The Element of Witchcraft in

*The Scarlet Letter*

by Karl P. Wentersdorf

When Hawthorne criticized some of his own tales as ‘blasted allegories,’¹ he evidently had in mind that type of symbolistic narrative in which there is no pretense of realism at the surface level, the characters being created as personifications of abstract ideas and the story told merely for the sake of the non-literal level of meaning. Such, for example, is ‘The Celestial Railroad,’ with its obvious indebtedness to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Hawthorne was well aware that there is a more sophisticated kind of allegory in which the surface story is consistently realistic, in which the events and characters are presented for their own sake even though, from the author’s point of view, the literal story may be less important than the non-literal level or levels of meaning. As Mark Van Doren pointed out:

[Hawthorne] knew that allegory is a good thing only when it contains ‘the history and experience of many souls.’ He knew how real an idea must be made to seem, and how little reality will appear if the story at hand does not ‘possess enough physical substance to stand alone.’ ‘Human nature.’ he remembered, ‘craves a certain materialism, and clings pertinaciously to what is tangible, as if that were of more importance than the spirit accidentally involved in it.’ Neither of two halves can be greater than the other, but it was clear to Hawthorne which half of a story must seem to be the whole. It is the visible half . . . ²

Though Hawthorne was not always successful in achieving the ideal fusion of spirit and physical substance, he came very close to that ideal in *The Scarlet Letter*.

It is true that for some readers the major characters even in this masterpiece are unrealistic and shadowy figures, merely the personification of abstract theological concepts or at best the


² Ibid.
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embodiment of moral types. But for numerous modern critics, these characters, with the possible exception of Pearl, are flesh-and-blood creatures, convincingly individualized, fascinatingly complex, and created for their own sake. Such minor figures as the stern Governor Bellingham and the venerable John Wilson are similarly convincing, though necessarily developed in less detail. And the reality of the characters and their actions is enhanced by the carefully and accurately drawn historical setting. The Scarlet Letter 'is not only allegory but historical romance."

There is, in fact, only one feature of the novel which might be regarded as detracting from the overall effect of historicity and that is the preternatural element, or rather certain aspects of that element. The people's belief in witchcraft, the superstitious interpretation of natural phenomena, the gossip about Chillingworth's necromancy — there is nothing unrealistic about these. Yet Mistress Hibbins, the witch-lady, does not at first sight seem realistic, especially in view of her invitations, both to Hester Prynne and to Dimmesdale, to visit the mysterious Black Man in the forest. It is clear that the witch, the Black Man, the forest, and the midnight ceremonies said to be performed there, lend themselves readily to simple symbolic interpretations. But do they also, like the other symbolic characters and actions, function in the novel at the literal level of meaning?

It is conceivable that the invitations were not spoken at all, that they are essentially an expressionistic device for revealing the inner conflicts and temptations of the two lovers. Or, if the invitations were spoken, Hawthorne might have intended Mistress Hibbins to be regarded as an eccentric person who has guessed the lovers' secret and who, through her conversations with Hester and Dimmesdale, is commenting symbolically on their former passion and encouraging them to resume the affair. In either case, the great black forest with its wild, heathen Nature would be a counterpart to Dante's selva oscura, the mysterious Black Man

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nothing more than a figurative reference to Satan. And as pure allegory, these aspects of the elements of witchcraft, militating against the illusion of historicity created in the other episodes of the novel, would constitute a notable flaw in what is otherwise a perfect example of sophisticated allegory.

There are, of course, other possibilities of interpretation, consonant with a literal reading of the incidents involving Mistress Hibbins. It could be that her conversation is the superficially rational but basically nonsensical babbling of a madwoman. If this assumption were valid, the details of her appearance and suggestions would fit in smoothly with the other historical materials at the literal level; they would add up to a vivid portrait of an unbalanced woman, whose fanatic talk reveals her to be a true child of an age which gave widespread credence to the superstitious belief that Satan regularly appeared on earth and in the guise of a Black Man, and that he was obeyed and worshipped by his devotees, the preternaturally endowed witches. It is also possible, on the other hand, that Hawthorne believed in the attempted practice of witchcraft by human beings as a fact of life in the seventeenth century and later, even though he may have felt no assurance as to the precise extent of the witches’ activities. If so, there would be no reason to doubt the reality of the secret meetings mentioned by Mistress Hibbins as taking place in the forest and presided over by the Black Man.

II

The apparently widespread assumption that the witchcraft ceremonies referred to in The Scarlet Letter are not to be taken literally is influenced, no doubt, by the controversy regarding the preternatural element in Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown,’ an allegorical tale about a New England Everyman who leaves his wife Faith one night in order to attend a witches’ sabbath in a nearby forest. Although it has been argued that Goodman Brown does not go into a forest at all or even dream that he does, the visit being (on this view) merely a metaphor for his indulgence in sin, critics in general have no doubts as to the literal existence of the forest from which he emerges on the following day an unhappy,

6 D. M. McKeithan, ‘Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”’: An Interpretation,’ MLN, LXVII (1952), 96.
despairing man. Very few, on the other hand, are prepared to agree that the townsfolk whose voices he hears or whose forms he recognizes, on his way into the forest and at the climactic orgy there, are creatures of flesh and blood.\(^7\)

When the actuality of the protagonist’s experiences is questioned within the tale — ‘Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild-dream of a witch-meeting?’ — the question seems less calculated to point to a particular interpretation of what happened to Brown than to lead the reader into further speculation. Was Brown perhaps the victim of hallucinations experienced while in a waking state? Or, since the Puritans believed in Satan’s ability to conjure up specters for the purpose of deceiving pious human beings, is the reader expected to think of Brown’s adventure as being real, even though the persons he sees and hears are apparitions produced by Satan with the object of plunging Brown into despair and thus undermining his faith?\(^8\)

To accept this view, it would be necessary to assume that Hawthorne intended to present the whole tale from the standpoint of a seventeenth-century Puritan — an interesting possibility, even though it involves recognition of a minor violation of point of view at the end of the story. The already mentioned authorial comment at the end of the tale, that the adventure might have been a nightmare, is better suited to a nineteenth-century writer, cognizant but critical of the Puritan beliefs, than to his undefined, imaginary seventeenth-century viewpoint character.

In any case, whatever appears to be the most satisfactory interpretation of the preternatural element in a tale written in 1835, it by no means follows that the same interpretation holds good for a work written in 1849–50. In the ‘Custom House’ essay which serves as an introduction to The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne pretends that the novel was the elaboration of a fortuitously discovered ancient tale, recorded in manuscript by an eighteenth-century Custom House official named Jonathan Pue. In the course of the novel, Hawthorne, developing his

\(^7\) According to Paul W. Miller, ‘Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”: Cynicism or Meliorism?’ NCF, XIV (1960), 259–60, the figures seen by Brown are not specters but ‘genuine’ witches — ‘persons dedicated to, or sorely tempted to dedicate themselves to, evil.’

imaginary role as rewrite-man and editor, sometimes raises a question as to whether a particular episode had actually taken place. Nowhere does he hint at the phenomenon of spectral apparitions. It must be admitted that he does not offer any such hint in 'Young Goodman Brown,’ where the confrontations in the forest were probably spectral; but that tale is written from a historical point of view, and there would have been no necessity for a Puritan persona, even as late as the middle of the eighteenth century, to comment on spectral apparitions for the benefit of his readers. The writer of The Scarlet Letter, on the other hand, as is implicit in the novel and quite explicit in the introductory essay, is a nineteenth-century critic interested in the political and religious problems of the past, and fully aware of the nature and significance of the spectral evidence presented at the Salem witchcraft trials. There would thus be no difficulty, on a priori grounds, in accepting the presence of preternatural episodes in a novel derived from an old tale, itself based upon memories going back to the late seventeenth century. For Surveyor Pue, Mistress Hibbins could have been a specter, at least as far as her conversations with Hester and Dimmesdale are concerned. But does it seem likely that Hawthorne would have reproduced episodes of this nature, at considerable length, without giving any indication of his attitude towards them? It is true that these conversations are among the episodes qualified by authorial questions regarding their authenticity, but it is only the actuality of the conversations that is being questioned. In his capacity as ‘editor,’ Hawthorne is not asking whether Hester and the clergyman conversed with a specter or with the mortal Mistress Hibbins: he is wondering whether the conversations took place at all.

Such expressions of doubt must be viewed in the light of the numerous other editorial comments questioning the authenticity of the supposed original story. Whatever the technical significance of these doubts, they offer no support for a spectral interpretation of the role played by Mistress Hibbins.

III

Whereas the personages said to have been encountered by Goodman Brown during his night in the forest may well have been
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spectral apparitions, the ancient lady met by Hester and Dimmesdale on various occasions in the novel is very much a part of the everyday world of the Puritan community. Nothing prevents acceptance of old Mistress Hibbins as a flesh-and-blood character. Her portrait was based by Hawthorne on the life of a public figure in the early history of Massachusetts. Ann Hibbins, widow of the colony’s agent in England, is mentioned in several of the historical works which Hawthorne is known to have drawn on for materials to be used in his novel; in 1656, she was accused of witchcraft, placed on trial, and sent to the gallows. The older view that Hawthorne’s witch is ‘a shadowy creation, a mere symbol’ does scant justice to the meticulous care with which the novelist developed the character, even to the embellishment of her portrait with details from the case of a notorious English witch, Ann Turner. There is certainly no reason to question the more recent view that Mistress Hibbins is one of the ‘memorable figures’ among the minor characters of the novel.

How can this view be reconciled with those elements which might at first sight appear to be adequate grounds for relegating her to the category of the fairy-tale witch? One such element is present in her implied claim, at the final meeting with Hester and Pearl, that she can ride through the air, presumably on the old woman’s broomstick to which Mr Wilson had referred earlier. The claim echoes statements to be found in many accounts of historical witches, and most nineteenth-century readers of the older histories and of Hawthorne’s novel probably assumed that such claims were merely part of the larger tissue of lies with which those in league with the devil sought to instil fear into others. It is now known, however, that witches used drugs to put themselves into a trance which gave them strange sensations, including that of flying. According to one modern investigator, the drugs were in the form of an ointment made from ‘foxbglove (digitalis) to accelerate the pulse,aconite to numb feet and hands, and belladonna, cowbane or hemlock to confuse the senses’; after being smeared with this ointment, the witch ‘could no longer feel her

9 For details, see Ryskamp, pp. 266–67.
12 Ryskamp, p. 266.
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feet upon the ground' and believed 'that she was flying across land and sea.'

There is clear evidence that Hawthorne was aware of the witches' use of drugs. He introduces the theme in 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835), when Goody Cloyse mentions that she had been anointed with the juice of smallage, cinquefoil, and wolfsbane (aconite). Little more than a year later, in July 1836, Hawthorne, as editor of The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge, published a note entitled 'Witch Ointment,' with a reference to Francis Bacon's mention of the subject. According to Bacon in his Sylva Sylvarum (§903), witches 'believe oft-times they do that which they do not,' and 'the great wonders which they tell of, of carrying in the air, transforming themselves into other bodies, etc. are still [always] reported to be wrought, not by incantations or by ceremonies, but by ointments,' the ointments being 'opiate and soporiferous.' Later in the same work (§975), Bacon lists the very herbal ingredients named by Goody Cloyse. The note in The American Magazine, echoing Bacon and probably written by Hawthorne himself, concludes with this comment on the hallucinogenic experiences of the anointed witches: 'Cervantes, in one of his tales, seems to have been of the opinion that the ointment cast them into a trance, during which they merely dreamt of holding intercourse with Satan. If so, witchcraft differs little from a nightmare.' Of course, it is one thing to explain away the witches' belief that they were able to fly (as Bacon does) by ascribing their belief to the use of drugs; it is quite another thing to assume (as Cervantes is said to do) that their meetings and conspiracies were likewise illusory, taking place only in their trances.

As Hawthorne was to discover in the course of his researches, witchcraft involved more than a trance-inducing drug cult. Witches brewed and sold potions — nostrums of various kinds, love philtres, and poisons; there was nothing illusory about such


14 The Works of Francis Bacon, ed. James Spedding et al. (Boston, 1863), V, 121.

16 Hawthorne's use of the note is demonstrated by Fannye N. Cherry, 'The Sources of Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown', AL, V (1934), 342-45.
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activities. Witches cast spells to shape the future, by influencing the weather or the health of living creatures; here they moved in the twilight zone between reality and fantasy. They were also popularly credited with extraordinary powers of prophecy; and once again, one is faced with an aspect of witchcraft that has a distinctly fairy-tale quality about it. It might seem at first sight that this unrealistic quality is present in Hawthorne’s novel when Mistress Hibbins proclaims to Hester that Dimmesdale’s offence will be disclosed to the whole world. But the statement is hardly conclusive as proof of her possession of preternatural skills; it is indicative rather of intuitive insight or commonsense judgment, stemming from her careful observation of the two lovers. She has guessed the truth about Dimmesdale and his relations with Hester.\(^{16}\) Her remark about the forthcoming public disclosure, with its intentionally terrifying implication that the Black Man is in control of events, is based simply on her conviction that the slowly dying minister will not be able to conceal his agonizing secret much longer.

What is one to make, however, of the witch’s invitations to the lovers to visit the forest in order to participate in the nocturnal orgies there? If the conversations are not spectral, what interpretation is to be placed on her references to the shadowy personage who allegedly presides over those ceremonies — the ugly Black Man with the heavy, iron-clasped book in which his servants or followers are said to write their names with their own blood? It is conceivable that the music and dances of which Mistress Hibbins speaks are the figments of an old woman’s warped imagination or wild dreams, functioning at the literal level of the novel as part of her plan to exploit superstition and enhance the aura of mystery with which she desires to surround herself, and at the allegorical level as a symbol for the temptations which lure men and women into the dark forest of sin. But it is also possible that the talk of the Black Man and the witches’ gatherings is to be taken, with some allowance for a proselytizing witch’s exaggeration, as referring literally to meetings of flesh-and-blood creatures.

The latter possibility has not been given as much consideration as it deserves. In those areas of sixteenth- and seventeenth-

\(^{16}\) The view that she ‘knows or at least guesses’ the truth is also advanced by Leland Schubert, *Hawthorne, the Artist* (Chapel Hill, 1944), p. 148.
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century Europe where witchcraft was practiced, the adherents of what was originally a pagan fertility cult were organized in secret groups or covens. The local leader of a coven was known as the Devil or the Black Man (he usually appeared with a blackened face or a black mask); and in some places, to guarantee secrecy, initiation into the cult involved an agreement or covenant reached by signing a document or book. Members of the cult met at intervals for night-time ceremonies which may not have been as extensive or orgiastic as is alleged in the surviving records pertaining to the witch-trials of the period, but which were certainly un-Christian.¹⁷

The existence of such a cult has been questioned and, particularly as far as New England is concerned, strenuously denied.¹⁸ On the other hand, many cultural anthropologists and scholars in related fields have affirmed their belief in the existence of covens and of some form of witches' sabbath, at least in the Old World.¹⁹ Modern historians agree, to cite one clear example, that the contemporary reports of the practice of witchcraft in late

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the initiation, the mark, the covenant, the Devil, and the witches' sabbath, see Pennethorne Hughes, Witchcraft (London, 1952), pp. 75–131.

¹⁸ Notably by George L. Kittredge, Witchcraft in Old and New England (New York, 1929, repr. 1956), esp. p. 275: 'The theory that English witches were keeping alive a pagan ritual, and were meeting in orgiastic mysteries that had descended from pre-Christian times, will not stand the test of the most elementary historical criticism.' Kittredge is equally skeptical as to the existence of a witch-cult in Scotland, though he is significantly non-committal on the subject of witchcraft elsewhere in Europe (pp. 278–79): 'Opinions will always differ as to any basis of fact that may underlie the Continental stories.' Kittredge's views, first published in 1907, were challenged by G. L. Burr, 'New England's Place in Witchcraft,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, n.s. XXI (1911), 185–217; but his skepticism is shared by Geoffrey Parrinder, Witchcraft: Europe and Africa (London, 1958); Eric Maple, The Dark World of Witches (New York, 1962); and Julio Caro Baroja, The World of the Witches, transl. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago, 1965).

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sixteenth-century Scotland have some basis in fact.20 According to one authority, 'the witchcult in Scotland was derived in part from ancient heathen practice in which devotees worshipped an incarnate god that appeared before them and in which the ritual consisted largely of fertility rites. The witches of Lothian confessed that they met in a congregation at North Berwick where the Devil came to them in the likeness of a man with a blackened or masked face or wearing the skin of an animal. They also confessed that there was dancing, singing and drinking at their meetings and that the Devil used them carnally.'21 Another historian agrees that witchcraft 'was not just a question of village gossip and weak-witted old women ill-wishing their neighbours' cows, but of an organized pagan cult, celebrated in midnight orgies by covens of men and women who believed that they had sold their souls to the devil. It penetrated to every class.'22 Since the original accounts of the witches' activities are polemic in character and based only partly on sober fact, partly on hearsay, and partly on legal testimony extracted from witnesses under great psychological pressure if not physical torture, there is no certainty about the precise nature of the cult. As to the reality of the clandestine meetings, however little they may have resembled the lurid accounts in the legal documents and the popular tracts, there can hardly be any doubt.

The picture of American witchcraft which emerges from the records of the trials in Salem and elsewhere certainly does not indicate that the cult was ever in a flourishing condition in the New World. As one writer observes, in discussing the practices to which the Salem witches confessed, 'the abomination of the rites consisted in their mere existence and in their dedication to the devil. Aside from that, they were surprisingly staid revels, not for a moment to be compared to the pagan obscenities which characterized such gatherings in Europe and Old England.'23 Even this

21 Willson, p. 104.
22 McElwee, p. 71.
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staid picture may have been — as far as the historical episode in Salem is concerned — the product of mass delusion, prompted either by folk memories only recently transplanted from the Old World, or by the reading of such popular works on witchcraft as the Daemonologie of no less an authority than King James VI and I. In any event, the vital question is not whether the witches’ sabbath was a reality, however muted, in seventeenth-century New England, but whether Hawthorne believed that some kind of cultic witches’ meetings had been a historical reality and intended that the references to such meetings in The Scarlet Letter were to be interpreted literally.

It is conceivable that a nineteenth-century writer would have attached little credence to old stories about witches’ activities, other than as dubious records of empty superstitions, dangerous delusions, or at most nightmares induced by drugs. Agonizing as he did over the role played by his ancestor Judge John Hathorne at the subsequently discredited Salem trials, the novelist, while admitting the existence of isolated practitioners of the black arts (putting curses on people, concocting potions for nefarious purposes, using drugs), might have felt skeptical on the subject of orgiastic meetings presided over by a local leader known popularly as the Devil or the Black Man. There were, it is true, abundant details on the subject of witchcraft in Cotton Mather’s account of the Salem trials, with its repetitious confessions of those who had been tempted by a Black Man to sign his book with their own blood, and thus to enter into a covenant with the powers of darkness which would entitle them to participate in feasting, dancing, and other delights, in secret ceremonies mocking those of the Christian church.24 Yet abundance of details does not necessarily make for credibility.

There are, however, some historical allusions and details in The Scarlet Letter suggesting that Hawthorne believed that there was more behind the reports about witchcraft than could be explained away as due either to mass hysteria or to the common belief in spectral apparitions. While writing the novel, he read

several contemporary accounts of the Overbury affair, a much-discussed English scandal of the year 1613 involving adultery, witchcraft, and murder. Among those involved in the affair were Dr Simon Forman, a noted necromancer who is described in the documents as a black enchanter and a devil, and Mistress Ann Turner, a notorious witch to whom Lord Chief Justice Coke referred as 'the daughter of the Devil Forman.' Such was Hawthorne's interest in the affair that he borrowed from the English records some authenticating details for The Scarlet Letter: he says that Chillingworth was believed to have been acquainted with 'Doctor Forman, the famous old conjurer, who was implicated in the affair of Overbury,' and that Mistress Hibbins had been an 'especial friend' of Forman's accomplice Ann Turner, the notorious witch who was 'hanged for Sir Thomas Overbury's murder.' (pp. 127, 221)

One of the more interesting pieces of evidence introduced by the prosecution during the course of the trial was a book of Forman's in which those who wished to avail themselves of his services had been obliged to sign their names before he would consent to practice his dark arts on their behalf. Evidence of this type, more concrete and sordidly mundane than the testimony of the disturbed women of Salem, showed Hawthorne that the local Black Man or Devil with his incriminating book was, at least in some places, a historical reality. And if the stories about the Black Man and his book turned out to have an element of truth, however

25 Reid, p. 7, notes that while working on The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne borrowed from the Salem Athenaeum A. J. Kempe's The Loseley Manuscripts (1836), which contains a sketch of the Overbury murder, and The Harleian Miscellany (London, 1808–11), with two more accounts of the affair.

26 Reid, p. 77. M. A. deFord, The Overbury Affair (New York, 1960), pp. 21–22, has an interesting account of Forman, 'the leading practitioner of black magic in London.' He was licensed to practice medicine, but 'primarily he was a necromancer, an astrologer, and a clairvoyant,' and he dabbled in poisons. Like many rogues, he seems to have been irresistible to the fair sex: 'Women made up most of his clientele, and his amours were notorious.' Surrounded by a wizard's paraphernalia, 'he swore his "spiritual daughters" to secrecy and — for a good price — lent dubious aid to the elimination of unwanted husbands and the attraction of longed-for lovers.'

27 Page references to The Scarlet Letter in this essay are to volume I of the Ohio State Univ. Press's Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. William Charvat et al. (Columbus, 1962).

28 Kempe, p. 388; A Complete Collection of State Trials (London, 1816), II, 951. According to deFord, p. 66, Forman's book contained the names of all his 'patients,' mostly ladies, with particulars of the amours in which they sought his help.
much overlaid with fantasy, would it not have been only reasonable for Hawthorne to believe that there was also some foundation in fact for the widespread references to meetings at which the Black Man and his followers met to celebrate their pagan revels and to conspire against their enemies? Mark Van Doren once commented, in discussing some of the earlier writings of Hawthorne and noting their indebtedness to the records of the Salem trials, that 'Witchcraft for him was not fiction, it was fact; he still experienced its mystery and its guilt...'. This comment is equally true of the of the novel published in 1850.

IV

The problem of interpreting the element of witchcraft in The Scarlet Letter is complicated by the already mentioned technique of introducing editorial comments concerning some of the episodes. This method permits the novelist to suggest various meanings or possibilities, usually without any clear indication of what is to be taken as true or false. The technique takes two forms. The first, the device of multiple choice, is found when Hawthorne describes an incident in such a way as to place it partly in the realm of fantasy, and then presents a diversity of reactions to it on the part of characters in the novel. The second, the device of editorializing, is that in which comments on the reality, credibility, or meaning of certain happenings are made not by persons in the story, in a manner consonant with their characters, but by Hawthorne himself, in the pretended process of dressing up Surveyor Pue's tale. The technique is admirably calculated to strengthen the fiction that The Scarlet Letter is based on a fortuitously discovered eighteenth-century manuscript.

Some of the important editorial comments are made during episodes centering on Mistress Hibbins, when Hawthorne notes that these might be parables. But the possibility of parabolic significance does not preclude a literal interpretation of the incidents. As already indicated, the ambiguity regarding the historicity of such episodes is artistically effective because it permits the author to emphasize his fictional role as the judicious editor of a historical document. Furthermore, the ambiguity is

29 Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 70.
inherently realistic, reflecting the difficulty of interpreting records of the past. Above all, it is part of a carefully planned technique for coping with possible skepticism on the part of his readers, regarding the existence of witches.

Old Mistress Hibbins is introduced at the beginning of the novel as ‘the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate’ and characterized, without any authorial qualification, as a witch. Her diabolic superior — the mysterious Black Man who is always in her thoughts but never enters into the action of the novel — is first mentioned by Hester Prynne. In the jail, after Chillingworth has extracted a promise of silence from her, Hester asks her tormenter: ‘Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest around us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?’ (p. 77) The first question is in no way ambiguous: there is no qualification (such as ‘who is said to haunt’) to suggest that Hester herself had not seen the Black Man, or to indicate that she did not expect her question to be taken literally. There is no authorial comment, either.

Mistress Hibbins first appears in the story after the elders have granted Hester’s plea to retain the custody of her child. As Hester is leaving the Governor’s mansion, the witch speaks to her from a chamber-window (pp. 116–117):

‘Hist, hist! . . . Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I wellnigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one.’

‘Make my excuse to him, so please you!’ answered Hester with a triumphant smile. ‘I must tarry at home and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man’s book too, and that with mine own blood!’

It is noteworthy that Hester expresses no surprise at the mention of the Black Man, and that it is she, not the witch, who broaches the subject of signing his book. Taken alone, of course, Hester’s answer would not conclusively indicate that she believed in the Black Man: it might have been nothing more than a skeptic’s way of ending a tiresome conversation with a fanatic. But she has already mentioned the Black’s Man existence to her husband as a fact.
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The account of this meeting begins on a cautionary note — ‘it is averred’ — and culminates in an ambiguous editorial comment: the incident reveals, says Hawthorne, that Pearl had saved her mother from Satan’s snare, but only ‘if we suppose this inter-
view . . . to be authentic, and not a parable.’ Of course, Pearl is the instrument of Hester’s salvation. In spite, then, of the authorial caution, there is no compelling reason to doubt the actuality of the incident, or to insist on a metaphorical interpre-
tation of the conversation. As for Hawthorne’s purpose in begin-
ning the incident on a note of doubt and concluding it with a disclaimer, it is simply to remind the reader of his fictional role as cautious critic, re-telling and commenting on an old tale.

A parallel encounter between Mistress Hibbins and Dimmesdale takes place when the minister returns to town after his talk with Hester in the forest (pp. 220–222). As he encounters some of his parishioners and is tempted to make wicked remarks to them, he wonders whether he is mad or given over to the fiend: ‘“Did I make a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood? And does he now summon me to its fulfilment . . .?”’ At this moment he meets the witch, who notes that he has been to the forest and offers to accompany him there on his next visit: ‘“Without taking overmuch upon myself, my good word will go far towards gaining any strange gentleman a fair reception from yonder potentate you wot of.”’ When the minister denies any interest in the offer, the witch laughs: ‘“You carry it off like an old hand! But at midnight, and in the forest, we shall have other talk to-
gether.”’ Again an authorial comment questions the reality of the meeting: Dimmesdale’s ‘encounter with old Mistress Hibbins, if it were a real incident, did but show his sympathy and fellowship with wicked mortals. . .’ Because he has sinned, the minister is in truth linked with that fellowship. The qualifying comment (‘if it were a real incident’) serves again to recall the editorial fiction.

There is also a passing reference to the witch when Pearl begs her mother for a story about the Black Man (pp. 184–185): ‘“How he haunts this forest, and carries a book with him, — a big, heavy, book, with iron clasps, and how this ugly Black Man offers his book and an iron pen to everybody that meets him here among the trees; and they are to write their names with their own blood. And then he sets his mark on their bosoms! Didst thou ever meet
the Black Man mother?’ When asked who told her these things, Pearl says she overheard an old dame in a chimney-corner: ‘She said that a thousand and a thousand people had met him there, and had written in his book, and have his mark on them. And that ugly-tempered lady, old Mistress Hibbins, was one. And, mother, the old dame said that this scarlet letter was the Black Man’s mark on thee and that it glows like a red flame when thou meetest him at midnight, here in the dark wood. Is it true, mother?’ Hester’s reply — that she had met the Black Man once — is enigmatic; but just as the old dame’s comments on the fantastic letter are certainly not to be taken literally, since the embroidered ‘A’ was well known to be Hester’s own handiwork, so, too, Hester is speaking symbolically when she tells Pearl that the scarlet letter is the Black Man’s mark.

The problematic element here is Hawthorne’s statement that Hester recognizes in Pearl’s story ‘a common superstition of the period.’ Does her skepticism apply to the popular belief in the reality of a Black Man with a book in which his devotees signed their names? Surely not this: doubts as to the existence of such a man (or men) would have been most unusual in the seventeenth century, and her comment in the jail does not indicate that she has any reservations on this score. One could argue that Hawthorne was guilty of an inconsistency in this passage, imputing to Hester a modern view incompatible with the outlook governing her earlier statements. But the difficulty can be resolved in a less desperate fashion by assuming that Hester is responding not to the story as a whole but to the climactic detail that the Black Man sets his mark on the bosoms of his followers. Doubts on this point might well have occurred to any intelligent person; furthermore, the thought about superstition comes right after Pearl has first mentioned the cultic mark, and the emphasis in the whole episode is on this phenomenon.

The most significant of the incidents in which Mistress Hibbins appears occurs while Dimmesdale is preaching the election sermon (pp. 241–242). She approaches Hester in the market place and whispers that the minister is one of those who visit the forest where there is music and dancing (‘we know what that means’). Hester declines to discuss the minister, whereupon the witch observes that ‘When the Black Man sees one of his own servants,
signed and sealed, so shy of owning to the bond as is the Reverend Mr Dimmesdale, he hath a way of ordering matters so that the mark shall be disclosed in open daylight to the eyes of all the world!” The claim that the minister had signed a bond with the Black Man is not consistent with the account of the witch’s meeting with Dimmesdale a short time previously. Her invitation to him to join the revellers indicates that he was not then a member of the cult, and there is no evidence that he joined later. The simplest explanation is that Mistress Hibbins is lying about the bond and making a shrewd guess about the forthcoming disclosure of Dimmesdale’s guilt. The lie is motivated by her annoyance at the lovers’ refusal to associate with the witches and by her desire to increase Hester’s anguish, either out of malice or in the hope that the young woman will in the end turn to the witches for consolation.

This reading leaves unresolved the problem created by Mistress Hibbins’ reference to Dimmesdale’s mark. That the minister has a pain in his breast is clearly evident to the witch. That she should divine the reason for his feelings of guilt is not surprising. And that she might allude to his guilt by referring metaphorically to the Black Man’s mark would be quite in keeping with her preoccupations. The difficulty here is that her allegation, even if it had been intended as a metaphor, turns out to be literally true: the minister does have some kind of stigma on his breast. The evidence for this is not restricted to the conflicting opinions of the onlookers after Dimmesdale’s confession on the scaffold. In the chapter headed ‘The Leech and His Patient,’ Chillingworth discovers something on the sleeping minister’s bosom, beneath his vestment; whatever it is, it is not described, but it sends the physician into a ‘ghastly rapture’ (p. 138).

The real question is not so much whether Mistress Hibbins could have known of the existence of the mark, but how it could have appeared if Dimmesdale had not received it at the hands of the local leader of the cult. A witch would have taken it for granted that the Black Man was powerful enough, even without personal contact, to call forth a mark — the diabolic counterpart of Christian stigmata — on the body of a man whose sin had demonstrated his basic kinship with the cult, but whose shyness prevented him from acknowledging the affinity. As far as the author-editor
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is concerned, Dimmesdale’s stigma might have been self-inflicted in the course of his penitential scourging, or it could have resulted from the physician’s sinister ministrations. More probably it is to be thought of as a natural if unusual psychosomatic phenomenon.\(^{30}\) Long before the term psychosomatic was coined, men knew that spiritual anguish may manifest itself in physical disorder. As Bacon puts it in the work consulted by Hawthorne on the subject of witchcraft, ‘imagination and vehement affection work greatly upon the body of the imaginant’ (\textit{Sylva Sylvarum}, § 902).\(^{31}\) And Chillingworth himself observes (p. 136) that bodily disease may be but a symptom of a spiritual ailment.

Finally, though Hawthorne does not express any doubt that the market-place episode actually happened, he does raise the question of the witch-lady’s sanity. In describing her appearance on the scene, he refers to her ‘eccentricities — or insanity, as we should term it’; and during the conversation about Dimmesdale which follows, Hester is said to be startled and to have the feeling that Mistress Hibbins is ‘of infirm mind.’ The two statements, however, are not mutually confirmatory. To many nineteenth-century readers of the novel, the narrator’s term ‘insanity’ would have seemed most appropriate to characterize the beliefs of anyone who could place credence in the Black Man’s claim to preternatural powers such as the ability to shape the future (‘he hath a way of ordering matters. . .’). But in the seventeenth century, it was the skeptic, foolishly and irreligiously denying the powers of witches, who was regarded as eccentric. Hester, like other normal and sensible persons in her age, takes the existence of the Black Man for granted and is convinced that the activities of his followers are real enough to constitute a serious problem for the community, a physical and moral danger from which she herself is not immune. When, therefore, she is described as feeling that Mistress Hibbins is ‘of infirm mind,’ her reaction is prompted not by any doubts as to the actuality of the revelries in the darkness of the forest but by her astonishment at the old woman’s insinuation that the self-torturing minister has been a willing participant in them.


\(^{31}\) \textit{The Works of Francis Bacon}, V, 120.
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In summary, the doubt which Hawthorne expresses about certain happenings in the novel — including incidents not involving Mistress Hibbins — is partly an ingredient in the apparatus of authenticating touches (a reminder that he is reworking a story from an ancient manuscript), partly a way of drawing attention to the difficulty of getting at the truths of history, and partly a device for countering the anticipated skepticism of his readers on some aspects of his subject.

V

Though *The Scarlet Letter* is a highly complex work to be read first of all on the literal or historical level, the allegorical levels of meaning are by no means second in significance. The more obvious of the non-literal levels is that concerned with traditional Christian morality in the broadest sense. The experiences of the lovers — including their meeting in the forest and the decision to flee together — exemplify the attractiveness of sin, the necessity for repentance, and the possibility of salvation through penance. Their story represents allegorically the faltering progress of Christian pilgrims who have broken any of the divine laws and who find their way back to grace through suffering and humility. At this level, the Black Man symbolizes Satan, and Mistress Hibbins the voice of temptation.

A deeper level of meaning, and one that may have been for Hawthorne of paramount importance, is that in which the allegory constitutes a protest against the traditional Puritan view of the artist as a worthless idler, if not worse, and in particular against the outright condemnation of imaginative fiction as evil. That Hawthorne, quite early in his career, was secretly embarrassed at his choice of a profession is apparent from his characterization of the youthful fiction-writer in *The Story-Teller* (1832). As Matthiessen points out, ‘Hawthorne had every reason to know as well as his young hero that the resolution not to go into business, dangerous anywhere, “was fatal in New England. There is a grossness in the conceptions of my countrymen; they will not be convinced that any good thing will consist with what they call idleness; they can anticipate nothing but evil of a young man who neither studies physic, law, nor gospel, nor opens a store, nor takes
to farming." Though still undeterred, he could not escape the thought that, in deciding to be a writer, he had made an "irrevocable choice" of evil fate.32

The view that Hawthorne felt guilty about being a writer has recently been revived by Ziff: 'To practice the profession of letters . . . was a very distinct break from a respected ethic': and though his inheritance could not stop him, 'it heightened the uneasiness with which he pursued his craft and extended it to the brink of guilt.' According to Ziff, the inner conflict experienced by Hawthorne was brought on by his yearning for art, a yearning that is personified in the passionate female characters he created: 'Art was the outlet for the female values of vitality above law, and beauty above business, and, as such, was infinitely dangerous and infinitely worthwhile. The figure of the dark lady fascinated because in her strong sexuality and her antinomian doctrines, she was like the creative impulses which had led him to writing. . . . The guarded observer and his female companion are metaphors of their creator's mind, characters in the allegory of the Puritan as nineteenth-century romancer.'33

Hawthorne's attitude on the subject of literary creativity finds its most forthright expression in 'The Custom House,' written after The Scarlet Letter had been completed but giving expression to long-held feelings about the position of literary artists in New England. In the essay, Hawthorne frankly admits that his Puritan ancestors would have regarded his literary activities with grave disapproval. The admission is reinforced by that remarkable episode in which he takes up the embroidered scarlet 'A' he has found with Surveyor Pue's manuscript and places it against his own breast. The immediate implication, especially in view of the pain which he claims to have experienced ('a sensation . . . as of burning heat'), is that the public stigma of being an artist is as painful to Hawthorne as the badge of an adulteress is to Hester Prynne. Yet it is a stigma of which he is as bitterly proud as

32 Matthiessen, p. 225. The Story-Teller was a framework project, intended to link the New England tales; Hawthorne abandoned the project, but the part cited by Matthiessen was printed in Mosses from an Old Manse under the title 'Passages from a Relinquished Work.' For details of Hawthorne's attitude on the craft of fiction, see Millicent Bell, Hawthorne's View of the Artist (New York, 1962).
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Hester is of hers. Thus his heroine’s great and forbidden love for Dimmesdale symbolizes Hawthorne’s passionate devotion to his work, in defiance of the disapprobatory attitudes of the society in which he lived; the ostracized heroine’s withdrawal to a cottage on the outskirts of the community parallels the novelist’s own life of seclusion in the small world of the Old Manse; and the child of Hester’s passion is a symbol for the pearl of great price which Hawthorne gave to the world in 1850. In view of these suggestive symbolic values, what significance is to be attached to the element of witchcraft in the allegory of the ostracized or outcast artist?

In the traditional view of the Puritan world, fiction originated with the Devil. Just as English Puritans of the sixteenth century inveighed against romances as tissues of lies, and against the theatre as a place of sinful delight and thus an invention of Satan for the damnation of the godly, so the Puritans of New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries denounced fictional works — except for avowedly didactic writings like those of Bunyan and Richardson — as calculated to stir up the passions and thus corrupt their readers. The chorus of protests and warnings rose at times to alarming heights, with one magazine thundering at the beginning of the nineteenth century that novels are ‘one great engine in the hands of the fiends of darkness.’

And though the Puritans were not successful in preventing the growth of fiction in popularity and artistic quality, they certainly made things uncomfortable for American novelists.

Common sense was ultimately to prevail; but in the years when Hawthorne was maturing as a writer, the tide of criticism was still flowing against fiction. Less extreme members of the establishment contented themselves with regarding the novel and the short story as little more than trash, and the attitude of the moderates is exemplified in the condescending pronouncement of Emerson’s aunt: ‘How insipid is fiction to a mind touched with immortal views.’ Yet not even this modified view was at all common. For many of Hawthorne’s contemporaries, as for his stern ancestors,

to write a romantic novel was to give oneself over to the Devil, as Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale had done; to publish that work was to become a source of temptation, like Mistress Hibbins, in luring others into the dark forest of sin and damnation. And for the making of the artist’s implicit agreement with Satan — to corrupt the godly in return for fame and livelihood — what apter symbol could there be than the signing of the Black Man’s book? To the modern mind, the very idea of Hawthorne as an instrument of ‘the fiends of darkness’ seems absurd; but it is no more absurd than the superficial implication of the episode in the ‘Custom-House’ essay in which Hawthorne places the scarlet ‘A’ on his own breast and experiences a burning sensation: ‘the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word.’ (p. 32) The element of witchcraft in The Scarlet Letter merges subtly with the other elements of literary allegory to constitute an unobtrusive but unmistakable satire on the Puritan aesthetic.