March 1984

The Development of Social Commentary in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Works: 1828-1844

Richard Predmore

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 20, no.1, March 1984, p.6-21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
The Development of Social Commentary in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Works: 1828–1844

by RICHARD PREDMORE

Most discussions of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s social and political themes have focused on the novels, especially those of the early 1850’s: The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, and The Blithedale Romance. In these novels many broad social issues of American democracy have been found: American materialism, the needs of the individual in democracy versus the demands of society, the historical supplanting of aristocratic mores by democratic political commitment versus apathy, and utopian socialism and other reform ideas. There has also been much discussion of Hawthorne’s involvement in the political issues of his own day, which were considerable. There is, however, no comprehensive examination of Hawthorne’s views on social and political questions during the sixteen years or so—1828 to 1844—that he concentrated exclusively on the short story and sketch.

My approach is distinct from other studies in two ways. First, I focus on the specific social and political issues of Hawthorne’s time, while many studies are limited to generalizations, with little or no concrete point of reference to the Age of Jackson. Second, most studies assume that Hawthorne’s was a static literary intelligence, as evidenced, for example, by the critical habit of quoting from the novels or The English Notebooks to support a thesis about “Young Goodman Brown,” or vice versa. In contrast, I have applied Nina Baym’s important, recent finding that “Hawthorne’s career was a development.” His developing


interest in the issues of the dynamic Age of Jackson, I have found, fall roughly into three stages. First, in the early stories—1828 through 1836—Hawthorne is noticeably silent on social questions, particularly those of his own day. Second, in the stories of what we might call a "transition period"—1837 to 1838—Hawthorne begins to record social issues, typically in a neutral or uncommitted manner, and he experiments in a few instances with how to bring more social relevance to his fiction. Third, in the late stories—1842 to 1844—-the topical references to the social and political issues of his day increase dramatically. Also, during this "Old Manse Period," something like a political position emerges, one that generally approximates that of the dominant political movement, Jacksonian Democracy.

Set in Puritan or colonial times, Hawthorne's early tales could hardly be more remote from the author's own rapidly industrializing world. Furthermore, the social and political themes that do appear take a very abstract form, for example the minor theme of western expansion in "Roger Malvin's Burial" or the cultural theme of "jollity and gloom...contending for an empire" in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount." Somewhat more importantly, there is "The Grey Champion" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," both of which show foreshadowings of the transition from British rule to American democracy. In the second story the political point of view is notably ambiguous and uncommitted: Robin, part of the rising democratic order, has a good measure of the dolt and the bumpkin to him, and Molineux, the displaced British order, is afforded a measure of dignity, even during his tar and feather humiliation.

In the early stories a rare kind of comment relevant to the author's own time is brief criticisms of American materialism, which Hawthorne...
apparently felt had its origins as early as colonial times. There are a few occasions in the early tales when the modern reader is likely to think that Hawthorne is outrightly insensitive to the issues of his own day. The most notable example is a discussion of slavery among the Puritans. Hawthorne says that the Puritans “modified and softened the institution, making it patriarchal, and almost a beautiful, peculiarity of the times” (“Old News,” XI, 139). As we will see, Hawthorne’s early neglect and occasional insensitivity to the wretched and exploited is eventually replaced by interest and ultimately by sympathetic understanding.6

During the middle or “transition period,” in 1837 and 1838, Hawthorne is increasingly observant of the social conditions of his time, and on occasions he experiments with making these issues a part of his fiction. One example of Hawthorne’s new observing eye is his description in The American Notebooks of his summer tour of western Massachusetts in 1838. Frequenting country stores, taverns, and inns, listening to stories, and meeting a cross section of society, Hawthorne’s experiences provide him with rich opportunities for maturing his vision of society. One typical kind of observation he makes at this time is to note a person’s dress and manner and to decide whether to classify him a countryman or gentleman. In a quiet way Hawthorne unmistakably considers himself of the gentleman class.

Typically during these years the manner of the social commentary is remarkably uncritical, unquestioning. There is a notable neutrality to an entry like this in The American Notebooks: “In an old London newspaper, 1678, there is an advertisement, among other goods at auction, of a black girl of about fifteen years old, to be sold” (VIII, 21).

In the middle period there are scattered references to the political issues of the day (see especially “Time’s Portraiture” and “The Sister Years”) and specifically a fair number of references to steam engines, factories, and girl factory workers, phenomena that excited Hawthorne’s partisan interest by the early 1840’s. But again, Hawthorne’s viewpoint in the late 1830’s is one of neutral observation, as the follow-

6. In fairness to Hawthorne it should be noted that at the time of Hawthorne’s statement (1834) slavery was decidedly a minor national issue, and in fact throughout most of the 1830’s the Jackson Democrats, Hawthorne’s party, “were bitterly critical of abolitionists” (Schlesinger, p. 424). It is absurd to think, as some have, that because of his later association with his college friend Franklin Pierce, who was “soft” on slavery, that Hawthorne never altered his view from that expressed above. Perhaps typical of Hawthorne’s approach to the subject in the 1850’s and 1860’s is his expression of equal sympathy for the black slaves of Southern plantations as for the white slaves of Northern factories (see letter to Horatio Bridge, Oct. 12, 1861). As early as 1845 Sophia reported that her husband could not feel a sense of belonging to the United States as long as the “weight of slavery hangs on our skirts” (quoted in Turner, p. 362).

ing account in *The American Notebooks* illustrates: "The brig Tiberius, from an English port, with seventy or thereabouts factory girls, imported to work in our factories. Some pale and delicate-looking; others rugged and coarse" (VIII, 194). In sharp contrast to this neutral record is the reaction of Hawthorne's fellow Democrats, for whom the importation of cheap foreign labor and long factory hours by young girls were issues of great concern.

An important experience for Hawthorne for heightening social awareness must have been his visit with his lifelong friend Horatio Bridge in Maine in the summer of 1837. Here he was frequently exposed to the plight of large numbers of Irish and French Canadian laborers. His lengthy accounts of their customs and living conditions in *The American Notebooks* cannot be characterized, as one critic states, as "detached, indifferent, and at times even hostile." Instead, the Notebooks contain the record of a man who did not really know what to think of this new American phenomenon of large-scale poverty, a record that ranges from neutral reporting to sympathetic concern. It is true that Hawthorne reports the existence among the Irish women of the inevitable concomitants of poverty, drunkenness and immorality, but he also notes that some of them "amid all the trials of their situation, appear to have kept up the distinction between virtue and vice . . ." (VIII, 49). Characteristic of this period, many of his observations are notably neutral, as when he reports that in the Irish "huts, less than twenty feet square perhaps, [Bridge] tells me that upwards of twenty people, male and female, have sometimes been lodged" (VIII, 41). But Hawthorne does make note of injustice in housing when he expresses concern "that a man [Bridge] should have the right, unarmed with any legal instrument, of tearing down the dwelling houses of a score of families, and turning the inmates forth without a shelter" (VIII, 48). It is clear Bridge in fact did not exercise his right, since Hawthorne is pleased to record several times that to the poor workers Bridge was their "protector and patron friend" (VIII, 41).

More congenial to Hawthorne's intellectual temper is his detailed analysis in the same visit to Maine in 1837 of "Gardiner's Folly," which was a pretentious mansion built by a wealthy Maine citizen and which Hawthorne characterizes as the "indulgence of aristocratic pomp among democratic institutions" (VIII, 42). In a similar passage several pages later, Hawthorne describes the remains of General Knox's plans for an aristocratic mansion with grounds. These plans, Hawthorne says, are an "illustration of what must be the result of American schemes of aristocracy" (VIII, 67). What the future holds for the United States is a more egalitarian society: "but now the house is all in decay, while,

within a stone's throw of it, is a street of neat, smart, white edifices... occupied chiefly by thriving mechanics” (VIII, 67).

As one might expect, some of these thoughts in The American Notebooks found their way into the fiction of the middle period, especially “Endicott and the Red Cross” (1837) and the four tales in “Legends of the Province-House” (1838). Here for almost the first time political theme is the central artistic concern, and here Hawthorne discards his characteristic neutral stance. Returning to colonial and revolutionary times, which he had often used for setting in the early stories, Hawthorne now specifically interprets American history politically. In an early story like “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” (1828 or 29) the contention is really for cultural preeminence—“jollity and gloom”—whereas in the five middle stories it is political freedom that is at stake. Furthermore, the interpretation of American history now comes, as the author says, from the partisan point of view of a “thoroughgoing democrat” (“Legends,” IX, 291), and the ambiguity on political questions, as in the early “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” (1828 or 29) has most likely disappeared. The political leader, John Endicott, for example, is treated in the early tale, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” with a measure of ambiguity that tilts on the negative side of this “iron man,” the “severest Puritan” (IX, 66); in the later story, “Endicott and the Red Cross,” the irony is much less, and the Puritan, for the most part, admirably foreshadows the American revolutionary spirit. Furthermore, as Paul Cortissoz points out, Hawthorne knew that Endicott was officially censured by the Puritans for symbolically cutting the red cross from the British flag, but the author “intentionally omitted any reference to Endicott’s arraignment in order to portray him as an early democrat who represented the liberal tendencies of the Puritan community.”8 The same patriotism characterizes the “Legends of the Province-House,” in which Hawthorne depicts or foreshadows in colonial times the rightful and beneficial takeover by the American rebels from the aristocratic British.

Hawthorne’s position on contemporary issues during the late 1830’s may be summarized as ambivalent. On the one hand, he had been reared to see himself as a gentleman of prominent Puritan ancestry; on the other hand, he was a member, in name anyway, of the radical Democratic party, and an applicant for political appointment. (The Boston Custom House appointment came through in 1839.) Sometimes his reactions to social and political issues are remarkably neutral, even cold, yet in a few instances during this period, he wrote partisan Democratic fiction. In a lengthy account in The American Notebooks of a lonely, poor relative, Eben Hathorne, a bachelor whose “pride of ancestry seems to

be his great hobby," Hawthorne is in some exaggerated way describing his own divided political self: "Eben passed from these matters of birth, pedigree, and ancestral pride, to give vent to the most arrant democracy and locofocoism,9 that I have happened to hear; saying that nobody ought to possess wealth longer than his own life, and that then it should return to the people, etc. It was queer" (VIII, 75).

IN THE last phase of his short story career, 1842-44, Hawthorne dramatically shifts his fictional interest from past to present, and his perspective on the world is now predominantly from the modern city. In his personal life there was much that brought Hawthorne into contact with the contemporary world during the years that led up to the Old Manse Period: his writing and editing of the topical material in *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* (1836), his giving up his relative isolation in the Salem garret (1838), his engagement (1839) and marriage (1842) to Sophia Peabody, and his stint as measurer in the Boston Custom House (1839-1840).10

Hawthorne’s brief flirtation with the social experiment at Brook Farm (1841) must have led him to think deeply about society. He must have been attracted by George Ripley’s goal of living “a more simple and wholesome life than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions” (letter to Emerson, 9 Nov., 1840) and by the goal of achieving leisure “for the production of intellectual goods” (Elizabeth Peabody in *The Dial*, Jan. 1842). The author’s disillusionment with this apolitical response to society’s ills,11 because of the beehive nature of existence there, because of the physical toil, and because of its likely financial failure, confirmed him in the belief that he maintained for the rest of his life: “it is [my] present belief that I can best attain the higher ends of my life by retaining the ordinary relation to society” (quoted in Turner, p. 138). Looking back on the manual labor of Brook Farm must have made him feel as Turner says he felt about the drudgery at the Boston Custom House: he “was pleased to be ‘entitled to call the sons of toil’ his brethren and to know how to sympathize with them” (p. 127).

During the Old Manse Period, Hawthorne’s works abound with topical references: to politics and politicians, to political parties, news-

9. The Locofocos, the radical branch of the Democratic party, were “so named because of their use of ‘locofoco’ matches to light candles at a meeting where the conservative Democrats had turned off the gas lights” (Van Deusen, p. 95).


papers, reformers, inventors, feminists, the Bank of the United States, the Stock Exchange, land speculation, incorporation, the national debt, the tariff, insurance companies, state prisons, slavery, war, steam engines, and Father Miller (who predicted Judgment Day for 1843). Beyond these contemporary references, which have been noted in other critical studies, what has not been fully recognized is the degree to which Hawthorne’s preoccupation focuses on social and political issues, nor has there been sufficient analysis of the nature of Hawthorne’s views on them.

To begin with, one notices that Hawthorne discards the neutral stance of the middle period in favor of a tone that is, for Hawthorne, at times strikingly opinionated. His opinions on politics most closely approximate Jacksonian Democracy; more than half of his stories in the Old Manse Period appeared in the radical Democratic Review. Although we know that Hawthorne was a Democrat, in name at least, from his college days on and that he was, according to Bridge, an “enthusiastic supporter of General Jackson” as early as the General’s first presidential campaign of 1824, the author’s incorporation of Jacksonian sympathies into his fiction comes, perhaps as we might expect from the cautious Hawthorne, as a kind of delayed reaction, since, by the Old Manse Period, Jackson and his successor Van Buren had left office. But, as historians agree, the Jacksonian influence was by no means defunct by 1842 and in fact remained a force through at least the entire decade.

Andrew Jackson’s rise to the Presidency from humble origins signaled the rise of the common man and the demise of political control by New England merchants and Southern planters. Generally, during Jackson’s Presidency—1829 to 1837—the United States underwent an “expansion of democracy” (Hofstadter, p. 55). Specifically, Jacksonians advocated such radical changes as a ten-hour work day, free public schools, liberalization of prison sentences and of bankruptcy laws, improvement in insane asylums, and restraint on the growth of banks and railroads. Jackson’s greatest political battle was against the “Monstrous” Bank of the United States and against its offspring of corporations. In the eyes of Jacksonians, these institutions stood for monied privilege, “moral irresponsibility” (Schlesinger, p. 335) and for the “growing depersonalization” (Schlesinger, p. 334) and abstraction in the affairs of business in the 1830’s and 40’s. All these political opinions are found in Hawthorne’s fiction of the early 1840’s. Hawthorne’s account of his age is also in accord with the modern historical view that Jackson’s age was particularly acquisitive in nature and that the tempo of life was especially frenetic. Perhaps most “Jacksonian” about Hawthorne’s fiction during the Old Manse Period is his growing sensitivity to questions of wealth and poverty, his increased sympathetic interest in the poor and

the worker, and his markedly increased tendency to present unfavorably
the aristocrat, the politician and the wealthy capitalist.

During the Old Manse Period, Hawthorne makes a few references to
the Bank of the United States, which was the focal issue of Jackson’s
two presidential terms. According to historians, Jackson’s fight not to
renew the charter of the Bank symbolized in the eyes of the common
man the general desire to overthrow aristocratic privilege and to do
away with economic inequality. Like the political writers of the Demo­
cratic Review, Hawthorne pictures the Bank as a disease, a “system that
had wrought itself into the vitals of mankind, and choked their original
thorne describes the Bank’s high-handed president, Nicholas Biddle, as
a man of “native pride and obstinacy” who “held the control of a vast
moneyed interest, which he had wielded in the same spirit as a despotic
monarch would wield the power of his empire, carrying on a tremen­
dous moral warfare” which ended for him in a “crushing ruin” (“The
Christmas Banquet,” X, 302). Hawthorne levels his most biting satire
against the Bank’s leading defender, Daniel Webster. The politician’s
famous eloquence, says Hawthorne in “The Great Stone Face,” could
possess the sound of “thunder” or “sweetest music” but in substance
was no more than “illuminated fog” (XI, 38-39). Hawthorne acknow­
edges Webster as a “marvelously gifted statesman” who, nevertheless,
turned “mighty faculties” to “little aims” (XI, 41).

By advocating the welfare of the ordinary worker, the farmer and the
mechanic, Jackson and his followers had the effect of calling attention
to the existence of social classes in America, a topic Hawthorne increas­
ingly raises in his fiction of the 1840’s. Furthermore, the earlier fictional
 technique of focusing on approximately one to three characters in a
given story or sketch is in the later stories often supplanted by the plan
of featuring a broad spectrum of society. In fact, of the twenty or so
stories of the Old Manse Period, about one-half depict a veritable
parade of human society. In these stories Hawthorne tends to divide
society into basically two classes, upper and lower, rich and poor, and
over and over Hawthorne juxtaposes the two. Sometimes he bemoans
the disparity between them, as he does in “The New Adam and Eve,”
where he has the couple wonder about the nature of a society in which
“one portion of earth’s lost inhabitants was rolling in luxury, while the
multitude was toiling for scanty food” (X, 263).

The sometimes aristocratic point of view characteristic of the early en­
tries in The American Notebooks mostly disappears by the 1840’s and is
supplanted by a perspective that is sympathetic to the poor and the
worker. This change can be seen by comparing the outlook in Haw­
thorne's descriptions of his summer tours of 1837 and 1838 (described earlier) with his charming description of his trip in 1841 to the Brighton Cattle Fair (The American Notebooks, VIII, 198–201). Fresh from working in the fields at Brook Farm and dressed for the day as a laborer, Hawthorne here comes as close as he ever does to enjoying the experience of rubbing elbows with the mass of humanity.

The qualities of the poor that emerge from the numerous, brief references to them are honesty and industry. In "The Celestial Railroad," for instance, Hawthorne specifically reminds us that it is the "meander brethren" (X, 188) who toil genteelly to heaven on foot in the honored manner of Bunyan's Christian. Often Hawthorne refers to the misery of the poor, as he does in "The Old Apple Dealer" (1842), which is a stark picture of the results, both physical and spiritual, of beggarly conditions. Perhaps Hawthorne's most penetrating comments on poverty come in a section of "The Procession of Life." In listing a variety of occupational hazards and diseases, Hawthorne gives an example of the consumptive seamstress, who "plied the daily and nightly needle in the service of master tailors and close-fisted contractors" (X, 210). Such conditions, Hawthorne says, have been "wrought by the tainted breath of cities, scanty and unwholesome food, destructive modes of labor, and the lack of those moral supports that might partially have counteracted such bad influences" (X, 209).

Hawthorne gives his greatest attention, however, to men of power and wealth, whom he shows to be both corrupt and unhappy. Almost every time they appear, it is in the context of exploiting fellowmen. Somewhat less harshly treated is the gouty aristocrat of the old-fashioned European sort who is relatively harmless because he is out of step with the forward march of America. As for businessmen, "The Celestial Railroad" contains attitudes fairly typical of Hawthorne's depiction. These are the moderns who take the railroad, the smooth and convenient way towards what they think is heaven. Most are content to remain in Vanity Fair, where the "capitalists of the city are among the largest stockholders" (X, 197) of the railroad, where human values are bought and sold, and where morality is reduced to a sort of Stock Exchange transaction. Also typical of Hawthorne's attitude is "The Christmas Banquet," which describes a rich man's perverse plan to bring together every year for a Christmas banquet the world's ten most miserable people. The majority of the attendants are the wealthy and powerful and include an exiled noble of the French Revolution, a broken soldier of the Empire, fallen monarchs, Aaron Burr, Nicholas Biddle, and Stephen Girard (a wealthy banker). Also at the banquet is a figure common in Hawthorne's later short stories, the man from the Exchange, "whose life's record was in the ledger, and whose soul's prison-house, the vaults of the bank where he kept his deposits" (X, 295).
In his frequent, brief sketches of businessmen and capitalists, Hawthorne characteristically employs words like “shrewd,” “calculating,” “materialistic,” “sordid,” “corrupt,” “lonely,” “guilt ridden”; to describe their business schemes, he typically uses the words “intricate,” “wild,” “artificial.” Hawthorne makes clear the connection between power and wealth on the one hand and deplorable deeds on the other when he observes that “all men who act over an extensive sphere are most liable to . . . commit wrong, devastation, and murder, on so grand a scale” because “it impresses them as speculative rather than actual” (“The Procession of Life,” X, 215). Hawthorne’s concern that the power and wealth of American business can lead to faceless abstraction and from there to misdeeds is his fictional expression of the Jacksonian concern for the depersonalization and “moral irresponsibility” (Schlesinger, p. 335) of the expanding American economy, a concern heard in the famous political aphorism of the time about large corporations: they “have neither bodies to be kicked, nor souls to be damned.”

Abstraction is an integral part of that familiar figure in Hawthorne’s fiction, the man whose cerebral coldness leaves him removed from the “magnetic chain of humanity.” This intellectualized isolato makes his first sketchy appearances in Hawthorne’s stories in the mid-thirties, but by the 1840’s he occupies a prominent position in some seven stories. What has not been sufficiently emphasized about him is that, with the exception of Ethan Brand who is of humble beginnings, Hawthorne regularly associates him with wealth and power. As early as Lady Eleanore (“Lady Eleanore’s Mantle,” 1838), for example, Hawthorne stresses that what has led her “to place herself above the sympathies of our common nature” (IX, 276) is her “haughty consciousness of her hereditary and personal advantages” (IX, 274). The distrust of isolation, with the judgment that this is a danger the rich are heir to, and the advocacy of warm contact with fellow man not only express personal truths for the author, but should also be seen as general expressions of Hawthorne’s Democratic sympathies.

In addition, in parts of some of the later stories, Hawthorne seems to be specifically declaring himself with the party of equality and of the common man. In “The Procession of Life,” for instance, he facetiously advances a new “classification of society” (X, 208) with the serious, democratic goal of making the “conventional distinctions of society melt away” (X, 210), so that “rank and wealth, and poverty and lowli-

14. Schlesinger, p. 335. For more on the Jacksonian concern for depersonalization, see Schlesinger, Chap. XXVI, section 1.
16. The seven are “The Virtuoso’s Collection,” “The Birthmark,” “Egotism; or the Bosom Serpent,” “The Christmas Banquet,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” “Ethan Brand,” and “The Book of Autographs.” (In this last series of sketches, Hawthorne wonders if George Washington were the cold type.)
ness” (X, 208), “peer and ploughman” (X, 211), the inhabitants of “palace and almshouse” (X, 213), the “noble and peasant, the beggar and the monarch” (X, 213) may perceive their common humanity. In “The New Adam and Eve” the discoveries of the young couple who are “commissioned to pass unconscious judgment upon . . . the vanished race” (X, 262) are similar in many ways to the criticism of the Whigs by Hawthorne’s Democrats: urban civilization is found to be in a “perverted state” (X, 253) characterized by vanity, injustice, and ugliness. How can one explain to innocence, Hawthorne asks, “the magnificence of one habitation as compared with the squalid misery of another? Through what medium can the idea of servitude enter their minds?” (X, 262). In the new Adam and Eve, we may conclude, we see not only the new man and woman but also the new Democrats, who might, if they could preserve their natural wisdom, create a more equitable society.

Perhaps it is in “The Hall of Fantasy,” in the lengthy discussion of reformers, where Hawthorne most strives to bring his fiction in line with the reform-oriented Jackson Democrats. Instead of showing the single-minded reformers as a tribe of dangerous fools, as was his custom, Hawthorne here evaluates them quite charitably. The narrator, a skeptic much like Hawthorne, is reminded by his guide of his own idealism, a key ingredient in reform politics: “You are at least a democrat; and methinks no scanty share of . . . faith [in idealism] is essential to the adoption of that creed” (X, 179). In evaluating reformers and inventors, says the guide, one must bear in mind that the “fantasies of one day are the deepest realities of a future one” (X, 179). There are limits, however, to Hawthorne’s credence—“My faith revived, even while I rejected all their schemes” (X, 181)—but the author is careful to tread lightly so as not to offend fellow Democrats: “Therefore may none, who believe and rejoice in the progress of mankind [i.e. Democrats], be angry with me because I recognized their apostles and leaders amid the fantastic radiance of those pictured windows. I love and honor such men, as well as they” (X, 180).

In addition to social commentary that is specifically Democratic, Hawthorne also offers the general opinion that his modern world is more corrupt and less happy than previous ages. For example, in “The Intelligence Office” Hawthorne has the Intelligencer declare to a devil: “Nowadays, men act the evil spirit for themselves and their neighbors, and play the part more effectually than ninety-nine out of a hundred of your fraternity” (X, 330). In politics especially does Hawthorne see an increase in “cunning tactics” (X, 330), an opinion also held by his fellow citizens for whom “suspicion of corruption was on the increase” (Van Deusen, p. 168).18

17. I will describe later Hawthorne’s Jacksonian preference for country over city life.
18. The scandalous Presidential electioneering of 1840 seemed to inaugurate a disgraceful period in political life; congressional graft was common, as was brawling on the floor of the House of Repre-
Hawthorne typically attributes the extra measure of corruption and unhappiness of his times to the materialistic and utilitarian bent of modern life. The best known tales that embody this theme are "The Celestial Railroad" (1843) and "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844), which are sweeping indictments of the mechanistic pragmatism of nineteenth-century America. There are some six additional tales of the 1840's that contain a similar idea, among which is the lesser known "The Intelligence Office" (1844). The thesis here is that "human character . . . may best be studied in its wishes" (X, 331-32) and that "the most ordinary wish, that was written down with wearisome recurrence, was, of course, for wealth, wealth, wealth" (X, 332). Hawthorne's description of the acquisitive and materialistic temper of Americans is in accord with firsthand European observers of the day and with present-day historical judgment. As Hofstadter says, "the typical American was an expectant capitalist . . . for whom enterprise was a kind of religion" (pp. 55-56).

Hawthorne's preoccupation in his writings with American materialism increased sharply from the 1830's to the 1840's, an increase which is reflected in his references to machines and factories. In early entries in The American Notebooks, there are numerous references in the characteristically neutral tone to these features of the American economy. On summer tour of New England, for instance, he notes that he often passed villages with factories, "the machinery whizzing, and girls looking out of the windows at the stage, with heads averted from their tasks, but still busy" (VIII, 87). What Hawthorne finds notable is the contrast between the factories, "supremely artificial establishments," and the "wild scenery" of New England. The entire scene, Hawthorne reports, is "picturesque" (VIII, 88).

In contrast, by the 1840's Hawthorne had become convinced that machines and factories were antithetical to the most precious qualities of human nature, the heart, the imagination and the soul. Now it is more typical for him to refer to the factory as the place "where the demon of machinery annihilates the human soul" ("The Procession of Life," X, 216). It is in the presence of the "monstrous and unnatural" steam engine that Owen Warland's artistic spirit "turned pale and grew sick" (X, 450). Similarly, in the sketch, "Fire Worship," the author laments the "almost universal exchange of the open fireplace for the cheerless sentatives and drunkenness in the Senate, to mention but a few outrages. For a complete discussion of Hawthorne's presentation of politicians, see L. S. Hall, Hawthorne, Critic of Society (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1944).


20. For more on the subject and for an account of European observations, see Meyers, Chap. 6, "The Judges and the Judged," pp. 121-41. The title of a popular book of the age speaks eloquently to Hawthorne and Hofstadter's point: The Book of Wealth; in Which It Is Proved from the Bible, That It Is the Duty of Every Man to Become Rich.
and ungenial stove” (X, 138). This kind of mechanical substitution, Hawthorne generalizes, is “fast blotting the picturesque, the poetic, and the beautiful out of human life” (X, 139). The locomotive of “The Celestial Railroad,” that “mechanical demon” (X, 190), is another such substitution. In this tale, in his picture of Vanity Fair, Hawthorne expresses the heart of his concern for his rapidly industrializing age: here the final steps in mechanizing man have been taken, so that thinking now is done for people by a “sort of machinery” (X, 198) and “there is another species of machine for the wholesale manufacture of individual morality” (X, 199).

Contributing to the general deterioration of the quality of life in his times, according to Hawthorne, is the nature of city life itself. In “The New Adam and Eve,” through the eyes of the innocent couple, the author points to the perversion and ugliness “in the heart of a modern city” (X, 248). Elsewhere, he asserts that one cause of poverty is “the tainted breath of cities” (“The Procession of Life,” X, 209). Of the references to cities in the late short story period, perhaps the most common echo heard is that of the “buzz, and clatter, and outcry” of the “busy population” (“The Intelligence Office,” X, 322), or the “muffled roar of the world’s metropolis” (“P’s Correspondence,” X, 362). This noisy and frenetic quality of city living is undoubtedly what led Hawthorne to assert that his is an age “preternaturally wide-awake,” one that has “gone distracted, through a morbid activity” (“The Old Manse,” X, 29).21

Anonymity, says Hawthorne, is another drawback to city life, a theme that began with “Wakefield” (1834). In this early story Wakefield’s becoming an “outcast” is due not only to the alienating nature of London life but to the fact that Wakefield himself is something of a “nincompoop,” motivated by little more than a “whim-wham” (IX, 135). By the 1840’s, when Hawthorne had become more critical of the city, he has a lost city dweller appear in the Intelligence Office to ask for his “true place in the world” (X, 323). The Intelligencer can offer little hope, because, he says, the “whole population of the city . . . is, more or less, in your predicament” (X, 323).

By the 1840’s Hawthorne was frequently asserting that life in the country was far more attractive than it was in the city, an artistic statement that had its political counterpart in the Democratic politician’s campaign rhetoric. In the rapidly industrializing Northeast, the Democrats frequently appealed nostalgically to Jefferson’s ideal of a rural Republic for America.22 Hawthorne’s fullest statement on the

21. Apparently foreign visitors viewed the pace of American life as did Hawthorne. See Meyers, Chap. 6. “How could people endure, remarked one visitor, feeling ‘all the time as if tied to the wing of a windmill’? ‘Ten years in America are like a century in Spain’ ” (Meyers, p. 122).

22. For more on the Democrats’ campaign appeal to Jefferson’s ideal for a rural Republic, see Marvin Meyers, pp. 161-62 and 134-36. It should be added that the Democrats had enjoyed such political success with the campaign appeal to rural virtues that the Whigs adopted the same strategy in Harrison’s successful presidential campaign of 1840. See Schlesinger, p. 290 ff.
subject is "The Old Manse" essay (1846), which is a beautiful panegyric to the simple virtues of rural living, a kind of living that offers respite from the "dusty glare and tumult of the world" (X, 28).

In "The Great Stone Face" (1848) the contrast between city and country becomes the fictional theme. The setting is a rural valley dotted with farms and small villages. A legend predicts that a local child is "destined to become the greatest and noblest personage of his time," and that he will be known by his "countenance in manhood," which "should bear an exact resemblance to The Great Stone Face" (XI, 28). The Great Stone Face itself is a symbol of the contemplative, country life, and for Ernest, the protagonist, it "had become a teacher to him" (XI, 33). False candidates, having left the valley to gain prominence in various professions in the "bustle and din of cities" (XI, 43), return in old age to claim likeness to the Stone Face. But it is Ernest, the "simple husbandman," who, through contemplation of the mountain, grows in likeness to it and to whom "college professors and even active men of the cities" (XI, 42) come to learn. The exaltation of country life comes at the climax with the final recognition of the identity between Ernest and the Great Stone Face.

By virtue of isolating a subject in an author's works, as I have done with the social and political content in Hawthorne, one runs the risk of exaggerating its prominence. Although we have traced the process by which Hawthorne does gradually give a larger role in his fiction to social and political questions, we must not make the mistake, as some critics have, of thinking that social considerations ever became for Hawthorne the prime mover in human affairs. In fact, as a determinant of the human condition, social and political questions rank third behind human character and fate, or "Providence." With Hester, for instance, her offense against society is secondary to the wrong she does to her own life and character, and both she and Dimmesdale inflict punishment upon themselves far more effectively than society ever could. Also, with all the corrupt men of power and wealth that we noticed in the stories of the 1840's, it is remarkable that Hawthorne is silent on the question of society finding a way to stop their exploitive activities or to bring them to justice. What he does comment on, however, is that these men do, or will eventually, receive just torment from their own guilty consciences. In short, from the beginning to the end of his writing career, Hawthorne's fascination lay more with the individual than society, more with sin than crime.

A second qualification needs to be made on the Jacksonian dimension of Hawthorne's fiction in the 1840's. Although Hawthorne unquestionably declares himself a Jacksonian in his sympathy for the common man, he nevertheless on occasions exhibits, as Patrick Brancaccio puts
it, "a genteel restraint in his concern for the 'great unwashed.' " 23 Furthermore, even though the humanitarian instincts of Hawthorne were moved by Jacksonianism, his sensibility resisted the liberal concepts of progress, perfectability, and reform. Rather than believing that society was perfecting itself, as L. S. Hall maintains about the author, 24 we have seen that Hawthorne was more inclined to believe that man was less content in modern times than previous ages. With reform, we have seen one instance ("The Hall of Fantasy") in which Hawthorne, probably in deference to fellow Democrats, goes out of his way to treat reformers kindly. But during the same period, Hawthorne could write a story like "Earth's Holocaust," the second half of which pictures the reform movement gone mad, destroying indiscriminately both good and bad social institutions. As we might expect from a man for whom ambivalence was a habit of mind, such fluctuation is typical of Hawthorne on social and political questions.

Despite these qualifications, it is nevertheless clear that Hawthorne markedly increased the role of social and political issues in his writings during his short story career. As we have noticed, he begins by writing stories about colonial times, stories that seem remarkably removed from the bustling and mechanizing world of Hawthorne's own times. Next, in a transition period in the late 1830's, he becomes an observer of social issues in his notebooks, although the tone is usually neutral and the perspective that of the gentleman class. During this time, primarily in "Endicott and the Red Cross" and "Legends of the Province-House," he experiments with bringing concrete social relevance to his interpretation of American history. By the early 1840's, in the Old Manse Period, social and political issues play a conspicuous part in Hawthorne's fiction. Generally, he sees his own times as characterized by discontent and corruption; these qualities are at least partly due to the materialism of the new machine age and to the anonymous and frenetic quality of modern urban life. Also, during the Old Manse Period, the social dimension of the stories reflects some fundamental influences of Jacksonianism, such as his attention to the question of class, and his dramatic increase in sympathetic references to the poor and to workers. Not unlike the Jacksonian criticism of Whigs, Hawthorne frequently presents the wealthy and powerful as cold men who engage in artificial and exploitive business transactions.

Ultimately, the idea that Hawthorne's interest in political and social issues is a developing one helps explain a central and puzzling fact about the author's literary career: his complete rejection at the close of the 1840's, after some eighty tales and sketches, of the short story genre in

24. In _Hawthorne, Critic of Society_ (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1944), L. S. Hall asserts, "certainly he believed in social progress and to a degree in man's perfectibility" (p. 30).
favor of the novel. Viewed from the perspective of developing social concerns, the break is not so surprising. The shift to the novel, with its greater scope for the treatment of social issues, seems the natural step from his increasing interest in these matters during his short story career.

*University of South Carolina at Spartanburg*