Chapter II

Review of Literature

American fiction writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most studied authors in the English language. His influence has been felt by writers and critics all over the world. He is considered canonical in both his own time and in the 21st century. His short tales and four full-length romances – *The Scarlet Letter* [1850], *The House of the Seven Gables* [1851], *The Blithedale Romance* [1852], and *The Marble Faun* [1860] significantly responded to the call for an American literature commensurate with the national culture which was developing and defining itself between the American Revolution and Civil War.

In his introduction to the book called *Critical Insights, Nathaniel Hawthorne* [Salem Press, 2009], Jack Lynch writes that Hawthorne’s works can be found in virtually every library in the English-speaking world. No responsible survey course on American literature is complete without *The Scarlet Letter*; no reputable collection of American short stories can omit “The Birth-mark” or “Rappaccini’s Daughter”. Hawthorne’s enduring works have established his reputation as a major writer of the 19th century America and the most prominent chronicler of New England and its colonial history.

As a forefather of American literature, there are a variety of critical viewpoints and an array of critical approaches to Hawthorne’s fictional corpus. Earliest critical works on Hawthorne are available in the form of a biography of Nathaniel *Hawthorne* by Henry James [1896] and reviews of Hawthorne’s *Twice Told Tales* by Edgar Ellen Poe in April, May 1842, and “Hawthorne and His Mosses” by Herman Melville.
Traditional literary approaches to Hawthorne’s work were centered on the moral and philosophical aspects in his works. Randall Stewart in *Nathaniel Hawthorne – A Biography* focused on his belief “in the educative value of sin” and “the idea of the fortunate fall” (263-264). In the collection of essays edited by A.N Kaul, Donald A.Ringe in “Hawthorne’s Psychology of Head and Heart” [1950] spoke about the dichotomy of head and heart in Hawthorne’s works. Ringe worked out on an interesting dimension in his reading by revealing that the isolation of Hawthorne’s characters was born out of an unopened heart whose key was sin. F.O. Mathiessen also discussed about the psychology of head and heart in his critical reading *American Renaissance* (337-351). Austin Warren in a chapter entitled “Moral slant” in his biography *Nathaniel Hawthorne* endorsed that the starting point of Hawthorne’s tales was essentially a moral idea “from earliest of Hawthorne’s published stories onward the theme of guilt is prominent” (54).

These critics asserted that *The Scarlet Letter* focuses on sin and its retribution, *The Blithedale Romance* is about the study of guilt and emblem, *The House of Seven Gables* is about sin of past and perpetuation of evil, and *The Marble Faun* explores aspects of guilt more than any other of his novels.

Hubert Hoeltje stressed on Hawthorne’s moral universe in his book, *Inward Sky* and Spiller in *The Oblique Light*[1970] , Reverend Leonard J. Fick in *The Light Beyond* [1955], and Lyle Elazier in *Decadence and Rebirth* [1977] related the idea of Hawthorne’s tales to fatality of universal sin and sense of moral responsibility for the fall. The theme of concealment, retribution, guilty conscience, and isolation had led to their psychological consequences, which supported psychological approaches to
Hawthorne’s works. It was assumed that because the writer was haunted by a sense of personal guilt, hence his stories were replete with instances of sin and isolation.

Formalistic approach to Hawthorne’s work directed readers to the world of his imagery, symbolism, allegory, and emblem in complete detachment from his life and perspectives. John W. Schroeder in “That Inward Sphere” dwelled on Hawthorne’s allegory, images, and symbolism along with Charles Fiedelson. David E. Smith also discussed religious allegory in his work in *John Bunyan in America* [Indiana: 1966].

With the evolving changes in perspective and methodology of criticism, the critical consensus on Hawthorne has considerably changed in recent decades. In biographical and critical studies of the recent dates, Hawthorne emerges as a well connected person with active involvement in social, political, and religious movements in his time. His historical acumen ship has been recognized at par with any contemporary chronicler of his time. The new critic Joel Pfister in *The Production of Personal Life* [1991] demystifies the claim of earlier critics who find Hawthorne’s works as product of isolated genius without any relation to his surroundings. This book rereads Hawthorne in historical perspective and reconstitutes a new image of him. Chapter 2 of this work “Historical Birthmarks” discusses why human bodies in Hawthorne’s fiction and his culture are stereotyped as unstable and disordered. Its chapter 3 “Plotting Womanhood” relates feminization to the social process and is benchmark writing on Hawthorne and the social construction of femininity in *The Blithedale Romance*. It explains Hawthorne’s role in the ideological process of feminization. Its chapter 5 is on *The Scarlet Letter*, chapter 6 is on *The House of the Seven Gables* and chapter 7 is about *The Marble Faun*. All these chapters present a historical reading of Hawthorne’s works.
David B. Kesterson in “Margaret Fuller and Hawthorne” enlightens us on Hawthorne’s relationship with one of the most unconventional woman of his time. Nina Baym’s article “Hawthorne and his Mother” (*American Literature*) throws new light on his relationship with his mother.

Other perforce reading was *Hawthorne: Critic of Society* by L. S. Hall. Especially Chapter VII of this book “The Social Ethics” offered a decisive refutation of the earlier views that Hawthorne’s works were allegorical romances, a byproduct of solitary existence. Hall had gone through official records, personal correspondences, and Notebooks to assert that Hawthorne was well braced with knowledge of contemporary society and politics.

Stoehr Taylor’s book *Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists* [1978] was published by Archon Books. It contains a comprehensive detail of pseudoscience and social sciences in the 19th century. His chapter 2 “Mesmerism” is a detailed historical documentation of the nefarious practice in the field of science in the 19th century. In his time, Hawthorne saw that the society had engulfed in the fascination of science and its preoccupation with self led to dehumanization of human society. Taylor cites letters of Hawthorne to his would be wife Sophia Peabody as an example to ascertain Hawthorne’s familiarity with mesmerism as well as his dislike for such wayward practices. Taylor’s chapter 10 “Mad Scientist” highlights the waning of interest in science and technology in the wake of distrust in its application after seeing the use of atom bomb on human beings in the 19th century.

*Gender and Morality in Anglo –American Culture1650-1800* by Ruth Bloch

Amid the corpus of available critical texts on Hawthorne, it was difficult to select any particular work and say it was the source in writing this thesis. The selection of resources was very exhaustive and time taking exercise. The nature of the present thesis made it mandatory to give equal importance to texts from other disciplines to place Hawthorne’s fiction in the context of thoughts and happenings in the time of its composition as well as the time they had talked about.

Henry James’s critical biography *Hawthorne* published over a century ago is an essential text in American cultural history. It had been written for the English Men of Letters Series and since then achieved canonical status among students of American literature. It is an insightful study of his predecessor. James assessed Hawthorne as a greatest imaginative author America had produced. He gave extended consideration to each of Hawthorne’s novels and a selection of his short stories in this full length critical reading. He defined Hawthorne as a moral realist who had a few perceptible point of contact with the world around but at the same time recognized his historical consciousness in his chapters, “Early Years”, “Early Manhood”, and “Early Writings”. His chapter “Brook Farm and Concord” gives an engaging account of Hawthorne’s stay at Brook Farm and an indispensable connection between the character of Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* and female activist and transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. His chapter 6 “The Three American Novels” is about his larger fictional works, chapter 7 “England and Italy” is about his European stay and the last chapter “Last Years” concludes with his death.

In Edward Mather’s biographical work *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, especially chapter six “Of Puritans, Quakers, and Witches” was instrumental in understanding the role of Puritans in deciding the fate of dissenters: Quakers and witches in the 17th century America. Chapter 15 of the same book “The Expulsion” and Chapter 16 “Decapitation” are political in nature. They narrate the whole episode leading to the expulsion of Hawthorne from the Salem Custom House and Hawthorne’s fight with the administration for his reinstatement as the surveyor of the Salem custom House. Wagenknecht’s book
explores Hawthorne’s relationship with Margaret Fuller. He defines Hawthorne’s attitude towards career oriented females as “negative”.

Frank Preston Stearns’s *The Life and Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne* [1906] gives an exhaustive detail on Hawthorne’s ancestral history, witchcraft trials and his ancestor’s role in that episode. It provides a detailed account of Hawthorne’s Brook Farm venture, his Concord stay and his affinity with transcendentalists and transcendentalism. Stearns draws at length at the similarity between the character of Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* and the real life female activist Margaret Fuller. He records Hawthorne’s bitter political experience at Custom House and political manouevring of Charles Wentworth Upham to oust him from his post of surveyorship.

But the book which was instrumental in projecting a new picture of Hawthorne as a man of his time was James R. Mellow’s *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* [Boston: 1980]. This book succeeds in rescuing Hawthorne’s image from the dungeon of isolation. It reveals him as a man normal in his activities and well connected with his family and the society of his time. Contrary to the commonly held belief of his estranged relation with his mother and sisters, this book reiterates that his relation with his mother was very cordial, affectionate, open and dependable by citing examples from Hawthorne’s epistles to his mother. Refuting the perverse impact of his so called abnormal family on his personality, Mellow portrays his sister Ebe as a well read person who was keenly aware of the political life of her time. He even raises fingers on dubious intention of Hawthorne behind propagating himself as victim of unhealthy family traits. Mellow also focuses on Hawthorne’s skeptical attitude towards revolutionary activities and dissects the probable
model for Judge Pyncheon’s character in *The House of Seven Gables* in real life political figures Daniel Webster and Nathaniel Silsbee.

In order to study Hawthorne’s Novels and Tales in New Historicist perspective, it was essential to understand New Historicism and its application on fictional works. Horald Veeser, ed. *The New Historicism.* [NY: 1989] contains some excellent essays on New Historicism by some outstanding New Historicists, Louis Montrose, Catharine Gallagher, Stephen Greenblatt, Thomas Brook and Frank Lentrichhia. The introduction to the book begins with pronouncement of Stephen Greenblatt, “I began with the desire to speak with the dead” in his essay “Shakespeare Negotiations”. Greenblatt’s essay focuses on the work of art as a ground for manipulations of critic’s ideas as well as many other thoughts undertaken in the construction of the original work. He expounds that the creative pieces are the result of negotiation between a creator and the institutions and practices of a society.

Louis Montrose in “The Poetics and Politics of Culture” asserts that reading and writing of the texts, their process of circulation, analysis and teaching are being reconstructed as historically determined and determining modes of cultural works.

Brook Thomas in “The New Historicism and other Old Fashioned topics” elaborates on the difference between old historical method and this present return to historical analysis. He asserts that New Historicism gives representation to the groups excluded by previous histories. Frank Lentrichhia in “Foucault’s Legacy –A New Historicism” also discusses at length on the difference between the old and new method of historical application in literature. All these essays have discussed in detail the various components of new historicist practice and even do not fail to point out its drawback.

*Essays* by Ralph Waldo Emerson[New Delhi:1965] with an introduction from Shiv Kumar contains essays on History, Self Reliance, Compensation, Spiritual Laws, Love, Friendship, Prudence, Heroism, The Over soul, Circles, Intellect, Art, The Poet, Experience, Character, Manners, Gifts, Malice, Politics, Nominalist and Realist, New England Reformers, Plato: or the Philosophers, Nepoleon; or the man of world. Emerson’s essays Self Reliance, Circles, Compensation, Circles, and New England Reformers were important to understand the ideology behind Transcendentalism which shaped the consciousness of Hawthorne.

To find out resonance between the ideas expressed in Hawthorne’s selected novels and tales and in the other discourses, numerous books were available on social, political, economical, and religious history of ideas in the library; the detail of all cannot be given here. It will need separate book to discuss all of them in detail. This review of Literature presents merely a summary of the whole venture.

The books of chronology helped in understanding the role of Hawthorne’s surroundings in shaping his thoughts and character which had gone into the making of his fiction. Henry Bamford Parkes *The United States of America –A History* presents an exhaustive account of a transitional phase in American political and social history in the 19th century.

James Truslow Adam’s work *The Americans* [NY: 1944] highlights the atrocities in the name of religion in the mid 17th century. He applauds Roger William for his liberal attitude and focuses upon the irony behind Puritan undemocratic practices. Nelson Manfred Blake in *A Short History of American Life* [NY: 1952] gives a comprehensive account of the sweeping changes in the American society with the emergence of bourgeois society and sidetracking of nobility in Jackson’s time. This book celebrates democratic principles and nullifies aristocratic privileges. He also expresses his views on female liberty and condemns those practices which push women to the periphery.


essential material on the witchcraft trial of 1692 and an authentic account of the historical Maule. The Quakers: “Hostile Bonnets and Gowns” from The Colonial Gazette mayflowerfamilies.com, Interactive communication [1988] gave a factual account of the strife between Quakers and the Puritan magistrates.

The present reading will focus on Hawthorne as a shrewd and large-minded writer who had read widely and pondered deeply about the human condition and American identity. He had written about his own society and its antecedents, but it turned out that he also wrote about ours. His works are cultural colloquy. The recognition that literary texts are man-made, historically produced objects, whose value has been created and recreated by men and women out of their particular needs, suggests a need to study the interests, institutional practices, and social arrangements that sustain the canon of classic works. It also opens the way for retrieval of the values and interests embodied in the texts which the literary establishment for a variety of reasons has suppressed.