’s posthumously published works include the unfinished novels Septimius Felton, The Dolliver Romance, Dr. Grimshawe’s Secret, and The Ancestral Footsteps and his American Notebooks, English Notebooks, and French and Italian Notebooks.

With modern psychological insight Hawthorne probed the secret motivations in human behavior and the guilt and anxiety that he believed resulted from all sins against humanity, especially those of pride. In his preoccupation with sin he followed the tradition of his Puritan ancestors. This could not be said about his concept of the consequences of sin, as either punishment due to lack of humility and overwhelming pride, or regeneration by love and atonement. In this he deviated radically from the idea of predestination held by his descendents. Hawthorne characterized most of his books as romances, a category of literature not as strictly bound to realistic detail as novels. This freed him to manipulate the atmospheres of his scenes and the actions of his characters in order to represent symbolically the passions, emotions, and anxieties of his characters and to expose “the truth of the human heart” that he believed lies hidden beneath mundane daily life. Hawthorne’s emphasis on allegory and symbolism often makes his characters seem shadowy and unreal, but his best characters reveal the emotional and intellectual ambivalence he felt to be inseparable from the Puritan heritage of America.