

Alfred Bendixen

"The Liminal Spaces of Hawthorne's Short Story Cycles"

Almost all of the short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne that we now admire and teach and write about were originally intended to be part of short-story cycles, unified and organized collections that deal with either Puritan History or the role of the Story Teller in American culture. My presentation focuses on the multiple dimensions of liminality in this fiction. The story that assumes a larger meaning when restored to its intended place in a thematic cycle clearly illustrates one aspect of liminality, but Hawthorne's stories of initiation in both *Provincial Tales* and *The Story Teller* (the titles of his projected volumes) also focus on the fluidity of identity in specifically democratic spaces. Identity in Hawthorne and much of American fiction is not something fixed that can be found, but something always in flux, something that must be either continually created or lost. His major stories tend to suggest liminality in his treatment of plot, character, and setting. Indeed, the characteristic Hawthorne story is a tale of initiation (successful or failed) within a setting that moves from reality to dream-world (often nightmare), from a landscape that is firmly rooted in historical detail to a realm that is largely symbolic and psychological. My presentation argues that this extensive use of liminality is central to Hawthorne's vision of the possibilities and limitations of American democracy.