

Narrative and Narrating: Hawthorne's Romances



Literature

Keywords: narrator; authorial narrative situation; first-person narrative situation; romance; reader.

Saša Simović

Faculty of Philosophy (Department of English Language and Literature)
University of Montenegro

Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne experimented with various techniques of narration, manipulating different aspects of narrative discourse. All of his romances begin with a "Preface" in which he invites the reader to step onto "neutral territory" somewhere between reality and illusion. In three of his romances *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun* we recognise the authorial narrative situation and the narrator who has an external perspective on the events he recounts. It is only in *The Blithedale Romance* that we recognise the first-person narrative situation, the situation that confirms the "reality" of romance. This paper will try to comment on some of the narrative techniques used in the aforementioned romances and to highlight the complex problem of narration in each of them.

Hawthorne's texts are usually considered to be full of allusions and symbols, offering a variety of interpretations due to the author's tendency to leave some things "shadowy" and "unexplained" or "inviting" readers to read between the lines. The author experimented with various techniques of narration, manipulating different aspects of narrative discourse thus making the world of his romances more attractive for different interpretations. All of his romances begin with a "Preface" in which Hawthorne invites the reader to step onto "neutral territory" somewhere between reality and illusion "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other (Hawthorne, 1994)." In three of his romances, namely *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun*, we recognise the narrative situation defined by a third person narrator, a narrator who interferes with the very process of narration, giving comments and suggestions or making digressions. It is only in *The Blithedale Romance* that we recognise the first-person narrative situation, a situation that confirms the "reality" of romance and that is marked by a narrator who experienced the actual event.

Since *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun* are told in the third person by an omniscient narrator who interferes in the process of narration itself with his comments, "talking" directly to the reader, we can identify the "auktorialer Roman" (Štancl, 1987) and an authorial narrator who has an external perspective on the related events. Throughout the process of narration by the authorial narrator the reader becomes aware that the narrator can become the object of interpretation. The reader can understand the narrator as an omniscient one or as one who as chronicler, is partly acquainted with a series of events that took place or is the objective "editor" of a certain document. The last statement is applicable to Hawthorne's masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. *The Scarlet Letter* begins with "The Custom House", an introductory sketch which was initially intended to be published with several other tales and sketches. However, "The Custom House" obviously represented an "attack" on the current political situation, the terms of the attack being those of "Jacksonian political rhetoric" as well as a complaint "that his tenure at the Custom House had sapped his creativity" which at the higher level exhibits "the complex nature of Hawthorne's complicity in American ideology (Kramer, 1992)." That is why throughout the sketch we detect a slight irony and a significant dose of humour especially when depicting a line of clerks that "marched" through the office. At the beginning of the sketch the narrator "apologises" to the reader because he talks much about himself, letting his autobiographical impulse overwhelm him once again. As Kramer put it, this apologia is obviously disingenuous. The unnamed narrator of the romance claims that he accidentally found in a Custom House chamber "a certain affair of fine red cloth much worn and faded (Hawthorne, 1994)." Afterwards, he describes how in this rag of scarlet cloth, with still visible traces of an artistic gold embroidery, was outlined the letter 'A', claiming that: "there was some

deep meaning in it most worthy of interpretation (Hawthorne, 1994).” The roll of dingy paper which was twisted around the scarlet cloth constituted documents made by the surveyor Pue, documents which introduced the narrator to the life story of one Hester Prynne. Moreover, the narrator insists that the facts concerning Mistress Prynne were confirmed by the old surveyor’s documents, available to any interested party, stating in addition that while creating his story, he also deliberately used the power of his imagination.

From the very first paragraph of *The House of the Seven Gables* the narrator introduces the scene where the main plot would unfold. Giving us a description of “a rusty wooden house” with seven gables pointing to different parts of the world, and a large elm tree, the narrator begins his story of the Pyncheon family, a story rooted deeply in the past. The heavy burden of the past incessantly hovers over the romance. The whole storyline takes place in the old mansion and garden of a once proud and well-to-do family. Chapter seventeen, “The Flight of Two Owls”, referring the running away of the Pyncheon siblings into the unknown, is the only exception. The plot of the romance involves members of several generations of Pyncheons and Maules – this is how the narrator succeeds in interweaving almost forgotten people and events with the present. All this served: “to illustrate how much the old material goes to make up the freshest novelty of human life (Hawthorne, 1966).” What also appears to be noteworthy is the fact that the narrator of *The House of the Seven Gables* just mentions the act of greatest importance for the plot of the romance: Colonel Pyncheon’s illegal confiscation of Maule’s land, as well as the act of Hester’s “sin” in *The Scarlet Letter* is merely commented upon, while the consequences of both acts are presented in detail. The narrator of *The House of the Seven Gables* treats the problem of conflict between the Pyncheons and Maules in cycles. The problem of cyclic movement can be transmitted to another perspective, or as Hyatt H. Waggoner (1955) argued, the presentation of family history “in the first chapter is in essence a summary statement of the cycles of mutability” while the cycles of nature are “embodied in the yearly ‘death’ and ‘rebirth’ of the elm.”

In *The Marble Faun*, his last and most mature romance, the narrator narrates the story of three American friends, all three of them being artists eager to be inspired in the rich well of Roman culture and a young Italian noble, much alike the Faun of Praxiteles. During the first eight chapters the reader is introduced to the main protagonists, being provided with important details relating to their lives and thus having the opportunity to create an image of each of them. The narrator’s next step is to depict the nature of relations that exist between the members of the party. After the crime was committed, the murderer being Donatello, we are gradually presented with the consequences of this act. As modern criticism has already pointed out, the problem of contrasts in *The Marble Faun* is highly exploited especially the contrast between youth, Protestantism and America on one side and maturity, Catholicism and the Eternal City on the other. Thus Hawthorne worked on the theme that Henry James elaborated in his novels, “the problem of European culture and American morality, of the contrasting and complementary virtues and defects of the innocent and the civilized [...] and the still-related contrast of knowledge and faith of progress as ways to redemption (Waggoner, 1955).”

Since *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun* belong to the line of authorial type of novels, it is not hard to observe that the narrator of each of them interferes with the process of narration itself, which is one of the most recognisable features of an authorial narrator. “We have as yet hardly spoken of the infant, that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion (Hawthorne, 1994)” or “Let us behold, in poor Hepzibah, the immemorial lady [...] It was overpoweringly ridiculous – we must honestly confess it – the deportment of the maiden lady while setting her shop in order for the public eye (Hawthorne, 1966).” In some cases it is a comment on the problem of narration, a comment which does not refer directly to the represented world, its atmosphere and everything it implies but to the difficulties which may spring out while representing it (Štancl, 1987).

“On Hester Prynne’s story therefore, I bestowed much thought. It was the subject of my meditations for many an hour while pacing to and fro across my room. [...] So little adapted is the atmosphere of a Custom House to *the delicate harvest of fancy and sensibility*, that, had I remained there through ten Presidencies yet to come, I doubt whether the tale of *The Scarlet Letter* would ever have been brought before the public eye. *My imagination was a tarnished mirror. It would not reflect, or only with miserable dimness*, the figures with which I did my best to people it. *The characters of the narrative would not be warmed and rendered malleable by any heat* that I could kindle at my intellectual forge. They would take neither the glow of passion, nor the tenderness of sentiment, but *retained all the rigidity of dead corpses*, and stared me in the face with *a fixed and ghastly grin of contemptuous defiance*. [...] In short, *the almost torpid creatures of my own fancy twitted me with imbecility*, and not without fair occasion (Hawthorne, 1994; italics S. Simović).”

The comment may refer directly to the story itself. In that case we can talk about the interpretation which does not just show the object of interpretation but its interpreter as well. In the following extract from *The House of the Seven Gables* we detect a certain amount of humour and slight irony, distinctive features of Hawthorne’s style:

“It still lacked half an hour of sunrise, when Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon – *we will not say awoke, it being doubtful whether the poor lady had so much as closed her eyes during the brief night of midsummer* – but, at all events, arose from her solitary pillow, and began what it would be mockery to term the adornment of her person. *Far from us be the indecorum of assisting, even in imagination, at a maiden lady’s toilet!* Our story must therefore await Miss Hepzibah at the threshold of her chamber. (Hawthorne, 1966; italics S. Simović).”

The authorial narrator expresses a tendency to make a close relationship with the reader and thus introduce him to the exciting world of his narrative (Štancl, 1987). In *The Marble Faun* the narrator states: “Four individuals, in whose fortunes we should be glad to interest the reader, happened to be standing in one of the saloons of the sculpture gallery in the Capitol at Rome. [...] We need follow the scene no further. [...] It may occur to the reader, that there was really no demand for so much rumor and speculation in regard to an incident (Hawthorne, 1961)”. The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* begins chapter nine entitled “The Leech” claiming the following: “Under the appellation of Roger Chillingworth, the reader will remember, was hidden another name, which its former wearer had resolved never more be spoken (Hawthorne, 1994).” Using such comments the narrator tries to make an indirect connection to the reader in order to bring him closer to the represented world of a typical Hawthornian romance, a world made of subtle fibres of imagination and facts. However, using numerous comments the narrator may burden his text which means that the dominant persona of the narrator may become an obstacle to the reader. That is why we can claim that if Hawthorne had omitted some of his comments it would not have spoiled the beauty of his romances. Sometimes the dominant persona of the narrator exposes the reader to his suggestions much more than appears to be the case. The narrator of *The Marble Faun*, depicting the fair-haired beauty Hilda the Dove, points out:

“We know not whether the result of her Italian studies, so far as it could be seen, will be accepted as a good or desirable one. Certain it is, that since her arrival in the pictorial land, Hilda seemed to have entirely lost the impulse of original design, which brought her thither (Hawthorne, 1961).”

According to Stanzel (Štancl, 1987) the significant feature of the authorial narrative situation implies putting obvious distance between the narrator and the world of the novel. This distance is not the same in different novels and the effects that can be achieved this way can differ to a great extent. Having in mind Hawthorne's aforementioned works, it is evident that there is a distance between the narrator and the represented realm of the romance. However, the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and to a certain extent of *The Marble Faun* is not completely objective. The reader recognises the narrator's "inclination" towards Hester Prynne. Although using irony and humour when speaking of Hepzibah, the narrator is evidently "on her side", he is rather "protective" toward the poor, good-hearted damsel. It seems that in *The Marble Faun* the narrator kept a greater distance between himself and the represented world of the romance.

The Blithedale Romance presents the "Ich-Roman" (Štancl, 1987), the first-person narrative situation with the narrator who appears as a character that belongs to the world of the romance which is actually the subject of his narrative. As Monika Fludernik (2009) argues, "[o]n Stanzel's typological circle, if we take the axis which concerns the identity / non identity of the worlds of the narrator and the protagonist(s), the first-person narrative is so positioned that it has the identity pole as its defining feature." This narrative situation is much more complex than the authorial one because the writer has tied in the experiencing perspective of the first-person character. The world represented within the first-person narrative situation is once again experienced through memory. In *The Blithedale Romance*, the narrator Miles Coverdale as a middle-aged man narrates his story about a community in Blithedale. Everything that we get to know about Blithedale, its life and the life of the other three main protagonists we find out through Coverdale's perspective. The plot of the romance mainly takes place in Blithedale apart from seven chapters (XVII-XXIII) which describe the course of events in the city. Coverdale tends to draw a line between himself and the world that surrounds him, which is, according to Stanzel, another essential characteristic of the first-person narrative situation, unlike the narrators of the aforementioned romances who narrate about characters that are exclusively the object of their observation and comment. While reading *The Blithedale Romance* the reader discovers that it is dominated by Coverdale's experiencing self with events, the course of action, character descriptions, and the complex relations between them in his focus. Nevertheless, his narrating self comes out in the last chapter "Miles Coverdale's confession" when he explains, from an obvious time distance, his present impression of Blithedale and the course of events that have taken place since he went away. Bertil Romberg (1962) argues that the first-person novel "makes a highly epic impression upon the reader" and that "the narrator and his narrative give to the novel as a whole the appearance of epic technique and epic fiction" stating that "the three fundamental types of epic situation [...] are supplied by the fictitious memoir, the diary novel and the epistolary novel". The most usual is the first one in which the narrator "depicts his own life – or someone else's – or parts thereof". Nevertheless, "the pattern is supplied by the authentic autobiography (Romberg, 1962)" and the narrator presents events in retrospect. These features can be identified in Miles Coverdale's story of Blithedale and the Blithedalers.

Furthermore, Miles Coverdale belongs to a line of, what Romberg called "perfect memory" narrators, capable of recounting past events, not using such means like diaries, letters or chronicles but simply insisting on his remembrance. Since the interval between the experiencing and the recounting of events is quite short, we can assume that Hawthorne did not have serious problems in refreshing the memory of his narrator.

Unlike his other romances, Hawthorne introduces the reader directly to the world of *The Blithedale Romance*. From the very first line we get to know Mr. Coverdale's voice. As his last name alludes, Miles often prefers peeping behind a tree or staring from a hotel window in order to survey the scene instead of being an active participant. Therefore he is "a reflector rather than actor, given to irony, which he as frequently directs at himself as at others (Waggoner, 1955)."

“Meanwhile, Zenobia and her companion had retreated from the window. *Then followed an interval, during which I directed my eyes toward the figure in the boudoir.* Most certainly it was Priscilla. [...] Again the two figures in the drawing-room became visible. *They were now a little withdrawn from the window, face to face, and as I could see by Zenobia’s emphatic gestures,* were discussing some subject in which she, at least, felt a passionate concern (Hawthorne, 1996, italics S. Simović).”

It becomes clear that he is incapable of expressing himself adequately which is considered to be one of the greatest imperfections of the narrator. That is why we simply do not believe him when he says at the end of the romance that he was also in love with Priscilla. Waggoner (1955) called him the “Greek chorus” of the story claiming that it is his character that “gives the work the tone of icy coldness”.

This short paper tries to shine additional light on the very inspiring and complex problem of narrativity in Hawthorne’s romances paying special attention to the genre of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s aforementioned books.

References

1. Barry, Peter. 2002. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York.
2. Fludernik, Monika. 2009. *An Introduction to Narratology*. Routledge, Abington.
3. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1994. *The Scarlet Letter*. Cox & Wyman, Berkshire.
4. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1966. *The House of the Seven Gables*. Allyn and Bacon, Inc, Atlanta, Belmont.
5. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1996. *The Blithedale Romance*. In: William E. Cain (Ed.), *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Blithedale Romance*. Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, Boston.
6. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1961. *The Marble Faun: or The Romance of Monte Beni*. Dell Publishing Co. Inc, New York.
7. Kramer, Michael P. 1992. *Imagining Language in America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
8. Lynn, Steven. 1994. *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory*. Harper Collins College Publishers, New York.
9. Romberg, Bertil. 1962. *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First–Person Novel*. Amquist & Wiksell, Stockholm, Goteborg, Uppsala.
10. Štancel, Franc. 1987. *Tipične forme romana*. Književna zajednica Novog Sada, Novi Sad.
11. Wagenknecht, Edward. 1989. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Man, His Tales and Romances*. A Frederick Ungar Book, New York.
12. Waggoner, Hyatt H. 1955. *Hawthorne: A Critical Study*. The Belknap Press, Cambridge.