Hawthorne and the Real

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In the midst of the Civil War, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote his friend Horatio Bridge, thanking him “for a shaded map of Negrodom, which you sent me a little while ago. What a terrible amount of trouble and expense, in washing that sheet white!—and, after all, I am afraid we shall only variegate it with blood and dirt” (XVIII 428). The map Hawthorne refers to most likely resembled the “Moral Map of U.S.” (see Figure 1), which Northern abolitionists had used to illustrate the white moral purity of the free states compared to the black evil of the Southern slave states. The map’s linking the putative color of slaves with the evils of slavery was an injustice so ingrained in the American political unconscious that it remained invisible, even to abolitionists. Embedded within Hawthorne’s comments on the map are two features of his political thought that would earn him condemnation in his own times and ours. The first is his skepticism, called by one of his English critics “the most immoral kind of political fatalism.” The second is his racism (implicit in the term “Negrodom”), which has become more noticeable and objectionable with each passing year.

Hawthorne’s skepticism about purifying the country by eliminating slavery arose not from any proslavery sentiments (he hated slavery, calling it a “foul scurf” [XXIII 431] upon the South); but rather, from his deep-seated belief that attempts to rid a village, region, or nation of evil could
produce results just the opposite of those desired, especially if the means used were violent. As a student of history and lifelong observer of human nature, he considered almost all people and causes as irrevocably “variegated,” a mixture of moral qualities resistant to purification and cleansing. In tales such as “The Birth-Mark” (1843) and “Earth's Holocaust” (1844), he made this point explicitly, and it also informed his attitude toward the abolitionist movement. In 1857 Hawthorne responded to an abolitionist pamphlet by his sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody by telling her that “vengeance and beneficence are things that God claims for Himself. His instruments have no consciousness of His purpose; if they imagine they

have, it is a pretty sure token that they are not His instruments. The good of others, like our own happiness, is not to be attained by direct effort, but incidentally” (XVIII 116).²

Because of this conviction, Hawthorne found himself during the 1850s and 1860s more and more at odds with his absolutist contemporaries, who professed to have direct access to the will of God. After he brought his skeptical outlook to bear upon the issues of slavery and the Civil War publicly, he became the object of sanctimonious denigration among New England writers and reformers. William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator called his “Chiefly About War-Matters” (1862) “flippant and heartless” and accused Hawthorne of writing “automatically, as though his veins were bloodless” (June 27, 1862: 2). Harper’s Weekly found the “tone of doubt and indifference” toward the Civil War in Our Old Home (1863) repellent, like that of “the most charming companion who should prove to have no objection to infanticide” (November 21, 1863: 739). After Hawthorne’s death, Emerson lamented in his journal that Hawthorne had “removed” himself “by the indignation his perverse politics & unfortunate friendship for that paltry Franklin Pierce awaked,—though it rather moved pity for Hawthorne, & the assured belief that he would outlive it, & come right at last” (JMN 15: 60).³ Hawthorne’s movement that Emerson speaks of was relative to his own position, of course, to his own sense of “right.”⁴ The most severe condemnation of this kind came in a long memorial review on Hawthorne in 1864 by the editor George William Curtis, who had been a friend of Hawthorne’s at Brook Farm and later Concord. Unable to suppress his outrage at Hawthorne’s lack of commitment to the Northern cause, Curtis characterized him as “hard, cold, and perverse” and claimed “he cared little for man; and the high tides of collective emotion among his fellows left him dry and untouched” (551). Curtis concluded by declaring, “his own times and their people and their affairs were just as shadowy to him as those of any of his stories,” and asserted that the reader’s “heart, bewildered, asks and asks again, ‘Is he human? Is he a man?’” (555).⁵

This moralistic approach to Hawthorne’s political thought has persisted into the present day, and he continues to be charged with the sins of blindness, cowardice, and escapism.⁶ Because he shared the racism of his white middle-class society, this feature of his vision, rather than his political “perversity,” has become the focus of recent judgments directed at him.⁷ The opprobrium cast upon Hawthorne in his time and ours holds considerable interest for anyone seeking a fuller understanding of the difficulties faced by a person of imagination and integrity in times of political strife, but to measure the depth and value of Hawthorne’s political views, we must go beyond the discourse of the New England antislavery movement,
which persists in American cultural and literary criticism, and explore his own historically informed, albeit still partial, imaginative world. In this essay, I want to extend previous studies of Hawthorne’s responses to slavery and abolitionism by examining two psychohistorical images that shaped his political and moral vision: revolutionary violence and witchcraft, both of which emerged from his deeply felt knowledge of American and European history.

A number of scholars have discussed the ways in which *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) incorporates Hawthorne’s stance toward the issues of slavery at midcentury and how an “Africanist presence” (Morrison 46) underlies the imagery and themes of the work. The romance Hawthorne tried to write some twelve years later in the midst of the Civil War, “Septimius Felton,” has received little critical attention, yet it reveals even more clearly the relationship between his political views and his imaginative thought. It also points to fears of revolutionary violence, witchcraft, and racial mixing as compelling sources of the “immoral” detachment that isolated him from his fellow New Englanders. The plans and notes Hawthorne wrote to himself in his manuscripts are especially revealing about the links between his personal views and the writing of his fiction. Before a long account of the mixture of Indian and white blood his protagonist has inherited, for example, Hawthorne in a marginal note reminds himself of the following: “The mixture of race a crime against nature, therefore pernicious” (XIII 256), which applies not only to Septimius personally, but also to racial relations in New England and the country over the course of several centuries. Although Hawthorne never completed “Septimius” nor sorted out the attitude he expected the reader to have toward its subject, it “promised to be the best thing of its kind Hawthorne had ever done” (Baym 26). With great effort, and intermittent confidence, he sought to resolve fears about the dissolution of his life and that of his nation, especially the latter’s bloody way of addressing the problem of variegated racial identities within the house divided.

Hawthorne began working on “Septimius” in the summer of 1861, several months after the firing on Fort Sumter, and by setting it in Concord in 1775 at the beginning of the American Revolution, he was able to draw upon his own ambivalence about the war fever surrounding him. His protagonist, Septimius, lives in a house modeled on the Wayside, and when the farmers and neighbors start assembling for battle, he, like his creator, finds that his meditative cast of mind sets him apart from their excited patriotism: he went into his house, and sat there, in his study, for some hours, in that unpleasant state of feeling, which a man of brooding thought is apt to experience when the world around him is in a state of intense motion, which he
finds it impossible to chord with. There seemed to be a stream rushing past
him, which, even if he plunged into the midst of it, he could not be wet by
it. He felt himself strangely ajar with the human race, and would have given
much, either to be in full accord with it, or to be separated from it forever.
(XIII 22–23)

In “The Old Manse” (1846), Hawthorne had contrasted his “circle of repose”
at the Manse with the social activism at the other end of Concord, where
“bats and owls, and the whole host of night-birds” flap around the “intellectu-
tial fire” (X 31) there (Emerson), and in “Septimius” he sets up a similar
polarity by creating the character of Robert Hagburn, an activist eager to join
the fight. Hagburn’s name connects him, I believe, to witch-hunting, and the
kinds of men willing to forsake reason and moderation in order to rid the
land of what they consider evil. As the British troops retreat from Concord,
the trailing colonists shoot at them from hiding, and as one redcoat staggers
and falls, Septimius shudders because “it was so like murder that he really
could not tell the difference.” Revealing his own sense of quietism,
Hawthorne writes, “how strange, how strange it is, this deep, wild passion
that nature has implanted in us, to be the death of our fellow-creatures and
which co-exists at the same time with horror” (XIII 24).

After Septimius kills one of these British soldiers himself, not by shoot-
ing at him from hiding, but in a face-to-face confrontation on the hillside
behind his house, Hawthorne brings issues of race and amalgamation into
the plot, making Septimius’s Indian blood account for a repressed savage-
ness in his behavior. He lives with his Aunt Keziah, who works as his house-
keeper, and they trace their mutual ancestry to a Puritan who married the
daughter of an Indian Sagamore. Among later descendants are a half-breed
woman executed “during the prevalence of the witchcraft delusion.” The
injustice of her fate and its link to false witnessing is explained by
Hawthorne, yet also attributed to this person herself: “the wild traits of her
heathen ancestry overpowered those of the civilized race with which her
blood was mingled; she was said, too, to have had a very dark skin, the
straight black hair, and that Indian form of the face, and Indian eye, line-
ments which are said to be harder to eradicate . . . than those of the negro
race. Something, also, perhaps of the fierce and cruel Indian temper, and
generally, a cast of character that made her disliked by her neighbors” (XIII
265–66). Aunt Keziah (later renamed Aunt Nashoba) whose darkness
endows her with mysterious knowledge, seems based in part upon Tituba,
an Indian slave from Barbados who became the first accused witch in the
Salem trials presided over by Judge Hathorne. (Tituba became half Indian-
half black and then all black in nineteenth- and twentieth-century histo-
ries.) According to the Hawthorncs' daughter Rose, there was another person who “no doubt stood for a suggestion of Aunt Keziah,” Mrs. Peters, the Hawthorncs’ black servant while they lived in the Berkshires. Rose describes her as

an invaluable tyrant, an unloaded weapon, a creature who seemed to say, “Forget my qualities if you dare—there is one of them which is fatal!” As my parents possessed the capacity to pay respect where it could be earned, the qualities of Mrs. Peters were respected, and she found herself in a sort of heaven of courteous tolerance. (Lathrop 1897, 161–62)

The aunt-nephew relationship Hawthorne establishes in “Septimius” suggests he may have felt some familial tie with Mrs. Peters, if only because, like Poe, his troubled lineage made him identify with and feel revulsion toward blacks, as alienated Others. As in The House of the Seven Gables where the blood lines of Maules and Pyncheons converge and unite, in “Septimius” Hawthorne combines Puritan witch-hunter and Indian witch within the same house or family line. Secluded in his study, Septimius, student of theology, contends not only with the enemy of all humankind, Death (seeking the elixir of life by deciphering a torn manuscript the dying soldier gave him), but also his own racial heritage, and, by extension, the dark and bloody presence within the emergent nation itself. When a red flower grows from the grave of the British redcoat, Septimius plucks it to make a trial effort at creating the elixir of immortality, but when he gives the elixir to Aunt Keziah, who has become critically ill, the drink kills rather than saves her. Hawthorne thus thematizes the destructive effects of good intentions, especially the harm inflicted upon racial others by those (such as Puritan divines, British redcoats, and New England scholars) deluded into thinking they are their more civilized saviors. In one of his plans for the romance, Hawthorne told himself, “Perhaps the moral will turn out to be, the folly of man in thinking that he can ever be of any importance to the welfare of the world; or that any settled plan of his, to be carried on through a length of time, could be successful” (XIII 529).

The sources of Hawthorne’s pessimistic political vision, which thus appears so strikingly in “Septimius,” can be traced, as I have suggested, to images of revolutionary violence and witchcraft that had long haunted his imagination. A crucial overlooked fact about life in antebellum American society is the nearness in time to the Reign of Terror, which gave terms such as “jacobinical,” “bloody,” and “revolutionary” such powerful associations, now lost to us by the passage of time. Sensational reports about the horrors of the Santo Domingo slave revolts between 1791 and 1804 also provided
terrifying images for those like Hawthorne who pondered the relation between abolitionist exhortation and slave violence.\textsuperscript{10} Today we tend to regard abolitionists as heroic moral leaders of their age, but for a number of years they were viewed as dangerous fanatics, even by those who would later join their ranks. Initially, the antislavery movement took a number of forms, including colonization, philosophical abolitionism, and immediate emancipation gradually accomplished (that is, the conferring of civil and political rights in stages following emancipation); however, it was the immediate and unqualified emancipation advocated by William Lloyd Garrison and his followers that galvanized public attention, inspired the most violent reactions, and eventually “usurped” the field of antislavery thought.\textsuperscript{11}

Many progressive supporters of the antislavery movement feared the consequences of immediate emancipation, especially the prospect of large numbers of ex-slaves joining Northern society and its labor force.\textsuperscript{12} Like his white contemporaries, Hawthorne believed that amalgamation between whites and people of color would degrade American civilization and lead to various social ills, such as “strange pursuits, ill-temper, passionateness, secret grudges” (XIII 266). As everyone knew, “the horrors of San Domingo” began with a mulatto revolt, inspired by the Jacobins in France.\textsuperscript{13} Anxiety about such consequences, expressed by Thomas Jefferson among others, led to the establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1817, whose goal was to deport free Negroes to Liberia. In the 1820s and 30s the threat of amalgamation inspired mob action against people of color in a number of northern cities, and it soon surfaced in the writings of even those devoted to the antislavery cause. In an 1851 essay on slavery for the \textit{North American Review}, Elizabeth Peabody argued that “if the two races, after the slaves are set free, remain together at the South, we can foresee nothing but evil. If amalgamation should take place, it would create a third race, certainly inferior to the white, and probably inferior to the negro.” “Of specific remedies,” she concluded, “we know only one, and that is colonization” (363). Similarly, at the end of \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (1852), Stowe calls for first educating the emancipated slaves “until they have attained to somewhat of a moral and intellectual maturity, and then assist them in their passage to those shores [of Africa], where they may put in practice the lessons they have learned in America” (626). Less explicitly, but with some conviction, Hawthorne supported the activities of the American Colonization Society with his editing of the \textit{Journal of An African Cruiser} (1845), written by his friend Horatio Bridge, telling about a recent cruise on the West Coast of Africa to protect American trade and stop slavers.\textsuperscript{14} Hawthorne’s own interest in the mysteries and dangers of amalgamation
(later termed miscegenation) has been discerned in any number of his writings, specifically “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844), The Scarlet Letter (1850), The House of the Seven Gables (1851), and The Marble Faun (1860).15

Hawthorne’s racial and political anxieties interlocked with one another and, though displaced onto his fiction, they were periodically stirred by abolitionist activity. Garrison, whose fanaticism was most visible, dominated the movement in its early stages. After he founded the Liberator in 1831, he became an inspiration to slaves like Frederick Douglass and used the paper and public assemblies to provoke and inflame. His odium fell upon the heads not only of slave-owners, but also of ministers, politicians, and even members of other anti-slavery groups that questioned his positions. Filled with a sense of anger and rage, Garrison burned the Constitution in public, calling it “a compact with Satan,” and spoke in the most passionate rhetoric. In his 1832 pamphlet criticizing the colonization movement, for example, he declared that if “the glorious day of universal emancipation” did not arrive,

woe to the safety of this people! ... A cry of horror, a cry of revenge, will go up to heaven in the darkness of midnight, and re-echo from every cloud. Blood will flow like water—the blood of guilty men, and of innocent women and children. Then will be heard lamentations and weeping, such as will blot out the remembrance of the horrors of St. Domingo. (59)

Although Garrison believed in nonresistance, claiming “We advocate no jacobinical doctrines” (75), his cause became associated with Nat Turner’s notorious Southampton slave insurrection of 1831, during which Turner and his band killed over sixty white men, women, and children. Though Turner’s only reading material had been the Bible, Garrison and the Liberator were widely perceived as instigators of the rebellion. Garrison received assassination threats from the South and New England both,16 and in 1835, at a meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, a mob dragged him through the streets with a rope around his neck, before he was rescued and put in jail for protection.

Hawthorne’s negative attitude toward abolitionism was shared by practically all his contemporaries during the late 1830s and early 1840s, due to its radicalism. Even Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller—later its ardent supporters—found the movement objectionable.17 Though often critical of the Transcendentalists, because he rejected their belief in the innate moral goodness of the individual, Hawthorne shared their early political quietism, built on a belief in an innate moral sense and the presence of a beneficent
tendency at work in the world. The commitment to moderation and compromise that scholars have discerned in Hawthorne’s politics at mid-century, yoking *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to the *Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852), became part of his social and moral outlook years before. In a poem from his youth, entitled “Moderate Views” and dated February 13, 1817 (when Hawthorne was twelve!), he writes, “With passions unruffled untainted by pride/By reason my life let me square” (XXIII 3). In a number of ways, Emerson and Thoreau in the 1840s articulated this optimistic moral vision, but unlike them, Hawthorne did not forsake it when faced with “the impending crisis.” Despite their commitment to contemplative idealism, almost all the Transcendentalists, were “forced,” as Stanley Elkins puts it, into more radical views by Southern intransigence. Eventually, they sanctified John Brown and beat the drums of war. Hawthorne, of course, did not. As the insightful Emerson disciple Moncure Conway observed, “He had not the flexibility of principle displayed by so many in those days. He thus had no party,—then nearly equivalent to having no country” (206).

Throughout his adult life, Hawthorne shied away from partisan political activism not because it jarred with his artistic sensibilities, as he sometimes feigned, but because he feared the untamed passions of radical action. Like Edmund Burke, he associated revolution with images of a breakdown in the familial order—murder of the father, distress for mother and children. In one of his early pieces, “Old News” (1835), he observes, “A revolution, or anything, that interrupts social order, may afford opportunities for the individual display of eminent virtue; but, its effects are pernicious to general morality” (XI 159). In 1840, Hawthorne described Burke as “one of the wisest men and greatest orators that ever the world produced” (VI 176), and one finds a consistent Burkean conservatism underlying Hawthorne’s settings, symbols, and themes. His most striking early treatment of radical sociopolitical behavior appears in “My Kinsman Major Molineux” (1831), first entitled “My Uncle Major Molineux,” where a “temporary inflammation of the popular mind” (XI 209) in the mid-seventeenth century causes angry colonists to tar and feather (and thus presumably murder) the royal governor. At the end of the tale, as the boy Robin watches the mob and their victim (his kinsman) pass, Hawthorne writes, “On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery round some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony” (XI 230). A comparable scene appears in Hawthorne’s story for children, “The Hutchinson Mob” (1841), an account of the attack on Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson’s house by colonists in 1765. Hutchinson’s daughter alerts her father that they are coming “as wild as so many tigers,” yet, “He was an old lawyer; and he could not realize that the people would do anything so
utterly lawless as to assault him in his peaceful home” (VI 157). But they do enter, like an “enraged wild beast” and a “tempestuous flood” and destroy tables, hearths, volumes of his library, family portraits, and mirrors. At the end of the account, Grandfather tells the children who are his auditors that this “was a most unjustifiable act. . . . But we must not decide against the justice of the people’s cause, merely because an excited mob was guilty of outrageous violence” (VI 159). As with “My Kinsman,” the imagery of this violence, rather than its justification, predominates in the telling.

Throughout Hawthorne’s works, revolutionary mobs engage in forms of symbolic emasculation, and it seems likely they are linked to the radical change that occurred in his life upon the death of his father when Hawthorne was a boy. One need not subscribe to Frederick Crews’s theory that Hawthorne suffered from unresolved filial hatred to believe that after he, his mother, and sisters moved in with the Mannings out of necessity, the boy experienced a sense of upheaval and victimization that stayed with him throughout his life.21 Despite his adult Jacksonianism, Hawthorne clearly identified with a number of his more refined characters when they were assailed by their social inferiors (Hester being the most obvious example), and even those characters who suffer from the “absurd delusion of family importance” (II 19) (such as the Pyncheons) receive the benefit of his nostalgia for a lost aristocratic past, even if he has to wrench a plot to provide it.22 His joke in “The Custom-House” sketch about having been beheaded by bloodthirsty Whigs reveals a deep-seated anxiety about revolutionary violence,23 and his notorious outburst about the “d——d mob of scribbling women” (XVII 304) also suggests an aristocratic sense of persecution. Like Burke, Hawthorne empathized with the royal family, and in a letter to his fiancée, Sophia Peabody, in 1840, he told her about a nightmare of his:

Dearest, thou didst not come into my dreams, last night; but, on the contrary, I was engaged in assisting the escape of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette from Paris, during the French revolution. And sometimes, by an unaccountable metamorphosis, it seemed as if my mother and sisters were in the place of the King and Queen. (XV 427–28).

The king and queen were subsequently decapitated, of course. In the fall of 1849, after the death of his actual mother and his own firing or “decapitation,” Hawthorne refreshed his memory of the 1789 French Revolution by reading Alphonse de Lamartine’s History of the Girondins (1847), which had just inspired the 1848 revolution in France and the tragic “Bloody June Days” that followed. At the same time, he started writing The Scarlet Letter, using a scaffold as his central setting.24
If we keep these revolutionary images in mind, it becomes easier to understand why Hawthorne, who had no first-hand knowledge of the horrors of slavery, would resist the growing agitation over the issue, even though he felt drawn to the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party. In an 1851 letter to Zachariah Burchmore, Hawthorne specifies where he stood in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act and the Compromise of 1850:

I have not, as you suggest, the slightest sympathy for the slaves; or, at least, not half so much as for the laboring whites, who, I believe, as a general thing, are ten times worse off than the Southern negroes [sic]. Still, whenever I am absolutely cornered, I shall go for New England rather than the South;—and this Fugitive Law cornered me. Of course, I knew what I was doing when I signed that Free-Soil document, and bade farewell to all ideas of foreign consulships, or other official stations. (XVI 456)

Within a year of writing this letter, Hawthorne found a means to position himself for another government appointment, however, by writing the campaign biography of his friend Pierce, a conservative “Hunker” Democrat nominated by Southerners. In the biography, Hawthorne’s commitment to moderation informs his notorious statement about the future of slavery. After discussing the abolitionist position, he adds,

but there is still another view, and probably as wise a one. It looks at slavery as one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream. (XXIII 416–17)

Hawthorne knew, of course, that political passions had been inflamed by the Fugitive Slave Law, and before writing the biography he told Pierce, who had supported the Compromise, that the slavery question involved “knotty points,” and though he did not yet know how to handle it, the subject was “not to be shirked nor blinked” but dealt with in such a way as to situate Pierce “on the broadest ground possible, as a man for the whole country” (XVI 561).

Hawthorne would later claim he had lost “hundreds of friends, here at the north, . . . in consequence of what I say on the slavery question” (XVI 605). These friends, some of the most educated and intelligent people in New England, were becoming more willing to condone the use of violence to achieve their political ends, and this key fact explains the growing diver-
gence between their political and moral visions and those of Hawthorne. The annexation of Texas (1845), the Mexican War (1846–48), the revolutions in Europe (1848–49), and the Compromise (1850) stimulated their growing radicalism and opposition to slavery. As Hawthorne was writing *The Scarlet Letter* in 1849, Thoreau in “Resistance to Civil Government” and Fuller in her Italian dispatches were defending murder and assassination on behalf of liberty. In Thoreau’s essay, often misread as an argument for passive resistance, he asserts, “But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death” (235–36). Thoreau’s later defense of John Brown, in “A Plea for John Brown,” proceeds logically from such thinking and allows him to repress his knowledge of the Pottawatomie Creek massacre, when Brown and seven other men dragged five settlers from their homes on the night of May 24–25, 1856, and split open their skulls with broadswords. Similarly, in Rome, after Count Pellegrino Rossi, the new prime minister of the Papal States, was stabbed in the throat on November 15, 1848, as he entered the Chamber of Deputies, Fuller reported that soldiers and citizens joined in singing “Blessed the hand that rids the earth of a tyrant,” and she added, “Certainly, the manner was grandiose” (SGD 240).

In a private letter, she told her mother, “For me, I never thought to have heard of a violent death with satisfaction, but this act affected me as one of terrible justice” (Letters 5: 147).

Even members of the New England ministry in the 1850s began accepting the belief, put forward by Frederick Douglass and his followers, that the murder of oppressors was justified. Encouraged by the European revolutions, they came to believe, as Theodore Parker asserted, that “All the great charters of humanity have been *writ in blood*, and must continue to be so for some centuries” (qtd. Demos 519; emphasis in original). In his 1850 sermon “The Function and Place of Conscience in Relation to the Laws of Men” (1850), Parker told his congregation, “if I were a fugitive, and could escape in no other way, I would kill him [the slave-catcher] with as little compunction as I would drive a mosquito from my face. It is high time this was said” (277–78). Prominent abolitionists Angelina Grimké Weld, Samuel May, Wendell Phillips, Henry Wright, and Parker Pillsbury all abandoned their “peace principles” in the 1850s, and Pillsbury even told the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society that “he longed to see the time come when Boston should run with blood from Beacon Hill to the foot of Broad Street” (qtd. Demos 523).

Hawthorne’s response to the growing commitment to violence surrounding him may be found in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), where he
portrays Hollingsworth as a fierce, cold-hearted reformer and Zenobia (obviously modeled on Fuller) as an activist who seems capable of plunging a dagger into her rival, an act of passion more appropriate “in Italy, instead of New England” (III 78). (Some eight years later, in The Marble Faun, he again drew upon his knowledge of Fuller’s political activities in Rome to have Miriam and Donatello, after the murder of the model, pass by Pompey’s forum, where Miriam proclaims, “there was a great deed done here! . . . a deed of blood, like ours! Who knows, but we may meet the high and ever-sad fraternity of Caesar’s murderers, and exchange a salutation?” (IV 176). In Blithedale, Hawthorne also exaggerates his own quietism by describing Coverdale’s unwillingness to stir himself on behalf of the Hungarian revolution, led by the famous Louis Kossuth. “Were there any cause, in this whole chaos of human struggle, worth a sane man’s dying for,” Coverdale says,

and which my death would benefit, then—provided, however, the effort did not involve an unreasonable amount of trouble—methinks I might be bold to offer up my life. If Kossuth, for example, would pitch the battle-field of Hungarian rights within an easy ride of my abode, and choose a mild, sunny morning, after breakfast, for the conflict, Miles Coverdale would gladly be his man, for one brave rush upon the leveled bayonets. Farther than that, I should be loth to pledge myself. (3: 246–47)

Several critics have linked Coverdale’s attitude with Hawthorne’s own, emphasizing the irony he directed at the prospect of becoming politically engaged. Yet, the sense of loss and enervation he attributes to his characters as a result of their detachment describes only a portion of his attitude. (While in England, he privately criticized Kossuth for failing to speak out against slavery in the United States.) Unlike Coverdale, he had steel in his character; as a public intellectual, he earnestly and consistently adhered to his political quietism, displaying a boldness (or stubbornness, if you will) that his self-effacing humor veils from his readers. What has been called Hawthorne’s “retreat” or “escape” into fantasy, then, can also be seen as his means of securing and maintaining a detached and complex understanding of current events.

While Hawthorne was abroad during 1853–1860, he read about the growing controversy over slavery in the United States and reacted negatively to the partisan rhetoric he encountered in the papers. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, the arrest and trial of Anthony Burns, the beating of Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate, and the attack on Harpers Ferry by John Brown inspired an impassioned thirst for revenge among Northerners and
Southerners alike that repelled Hawthorne. In the summer of 1854 he found it “impossible to read American papers (of whatever political party) without being ashamed of my country” (XVII 237), and two years later, he declared to William Ticknor, “I sympathize with no party, but hate them all—free-soilers, pro-slavery men, and whatever else—all alike” (XVII 559). As consul Hawthorne spent his time assisting wronged Americans who came to his office and attending to case after case of brutal treatment of sailors by shipmasters. At first he followed policy, but “by the end of his term,” as editor Bill Ellis points out, “... he acted more decisively, siding, for instance, with the black seaman William Valentine of the Vanguard, who, threatened and goaded by his white superiors, finally turned on one of his oppressors with a knife and was in return beaten senseless” (XIX 28). Hawthorne defended Valentine and sought prosecution of the officers, who he told the U.S. Secretary of State had been “very tyrannical, and had grossly illtreated the men” (XX 154). In an attempt to alleviate the suffering he witnessed, Hawthorne appealed for help to Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, the leading abolitionist in the Senate, telling him that “no slave-drivers are so wicked” as the shipping masters, “and there is nothing in slavery so bad as the system with which they are connected” (XVII 345). Sumner never answered. He forwarded the dispatch to Attorney General Caleb Cushing, who ignored it.

When Hawthorne arrived back in the United States, he found his old friends and neighbors more violently inclined than ever. Thoreau, following the trial of Anthony Burns, declared in his journal that rather than “consent to establish hell upon earth—to be a party to this establishment,—I would touch a match to blow up earth and hell together” (VI 315). In a similar mood, Emerson had subscribed “lavishly” to help furnish Sharp’s rifles to the “Free State men,” according to his son Edward (579), and though not a member of John Brown’s “Secret Six,” Emerson had befriended Brown and given moral support, after the fact, to his raid on Harpers Ferry that ended with seventeen persons killed. At the beginning of the Civil War, Hawthorne observed that Emerson “is as ‘merciless as a steel bayonet’” (XVIII 544), and this was not an overstatement. “Ah! Sometimes gunpowder smells good,” Emerson declared while visiting the Charlestown Navy-Yard, and in an address at Tufts College, he asserted, “The brute noise of cannon has a most poetic echo in these days, as instrument of the primal sentiments of humanity” (qtd. Edward Emerson 579).

Lydia Maria Child, another peaceful abolitionist, went through a similar transformation, defending John Brown, and persuading herself that violence on behalf of liberty was right action. To a friend, she confided “I force myself to remember that, terrible as an insurrection would be to white
women and children, the black women and children have, for many generations, been living in subjection to things as horrid, with no Union, no laws, no public sentiment to help them” (qtd. Karcher 1994, 424; emphasis in original).

Hawthorne expressed his opposition to the violence that disturbed him in “Chiefly About War-Matters,” signing it “By a Peaceable Man,” knowing full well that the Peace abolitionists, whom Garrison once led, had disappeared from the scene. As John Demos has pointed out, at this time, it is “not a little ironic, that the ‘ultra’ or ‘radical’ position was the pacific one” (525). In Hawthorne’s essay, counterpointed by editorial footnotes he wrote himself, expressing mock dismay at his political views, he describes his excursion to Harpers Ferry and his visit to the old engine house, “John Brown’s fortress and prison-house,” converted into a prison for Rebel soldiers. Calling Brown a “blood-stained fanatic,” Hawthorne challenges Emerson’s view that Brown’s death had “made the Gallows as venerable as the Cross.” “Nobody was ever more justly hanged,” Hawthorne declares. “He won his martyrdom fairly, and took it firmly . . . any commonsensible man, looking at the matter unsentimentally, must have felt a certain intellectual satisfaction in seeing him hanged, if it were only in requital of his preposterous miscalculation of possibilities” (XXIII 427–28). Such a harsh view of Brown, along with Hawthorne’s expression of sympathy for captured confederate soldiers—vacant-eyed, ragged, lacking “the remotest comprehension of what they had been fighting for, or how they had deserved to be shut up in that dreary hole” (XXIII 429)—contributed to Hawthorne’s estrangement from his Concord neighbors and revealed once more the depth of his opposition to political violence.32 His final thoughts on this matter and his most explicit justification for his political vision appear in “Septimius Felton,” where he describes what occurs at moments of “seething opinions and overturned principles”:

In times of Revolution and public disturbance, all absurdities are more unrestrained; the measure of calm sense, the habits, the orderly decency, are in a measure lost. More people become insane, I should suppose; offenses against public morality, female license, are more numerous; suicides, murders, all ungovernable outbreaks of men’s thoughts, embodying themselves in wild acts, take place more frequently, and with less horror to the lookers-on. (XIII 67)

This is Hawthorne’s nightmare world, one he found himself in the midst of, notable for its absence of calmness and rational thought.

Although the psychohistorical image of revolutionary violence played a
major part in the shaping of Hawthorne’s political and moral vision, I believe a second image, related to the first, affected him more strongly. I refer to witchcraft, or more specifically, to the Salem witchcraft delusion of 1692. As is well known, Hawthorne’s great-great-grandfather John Hathorne, gained infamy as one of the three judges of the Salem witchcraft hearings, and, according to family legend, had a curse placed upon him and all his posterity. Before the delusion ended in 1693, he had presided over the imprisonment of more than 150 persons, the hanging of nineteen innocent persons, and the death by torture of another. In the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne declares that this ancestor “inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him.” He adds that he will “hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them . . . may be now and henceforth removed” (I 10). Though this confession and professed atonement are light and humorous, or at least intentionally melodramatic, it appears that Hawthorne indeed felt guilty about the role his ancestors played in Puritan history, which he studied intently. The historical accounts with which he was familiar, such as Charles Upham’s *Lectures on Witchcraft* (1831), Robert Calef’s *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700), and George Bancroft’s *History of the United States* (1840), portray the ministers and magistrates in charge as close-minded and cruel and reveal that the specter evidence used to convict the accused was so obviously fabricated that anyone guided by reason, rather than superstition, would have dismissed it. Yet it prevailed. As Hawthorne writes in “Alice Doane’s Appeal” (1835), Gallows Hill became “the spot, where guilt and phrenzy [sic] consummated the most execrable scene, that our history blushes to record. For this was the field where superstition won her darkest triumph; the high place where our fathers set up their shame, to the mournful gaze of generations far remote” (XI 267). It was Hawthorne’s own mournful gaze, then, that strengthened his resolve to resist the pull of religious fanaticism and righteous causes.

Witch hunting and abolitionism, I would argue, formed a particularly strong bond in Hawthorne’s mind due to a number of parallels he would have recognized, including a Puritan religiosity intent on ridding the Devil from the land, the sensationalistic demonization of others (accused witches and slavemasters, respectively), obsession with forbidden sexual relations (such as concubinage and amalgamation), and perhaps most important, a failure of vision caused by fanaticism and madness. Hawthorne may not have discerned these parallels at a conscious level, yet they entered his unconscious mind and shaped his political and moral vision. He sensed, as many of his contemporaries did, that Puritanism and
the warrior spirit of Cromwell were alive and well in New England, despite the efforts of the Unitarians and Transcendentalists to proffer a new view of humankind. Moral purity remained the national goal. By the beginning of the Civil War, as Joanne Pope Melish (1998) has observed, “the New England nationalist trope of virtuous, historical whiteness, clothed as it was in a distinctive set of cultural, moral, and political values associated with New England’s Puritan mission and Revolutionary struggle, had come to define the Unionist North as a whole” (224). Although Hawthorne himself at times seems a proponent of Puritanism, especially due to his skeptical view of human nature, he was also its harshest critic, dramatizing its narrowness and blindness. Intellectual historians have credited the “erosion of Calvinist orthodoxy and the emergence of a powerful alternative often labeled liberal Protestantism” with becoming the “primary source for abolitionist arguments about the inherent brutality of slavery” (Clark 471), yet a Puritan sensibility inspired much of the righteous indignation of antislavery thought.

As a consequence, Hawthorne’s critique of his reform-minded contemporaries often coincided with his critique of his ancestors. At their worst, both could become iron men whose repressed fears and desires became externalized in demonic shadow figures resembling themselves. In “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” for example, Cotton Mather appears riding at the rear of a procession of witches, “a figure on horseback, so darkly conspicuous, so sternly triumphant,” says the narrator, “that my hearers mistook him for the visible presence of the fiend himself.” Proud and hateful, Mather is described as “the one blood-thirsty man, in whom were concentrated those vices of spirit and errors of opinion, that sufficed to madden the whole surrounding multitude” (XI 279). In “Main-Street,” Hawthorne likewise depicts Mather on horseback overseeing a pitiful group of witches being taken to the gallows, and there he asks,

May not the Arch Fiend have been too subtle for the court and jury, and betrayed them—laughing in his sleeve the while—into the awful errors of pouring out sanctified blood as an acceptable sacrifice upon God’s altar? Ah! No; for listen to wise Cotton Mather, who . . . tells them that all has been religiously and justly done, and that Satan’s power shall this day receive its death-blow in New England. (XI 77)

Hawthorne’s heavy irony here suggests that Mather has unwittingly placed himself in league with the devil, under the delusion that he has successfully resisted him. In a similar psychological process, the protagonist of “Young Goodman Brown” encounters in the forest a devil who bears “a consider-
able resemblance to him, though perhaps more in expression than features. Still, they might have been taken for father and son” (X 75). As Brown rushes deeper into the forest, “brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting forth such laughter, as set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him,” he himself becomes a demon and generates a nightmare world of his own creation. And in “The Hall of Fantasy” (1843), delusion and doubling receive additional, yet less serious, treatment as Hawthorne satirizes a “herd of real or self-styled reformers,” many of whom “had got possession of some crystal fragrance of truth, the brightness of which so dazzled them that they could see nothing else in the wide universe.” Among them stands the abolitionist, “brandishing his one idea like an iron flail” (X 180), and the resemblance of this figure to a demonic slave master, whip in hand, is surely intentional.

As he read accounts of the Salem witchcraft delusion, Hawthorne would have encountered imagery linking witch hunters, devils, and slavemasters, as well as witches and slaves. He would also have noticed the ways in which the evil perceived by the most prominent witch hunters revealed more about themselves than about the devil. The most striking example appears in the case of the Reverend Samuel Parris, whose slave Tituba first confessed to being a witch, accused others, and told a wild tale of how the Devil became her master—“he Tell me he god, & I must believe him and Serve him” (Breslaw 1996, 195). After the executions stopped, she retracted her confession and declared “that her Master [Parris] did beat her and otherways abuse her, to make her confess and accuse (such as he call’d) her Sister-Witches” (Calef 1914, 343). Thus the Reverend Parris, leading witch hunter and enemy of Satan, becomes, as Bancroft puts it, “the beginner and procurer of the sore afflictions to Salem village and the country” (86). (In her confessions, Tituba, significantly, described the devil not as the Black Man, as others did, but as a tall man from Boston with white hair who wore a black coat, which was sometimes serge.)35 In 1862, Hawthorne reminded himself, as he planned “Septimius Felton,” “The clergyman is the more terribly earnest in his religion, because he is conscious of the devil in his blood” (XIII 515).

Other ministers in Salem village during the witchcraft trials used imagery linking the devil to slavemasters, and, indirectly, to themselves. In a sermon the Reverend Deodat Lawson, Samuel Parris’s predecessor, delivered in Salem during the trials, he declared,

It is a matter of terror, amazement, and astonishment, to all such wretched souls . . . as have given up their names and souls to the Devil; who by
covenant, explicit or implicit, have bound themselves to be his slaves and
drudges, consenting to be instruments in whose shapes he may torment and
afflict their fellow-creatures (even of their own kind) to the amazing and
astonishing of the standers-by. (Upham [1867] 1971, 2: 82)

Mercy Short, an unstable young woman in Cotton Mather’s congregation
whom he claimed to save through his fasts and counsel in the fall of 1693,
apparently fought off the Devil’s attempt to make her his slave. According
to Mather, his efforts prevented Short’s evil angels from tormenting her,
and she “could see their ‘Black Master’ strike and kick them, ‘like an Over-
seer of so many Negro’s’ until tiring of their useless attempts they said furiously, ‘Well you shant be the last,’ and flew from the room” (Silverman
1984, 127). As Mercy’s minister, Mather was her overseer—from his pulpit,
he literally oversaw all in his congregation. And if religious oppression was
a cause of the demonic possession Mercy and the hysterical girls of Salem
Village performed, then what spills forth from their frenzy may be forms of
religious rebellion. (Mercy’s invisible tormentors, Mather reported, fre-
fently indulged in “Railing and Slander against a certain Person in the
Town”—Mather himself.) In “The Old Manse” preface Hawthorne
alludes to the doubling he sees afflicting Puritans like Mather, when he
observes that his own dark study was

made still blacker by the grim prints of Puritan ministers that hung around.
These worthies looked strangely like bad angels, or, at least, like men who
had wrestled so continually and so sternly with the devil, that somewhat of
his sooty fierceness had been imparted to their own visages. (X 5)

For Hawthorne the witchcraft hysteria had been sustained by the “wicked
arts of a few children,” but “the ministers and wise men were more deluded
than the illiterate people” (VI 77–78)

It is important to notice the priority Hawthorne gives to faulty percep-
tion in his treatment of witch hunters, abolitionists, and self-righteous
reformers, for in his view the violence they cause represents not malice but
a failure of vision. In his discussion of John Brown in “Chiefly About War-
Matters,” Hawthorne writes, “He himself, I am persuaded, (such was his
natural integrity) would have acknowledged that Virginia had a right to
take the life which he had staked and lost; although it would have been bet-
ter for her, in the hour that is fast coming, if she could generously have for-
gotten the criminality of his attempt in its enormous folly” (XXIII 428).
Folly, delusion, madness—these were the visual and mental defects
Hawthorne saw animating those intent on ridding the land of evil. In his
biography of Pierce, in a passage that has become notorious, Hawthorne calls abolitionism “the mistiness of a philanthropic theory,” and it is important to recognize the delusion inscribed in this characterization. The relevant passage reads:

[Pierce] fully recognized, by his votes and by his voice, the rights pledged to the South by the Constitution. This, at the period when he so declared himself, was comparatively an easy thing to do. But when it became more difficult, when the first imperceptible movement of agitation had grown to be almost a convulsion, his course was still the same. Nor did he ever shun the obloquy that sometimes threatened to pursue the northern man who dared to love that great and sacred reality—his whole, united, native country—better than the mistiness of a philanthropic theory. (XXIII 292)

What is unusual about the dichotomy Hawthorne sets up, between the “reality” of the United States and the “mistiness” of abolitionism, is that it is an effect, not a cause, he questions. Beyond its reference to climatic conditions, mistiness, as the *OED* points out, can also refer to the obscuring of mental vision or outlook, when the real character of a thing is veiled from one’s eyes and mind. For Hawthorne, mist also suggested ocular and mental deception, such as that surrounding specters and ghosts.

Hawthorne’s contemporaries shared his familiarity with this usage, as their writings show. Margaret Fuller, in a well-known dispatch she wrote from Scotland in September 1846, tells about the mist that arose on Ben Lomond, before she could descend, and the night spent on the mountain during which she saw “visionary shapes, floating slowly and gracefully, their white robes would unfurl from the great body of mist in which they had been engaged, and come upon me with a kiss pervasively cold as that of Death” (76). In *Walden*, Thoreau also suggests the supernatural and bewitching effects of the mist as he describes how the rising sun revealed the “soft ripples” and “smooth reflecting surface” of the pond, “while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal convenciler” (58). In Hawthorne’s writings, mists and mistiness are used to suggest not only ghosts and witchcraft, but also mental failure. Clifford goes into a mist in *The House of the Seven Gables* when his mental torpor settles upon him; Priscilla appears as behind a mist in *The Blithedale Romance* after she enters her trance as the veiled lady.

When individuals most often suffer from the inability to see beyond their narrow obsessions in Hawthorne’s works, often it is an “ism,” such as Puritanism, transcendentalism, or abolitionism that has blinded them.
These are the “theories” or enthusiasms he thought preyed upon the weak-minded and harmed actual persons. He once commented in his notebook, “I find myself rather more of an abolitionist in feeling than in principle” (VIII 112), thus expressing his privileging of persons over abstractions. The way Sophia put it in their journal was to say her husband was “without theories of any kind,” which distinguished him from their Concord neighbors. In “The Celestial Railroad” (1843), Hawthorne describes the Giant Transcendentalist who occupies a cave deserted by those “vile old troglodytes” Pope and Pagan. German by birth, the Giant looks “like a heap of fog and duskiness” and fattens unsuspecting travelers for his table by feeding them “plentiful meals of smoke, mist, moonshine, raw potatoes, and saw-dust” (X 197). Less comically, Hawthorne in “Septimius” places his protagonist within the heart of Transcendentalism, the town of Concord, and shows him struggling unsuccessfully to make his way out of this bewitched land: “with every step that he took, it seemed as if he were coming out of a mist, out of an enchanted land, where things had seemed to him not as they really were” (XIII 129). Linking the mist to witchcraft, Hawthorne claims that Septimius had wandered unawares into a mental landscape inconsistent “with all that really is, with men’s purposes, fates, business; into such a misty region had he been, and strayed many days, deeming himself at home; but now the mists were thinning away, he was passing the witch-like boundaries, and might never find his way over them again” (XIII 129).

If Hawthorne recognized, if only subconsciously and imaginatively, the psychohistorical parallels between the Salem witchcraft delusion he felt guilty about and the Concord abolitionism that came to possess his friends and family, then his resistance to and comments upon the latter become more understandable if not less morally irresponsible. When Curtis in his condemnation of Hawthorne in 1864 claimed that Hawthorne failed to appreciate “the fine moral heroism” and “the spiritual grandeur” of the Puritans, he anticipated the link I have been trying to forge between witch hunting and abolitionism. In the process, he also unwittingly supported Hawthorne’s case against the abolitionists. Referring to “Young Goodman Brown,” Curtis assails Hawthorne’s quietism about slavery by asserting 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 [Hawthorne’s] imagination, and produced one of his weirdest stories. But that the same Devil, clad in a somber sophism, was confusing the sentiment of right and wrong in the mind of his own countrymen he did not even guess. (418–19)
Curtis would have it that Hawthorne himself was in league with the devil, saying, “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” (544). Curtis not only misreads Hawthorne’s short story, and its critique of specter evidence, but also unwittingly puts himself in the false position of the Puritan witch hunter. He indicts Hawthorne for failing to see the Devil at work in the Slavocracy, thus making himself an advocate for those willing to kill the innocent in order to drive the Devil from the land. Such ahistorical moral absolutism is precisely what motivated that mad Puritan John Brown at Pottawotamie Creek and Harpers Ferry.

The demonization of one’s enemy is clearly a transhistorical, cross-cultural phenomenon, yet in American history, there has been an unusually full and dynamic set of persons who have been demonized. As Michael Rogin points out, “the Indian cannibal, the black rapist, the papal whore of Babylon, the monster-hydra United States Bank, the demon rum, the bomb-throwing anarchist, the many-tentacled Communist conspiracy, the agents of international terrorism” (Rogin 1987, xiii) are a consistent, repressed feature of American sociopolitical history. Rogin does not mention the Salem witches, but of course they too form part of this series, as does the Southern slave owner in abolitionist iconography and rhetoric. I would assume that the latter fact has not been a topic of interest in recent American studies because it serves no obvious purpose in advancing a politics of liberation, or “transformative social action” (Cheyvitz 1994, 545); however, it would not have escaped Hawthorne’s notice, not only because of its link to the Puritan past, but also because Southerners made a point of objecting to it. Stowe’s Simon Legree was the most obvious example of this demonization, but others appeared throughout anti-slavery periodicals, literature, and speeches. Moncure Conway, the Virginian turned New England abolitionist, after participating in the famous July 4, 1854 meeting in Framingham Grove, Massachusetts, which featured speeches by Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, and Garrison, decided,

I could not join the Antislavery Society. There was a Calvinistic accent in that creed about the “covenant with death and agreement with hell” [Garrison’s description of the Constitution, which he burned on stage]. Slavery was not death, nor the South hell . . . my peace principles inclined me to a separation between sections that hated each other. Yet I knew good people on both sides. (Autobiography 2: 185)
Just as John Hathorne and Cotton Mather sought to drive Satan from New England, Garrison and his followers sought to drive him from the Union. In Mather’s eyes, the devil had “decoy’d a fearful knot of proud, froward, ignorant, envious and malicious creatures, to lift themselves in his horrid Service... each of them have their Spectres, or Devils, commission’d by them, & representing of them, to be the Engines of their Malice. By these wicked Spectres, they seize poor people about the Country, with various & bloody Torments” (Mather 1950, 67–68). For Garrison, whose rhetoric, like Mather’s, drew upon the Bible, Southern slave owners were the devil’s agents, “an adulterous and perverse generation, a brood of vipers, hypocrites, children of the devil, who could not escape the damnation of hell” (180). Such demonization appeared in iconography as well as rhetoric, outraging those accused of depravity. In the summer of 1835 Senator John Tyler of Virginia held up a copy of the Anti-Slavery Record and showed his fellow Southerners “a picture upon the external covering, designed to represent each of you gentlemen. A scourge is in your hand, and three victims bound and kneeling at your feet. You are represented as demons in the shape of men” (qtd. Richards 1970, 56–57). As Bertram Wyatt-Brown has pointed out, the abolitionists looked to the past for their imagery, and primitive woodcuts of lustful masters and abject slaves became the gargoyle and relics of a gothic revival” (23).

Northern fascination with the sexual relations between Southern masters and their female slaves (coded as “concubinage,” not rape, by male abolitionists) in many ways mirrored seventeenth-century Puritan fascination with the sexual relations between the devil and his concubines. Licentiousness took on political significance, and the black female body, like those of accused witches, could be identified as a threatening site of sin and vice. Few noticed the injustice of blaming the victim such identification involved. Drawing upon first-hand knowledge, one assumes, Thomas Jefferson addressed this aspect of the slavemaster relationship in his Notes on the State of Virginia, warning that slavery allowed “a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism” (289). Just as the religious persecution of witches, especially on the Continent, involved avid exploration of the “filthy rites” practiced by the devil and his female worshippers, so, too, the abolitionists focused upon the appetites and lusts of the slavemasters, indulged through the bodies of their female slaves. Wendell Phillips, for one, called the South “one great Brothel, where half a million of women are flogged to prostitution, or worse still, are degraded to believe it honorable” (11). Similarly, Hawthorne’s brother-in-law Horace Mann, in his “Speech on the Institution of Slavery” (1852), identified slave owners as those wanting to “introduce a foul concubinage
in place of the institution of marriage, and who would remorselessly trample upon all the tenderest and holiest affections which the human soul is capable of feeling” (267).

A certain sexual anxiety as well as prurience at times seems to surface in Puritan attacks on the “luxurious” South, and such anxiety is an issue Hawthorne explored in “Young Goodman Brown,” where he dramatizes the
competing desires of the "holiest affections" of marriage and the unholy sexual attractions offered by the Devil and his sex slaves. Brown’s departure from his wife, Faith, to pursue forbidden sexual knowledge deep in the forest demonstrates his moral weakness, as does his susceptibility to spectral evidence, which he accepts as real. Witchcraft in Salem is the focus of the tale, however, not slavery; but when the "dark figure" of the devil reappears as the “Black Man” in The Scarlet Letter, the issues of witchcraft and slavery merge, as does the imagery of revolutionary violence and witchcraft. Hester tells Pearl she met the Black Man only once, and we know she means not the devil but the Reverend Dimmesdale, and that forbidden desire impelled their union. It is not the Black Man as devil or minister, however, that poses the greatest threat to the peace of the community. Rather, it is the violence-prone mob of “gossips” who surround the scaffold and reveal a frightening bloodlust, wanting Hester to be branded or executed. (The actual Mistress Hibbins, whom Hawthorne fictionalizes in his novel, died at the hands of Godfearing Puritans in 1646, hanged as a witch.) For Hawthorne, spectral evidence, lies, and mental weakness go hand in hand, and the multitude, when aroused by false stimuli, especially if it is salacious, can be positively fatal.

Hawthorne’s politics, growing out of an aversion to violence, social unrest, moral absolutism, and faulty perception, expressed itself in The Scarlet Letter and throughout his works in allegories of self-delusion and faulty vision, where lies and myths of salvific action, rather than devils, take possession of people and lead them toward a hell they do not see ahead. Hawthorne’s writings of the 1850s and 1860s, especially, show us that the historical novelist, like the historian, can acquire as a blessing and a curse the ability to come at political issues with imagination and understanding, to approach emotive discourse with skepticism and insight, seeking truth through structural links to the past, both fabulous and real. As a romance writer familiar with Gothic conventions, Hawthorne understood how language and imagery can serve to manipulate a reader’s emotions, and he was a resistant reader as a result, especially of sensational or partisan rhetoric aimed at exciting his passions. (He surely noticed and perhaps resented the incredible success of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.) Though charged with a “politics of ‘indeterminacy’” by one recent critic, and “ideological fixation by another,” which supposedly prevented him from commitment to political action, Hawthorne can more fairly be credited with a “politics of imagination,” which allowed him to resist the kind of groupthink leading to violence and death. His habitual assumption of the perspectives of different persons (essential to the craft of fiction) and his exposure to the viewpoints of those in foreign cultures, in England and Italy, enabled him to appreciate multiple points of view in the midst of partisan propaganda and radical violence. The one key point of view he failed to assume, however, was that of the slave.
Perhaps the most morally responsible aspect of his incomplete vision was its revelation of the ways in which righteousness can become totalitarian as it tries to impose one narrow view of the world upon others. In a letter to Francis Bennoch, ca. July 1861, Hawthorne tells him we have gone to war, and we seem to have little, or, at least, a very misty idea of what we are fighting for. It depends upon the speaker, and that, again, depends upon the section of the country in which his sympathies are enlisted. The Southern man will say, We fight for state rights, liberty, and independence. The middle and Western statesman will avow that he fights for the Union; whilst our Northern and Eastern man will swear that, from the beginning, his only idea was liberty to the Blacks, and the annihilation of slavery. All are thoroughly in earnest, and all pray for the blessing of Heaven to rest upon the enterprise. (XVIII 387, emphasis added)

Although his fellow New Englanders did not appreciate this cast of mind, Hawthorne’s wife, Sophia, apparently did. In the spring of 1862, while he was in Washington D.C., she wrote him:

I could wish thou mightest be President through this crisis, and show the world what can be done by using two eyes, and turning each thing upside down and inside out, before judging and acting. I should not wonder if thy great presence in Washington might affect the moral air and work good. (qtd. Lathrop [1897] 1969, 437).

This high praise was echoed by Henry James, who in his biography of Hawthorne, defended “Chiefly About War-Matters,” calling it “interesting as an example of the way an imaginative man judges current events—trying to see the other side as well as his own, to feel what his adversary feels, and present his view of the case” (James [1879] 1966, 151). If Hawthorne had extended his imagination to take in the plight of the slaves, which even Lincoln found it impossible to do, it would be difficult to find a more thoughtful “peaceable man” of the times.

Notes


2. In “Chiefly About War-Matters,” Hawthorne spoke of the Civil War in the same terms: “No human effort, on a grand scale, has ever yet resulted according to the purpose of its projectors. The advantages are always incidental. Man’s accidents
are God's purposes. We miss the good we sought, and do the good we little cared for" (XXIII 431).


4. Some twenty years after Hawthorne's death, Philip R. Ammidon recalled, "with what concern I once heard a resident of Concord, a man not unknown in the world of letters [Emerson?], speak of certain evils like to result from 'Hawthorne's fall.'" The speaker was referring to Hawthorne's "effort in behalf of his college comrade and life-long friend [Franklin Pierce], that was supposed to imply a state of moral declension fitly indicated by the sinister word" (516). Emerson's friend the abolitionist Moncure Conway even held Hawthorne responsible for the Civil War. He reasoned that Pierce was a political unknown until Hawthorne's campaign biography elevated him to national attention and "extolled" him "into the presidency whose oppression in Kanzas [sic] . . . made the war inevitable" (203).

5. Curtis's brother Lieutenant J. B. Curtis lost most of his regiment at Antietam, and Curtis's brother-in-law Colonel Robert Gould Shaw was killed along with hundreds of his all-black regiment during their celebrated assault on Fort Wagner.

6. See, for examples, Hall 1966, 147; Miller 1991, 474; and Bercovitch 1993, 236.

7. For the most severe judgments, see Cheyvitz and Yellin.


10. In a speech delivered before the Nashville Convention in 1851, General Felix Huston of Mississippi declared that the San Domingo insurrection "having occurred so near to us, and being within the recollection of many persons living, who heard the exaggerated accounts of the day, has fastened itself on the public imagination, until it has become a subject of frequent reference" (qtd. John Weiss, "The Horrors of San Domingo," Atlantic Monthly 11 [June 1863]: 773).

11. See Elkins 1976, 175–93, for a narrative of how this occurred.


13. Thus, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe has Augustine St. Clair declare, "If ever the San Domingo hour comes, Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day. Sons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins, will not always be bought and sold and traded. They will rise, and raise with them their mother's race" (392).

14. See Brancaccio, who points out that the American Colonization Society listed the Journal in its annual report for 1846 as "one of the most prominent events in the history of colonization for the past year" (1980, 39).

17. See Kearns 1964, Teichgraeber 1995, von Frank 1999, and Rosenwald 2000. In an 1844 journal entry, Emerson described the abolitionists as an “odious set of people, whom one would be sure to shun as the worst of bores & canters” (JMN 9: 120), and in his “Ode, to William H. Channing” (1846), he questioned abolitionist methods by asking,

What boots thy zeal, O glowing friend,/
That would indignant rend
the northland from the south?
Wherefore? To what good end?
Boston Bay and Bunker Hill
Would serve things still;
Things are of the snake.

Emerson’s social conservatism matched Hawthorne’s at this time, and his racial fatalism went even farther, for he includes in the poem the following lines:

The over-god
Who marries Right to Might,
Who peoples, unpeoples,—
He who exterminates
Races by stronger races,
Black by white faces,—
Knows to bring honey
Out of the lion. (Collected Poems 61–64).

19. Emerson’s idealism impels his writings of the 1830s, of course, such as Nature (1836), but even in his 1844 Anti-slavery address, he saw “blessed necessity” at work in the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies, thus anticipating Hawthorne’s own gradualist sentiments that so outraged abolitionists (see von Frank 1999, 402). Thoreau, too, sought to elevate himself above the “tintinnabulation,” as he called it, of reform movements of the day. In his poem “The Spirit of Lodin” (1851), he fantasized, “I look down from my height on nations,/ And they become ashes before me;/ Calm is my dwelling in the clouds;/ Pleasant are the great fields of my rest” (Journal 3: 213–14).

20. As Michael Colacurcio has pointed out, this account of early colonial history calls into question “the flagrant idolatries of America’s pseudo-Puritan civil religion.” In its place, Hawthorne offers “a Tory view” emphasizing “provincial unruliness, a mob scene” (Province 136–38). See also McWilliams 1976.
21. In an illuminating statement, Hawthorne’s daughter Rose recalled of her father, “He hated failure, dependence, and disorder, broken rules and weariness of discipline, as he hated cowardice. I cannot express how brave he seemed to me” (Lathrop [1897] 1969, 478).

22. On the internal contradictions of Hawthorne’s Jacksoniansm, see Herbert 1993, 88–112.

23. Bell makes the excellent point that, though hostile toward “the radical ideal of revolution,” Hawthorne “saw the essential connection between the unleashing of fantasy and the unleashing of revolutionary violence” (Bell 1980, 170–71).


25. For an account of Thoreau’s knowledge of Brown’s past, see Meyer 1980.

26. “These Sad but Glorious Days”: Dispatches from Europe, 1846-1850, ed. Larry J. Reynolds and Susan Belasco Smith. Cited parenthetically as SGD.

27. For a full account of the Hawthorne-Fuller relationship, see Mitchell 1998.

28. Richard Brodhead has done so most cogently, declaring “typically, the quickening of Hawthorne’s sense of involvement in the larger struggles of a society in conflict ends up producing not deepened commitment but deepened irony toward such commitment. The main source of this irony is Hawthorne’s unregenerate fantasy” (1984, 98).

29. In a June 14, 1854 letter to George Sanders, Hawthorne reacted to a letter Kossuth had written about his decision to remain neutral with regard to the slavery controversy in the United States. “Does he not trim and truckle a little?” Hawthorne asked. “Doubtless, he says nothing but what is perfectly true; but yet it has not the effect of frank and outspoken truth. I wish he had commenced his reply with a sturdier condemnation of slavery…” (XVII 230).

30. Horace Greeley later recalled,

The passage of the Nebraska Bill was a death-blow to Northern quietism and complacency, mistakingly deeming themselves conservatism. To all who fondly dreamed or blindly hoped that the Slavery question would somehow settle itself, it cried, ‘Sleep no more!’ in thunder-tones that would not die unheeded. . . . Systematic, determined resistance was now recognized as imperative duty. (294)

Thus was born the Republican Party.

31. The debate over the Nebraska Bill became heatedly moralistic thanks to the publicity efforts of a small group of free-soil Democrats in Congress. As David Potter points out, “increasingly after 1854, they had a strength which derived not only from the righteousness of their cause but also from the technical skill of a dis-
tinctive style of publicity, which discredited their opponents as not only wrong on principle but also morally depraved and personally odious” (Potter 1976, 164–65).

32. For a full account of Hawthorne’s stance with regard to John Brown and his supporters, see Moore 2000.

33. See also Michael Colacurcio, who points out that Hawthorne “had the critical intelligence to discern how much of the familiar politics of mission and destiny was but the public face of a piety that flourished in America distinctively. And eventually, especially in the 1840s, he acquired the perspective to notice how much of the morale of his own generation of intellectuals was suitably understood as neo-Puritan, despite their vigorous rejection of the theological idioms of the older orthodoxy” (1987, viii).

34. The Virginian Moncure Conway, who became an abolitionist and friend of Emerson, observed John Brown’s Puritan appeal: “[I]t appears to me now that there had remained in nearly every Northern breast, however liberal, some unconscious chord which Brown had touched, inherited from the old Puritan spirit and faith in the God of War. I had been brought up in no such faith, but in the belief that evil could be conquered only by regeneration of the evil-doer” (Emerson 303).

35. See Breslaw’s Appendix C, “Transcripts of Tituba’s Confessions.”

36. See Burr 1914, 267, and Mather’s whole account of “A Brand Pluck’d Out of the Burning” (1693) (Burr 203–88).


38. As Emily Budick has pointed out, “Young Goodman Brown” not only explores the power and nature of spectral evidence, it also reveals Hawthorne’s appreciation of moral relativity by dramatizing “Brown’s failure to question the sweeping and unsubstantiated claim that his ancestors willingly accepted the devil’s help, that they performed deeds that they (and not a subsequent generation) considered evil” (Budick 1986, 221).


40. See also, Our Old Home (1863), where he describes the effect of studying the Cathedral of Lichfield, which becomes “a kind of kaleidoscopic mystery, so rich a variety of aspects did it assume from each altered point of view” (V 124–25).