

Children Figures of Nathaniel Hawthorne: Flower Names, Education and Expectations*

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), whose family name reminds us of its botanical name as “Crataegus,” a large genus of shrubs and trees in the family Rosacea, had a strong interest in flowers and trees throughout his life. For instance, when he moved to England as the American consul for Liverpool, his journal entry for 8 August 1853 stresses the difference of vegetation between England and his hometown Concord in New England:

There were immensely large gooseberries in the garden; and in this berry, I believe the English have decidedly the advantage over ourselves. The raspberries, too, were large and good. I espied one gigantic hog-weed in the garden; and really my heart warmed to it, being strongly reminded of the principal product of my own garden at Concord. (*English Notebooks* 8)

This passage shows that Hawthorne’s awareness of plants is based on his vast knowledge about horticulture.

Despite his affection for plants and attachment to gardening, not so many critics have examined the relationship between the protagonists and botanical figures in Hawthorne’s works. It is true that “Rappaccine’s Daughter” (1844) has been examined from the perspective of the garden, full of blooming yet poisonous flowers and obnoxious plants,¹ whereas “Roger Malvin’s Burial” (1831) has been analyzed in terms of the symbolism of oak trees.² However, the relationship between child characters and plant figures in Hawthorne’s works has been hardly investigated in previous studies.³ Moreover, although Hawthorne

* I am sincerely grateful to Professor Takayuki Tatsumi for giving many insightful suggestions for this paper. I also would like to express my gratitude towards Professor Hisayo Ogushi for valuable comments.

¹ Kloeckner demonstrates that Hawthorne employs flower and water symbols associated with love.

² Samson, for instance, focuses on this point: the oak tree is the central symbol in “Roger Malvin’s Burial”.

³ Sánchez-Eppler discussed the matter with Hawthorne’s writing of childhood.

started his writing career as an author of juvenile fiction, these books have not attracted satisfactory attention.⁴

The aim of this study is to explicate what the botanical figures about children in Hawthorne's works signify, and how they work in conjunction with the language of flowers, the education of children of nature, and the relationship between children's prosperity and nationalism in America. I will attempt to reveal Hawthorne's hidden agenda in describing plants and children.

Children with Flower Names

One year after he published *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne begot for the third time and wrote *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851). It is a book for children retold classical Greek myths.⁵ Twelve children in this book are named after flowers and plants: Primrose, Periwinkle, Sweet Fern, Dandelion, Blue Eye, Clover, Huckleberry, Cowslip, Squash Blossom, Milkweed, Plantain, and Butter-cup. As for these names, the author explained as follows:

I am afraid to tell you their names, or even to give them any names which other children have ever been called by; because, to my certain knowledge, authors sometimes get themselves into great trouble by accidentally giving the names of real persons to the characters in their books. (6)

The author explained the reason for those flower names. To avoid troubles, he concealed children's real names. Besides, remaining anonymous enables him to develop the narrative space into fantasy. ". . . such titles might better suit a group of fairies than a company of earthly children" (6). The function of botanical names clarifies the protagonists' identities alone. It clearly produces a "fantasy" space in his narrative. Hawthorne was deeply knowledgeable about the effect of names.

Hawthorne himself changed his family name around 1825 (Wineapple 63). His original family name was "Hathorne," but he added "w" after "a," "Hawthorne."⁶ Namely,

⁴ Many Hawthorne's early works were written for *The Token* published by Samuel Griswold Goodrich. The Token was intended as a gift at Christmas and New Year for children and adults.

⁵ According to Wineapple, only six weeks were required for Hawthorne to complete *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boy* (241).

⁶ Berlant indicates this modification shows Hawthorne's modernity and difference between his Puritan ancestors (178-9).

Hawthorne identified himself by modifying the family name to protect his historical identity with “w.” “Hawthorne” signified his dual identity. Paying attention to the letter “w,” it is a multivocal letter. The memory of judge Hathorne, who assisted witch hunt in Salem was engraved in letter “w”: a wicked witch. Thus, Hawthorne lived under the double consciousness: forgetfulness and remembrance of his roots. The modified family name, “Hawthorne” might be his mnemonic system.

In his collection of short stories, *The Snow-Image and Other Twice-Told Tales* (1852), Hawthorne attaches floral names to three children in his works: Peony and Violet in “The Snow-Image,” and Daffadowndilly in the story of the same name “Daffadowndilly.”

Peony and Violet are middle-class children of the Lindsey family living in New England:

The elder child was a little girl, whom, because she was of a tender and modest disposition, and was thought to be very beautiful, her parents, and other people who were familiar with her, used to call Violet. But her brother was known by the style and title of Peony, on account of the ruddiness of his broad and round little phiz, which made everybody think of sunshine and great scarlet flowers. (7)

This “tender and modest” girl is named after a spring flower violet (7), with her real name confidential. Hawthorne keeps the young boy’s name secret, too. According to the nineteenth-century language of flowers dictionary published in America, the figurative image of Violet is associated with modesty, while Peony with hardiness, heaviness and bashful shame (Seaton 188, 196). Readers may have connected the personality and appearance of those protagonists with specific flowers employing the language of flowers.

The language of flowers originated in Turkey flourished in the Victorian age (1820-1880). The eighteenth-century French book, *Le Langage des Fleurs* (1819) written by pseudonym Charlotte de Latour, was imported to America. The culmination of the language of flowers in America was the period 1830-1850 and the first serial publication of the language of flowers was *School of Flora* written by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque a self-educated botanist. From 1827 through 1828, appeared weekly in *The Saturday Evening Post* and the monthly *Casket; or Flowers of Literature, Wit, and Sentiment*. Each of entries with floral emblems contains the botanic name and the emblematic meaning of the plant (Seaton 85). This suggests that the language of flowers was widely known in the middle of the nineteenth century.

In this cultural background, Hawthorne gives those children popular flower names. By concealing their real identity, he ensures that these children’s presence remains ambiguous

and mysterious, but each personality can be defined by the language of flowers. His strategic vagueness regarding these children helps establish his Romance theory; Hawthorne attempts to create a “neutral territory,” a place “between the real world and fairy-land” in his writings (*The Scarlet Letter* 28). His “neutral territory” must require both actual and imaginary objects.

Vigorous Violet suggests to her younger brother Peony a plan for making a snow image for their playmate. They begin to gather snow in the front garden to make an image of a little girl. When Violet kisses the snow girl’s lips and Peony feels a kiss on his cheek from the snow child, the little garden suddenly turns into the Edenic garden in which a girl made by snow comes to life:

Accordingly, the mother heard two smart little smacks, as if both her children were kissing the snow-image on its frozen mouth. But, as this did not seem to make the lips quite red enough, Violet next proposed that the snow child should be invited to kiss Peony’s scarlet cheek. “Come ‘ittle snow-sister, kiss me!” cried Peony. “There! she has kissed you,” added Violet, “and now her lips are very red. And she blushed a little, too!” “Oh, what a cold kiss!” cried Peony. (8)

The children’s kisses breathe life into the snow object. Violet and Peony play the role of Creator in the Edenic. The function of these children with flower names is an example of idealistic existence in the “neutral territory.” Violet and Peony have double persona. They exist in reality while concealing their real names. At the same time, they have a place in the “neutral territory”—working on miracle.

Another protagonist Daffadowndilly in the eponymous tale is also linked to the language of flowers:⁷

Daffydowndilly was so called, because in his nature he resembled a flower, and loved to do only what was beautiful and agreeable and took no delight in labor of any kind. (200)

This boy’s personality also relates to a specific flower, the daffodil, suggesting instability and self-centeredness. In keeping with the image of this flower, he likes to enjoy himself and neglects his duties. After running away from the strict teacher Mr. Toil, Daffydowndilly faces

⁷ Some scholars pointed out this allegory background based on *The Gospel of Luke*: Think about lilies, and how they grow. They don’t work hard, and don’t spin yarn—but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was as beautifully dressed compared to them (12:27).

the social codes and teachings: no one can avoid laboring and studying. He learns his lesson and turns a new page, becoming a modest, good boy. Typically, such moral tales employ the anonymity of the protagonist to internalize social values.

The connotations of flower names used to characterize children enable Hawthorne to create his “neutral territory” effectively. The children serve not only as constituents of Hawthorne’s works but also as protagonists making the stories fantastical. With their dual persona, they easily exist in “neutral territory”. Using flowery names for children protagonists, Hawthorne succeeds in producing his Romance as exactly as what he envisions.

Hawthorne’s Romantic Children

What is the significance of these children in Hawthorne’s Romance? William Wordsworth is a Romantic poet who once featured a girl with the flower metaphor like Hawthorne.⁸ It is Lucy who “grew in sun and shower” for three years, “a violet by a mossy stone half hidden from the eye!” (Bloom 331-32). Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) has a similar nature to that of Lucy. She is “a lovely and immortal flower” (58) and an elf-like odd child. Both girls are related to nature and isolated from society not only physically but also mentally. Lucy seems to be happy to avoid human-beings, maintaining her innocence completely. Finally, she withers away and dies alone. In contrast, Pearl grows up and might have become a mother on another continent. However, these two have common points in their personality.

Lucy’s innate gift is “innocence” as a child of nature. She is not able to mature: if someone were to try to influence Lucy, her innocence would be spoiled all at once. Pearl, despite a child of nature like Lucy, is influenced by other people, such as her mother Hester Prynne and her father Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl is so well educated as to socialize within the Puritan community from which her mother was ousted.

The scarlet letter A, the symbol of Hester’s sin, is the first of the alphabet. Little Pearl must learn the sinful letter “A” on her mother’s chest from her *New England Primer*,⁹ which lists under A “In Adam’s Fall. We Sinned all” to teach “original sin.” Hester has committed one of the deadly sins, adultery. Her illegitimate daughter Pearl is also a symbol of Hester’s sin, at the same time that Pearl herself is a sinless, innocent child.

⁸ Hawthorne has been classified as a Romantic writer. Abel analyses Pearl’s character by comparing her with Lucy as a Child of Nature.

⁹ The New-England Primer was the principal textbook in early colonial America. It was first published between 1687 and 1690.

Pearl is, however, a difficult child to raise. She is whimsical, stubborn and wild. And the major figures of the Puritan community wonder “If the child, on the other hand, were really capable of moral and religious growth, and possessed the elements of ultimate salvation. . .” (64). Hester makes a declaration to the Puritan authorities that “I can teach my little Pearl what I have learned from this!” (71). She goes through hardships to take care of this strange daughter for many years:

Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. (151)

Hester’s efforts are finally rewarded: Pearl turns into a sensible and sympathetic person when she kisses her father Dimmesdale. The sin of Hester is not enough to overshadow Pearl’s bright future. What is more, Pearl has a family across the ocean. She proves she can be a self-reliant and useful member of society.

Both Wordsworth’s Lucy and Hawthorne’s Pearl are children of nature. The destinies of Lucy or Pearl reflect Wordsworth and Hawthorne’s respective views of children. Hawthorne believed that children can grow into adulthood with education and experience. In contrast, Wordsworth believed that education and experience would only spoil a child’s innocence, ruining their whole life.

In case of Daffydowndilly his education and experience are different. He escaped from school not to meet the strict teacher, Mr. Toil. After that, he was annoyed by the endless stalking of Mr. Toil. In the end, to put an end to the nightmarish vision of Mr. Toil, he determines to become a good student. His idleness is not incurable but reformable. Thus all Hawthorne’s children, including Daffydowndilly, have the potential to grow mentally and emotionally with education and experience. This emphasis on education is repeated in Hawthorne’s works; Hawthorne’s children embody the author’s expectations. Hawthorne believed that every child should grow like a plant. In “The Custom House,” the famous introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, employing the metaphor of the potato Hawthorne’s *alter ego* prays his children will thrive:

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (12)

This prayer is answered in the last chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Pearl settles in “unaccustomed earth” (12) and becomes “a citizen of somewhere else” (32). Moreover, she increases the number of offspring in other countries.

When Hawthorne struggled to be a professional writer in his youth, he found a job for children’s books. Teaching American history to children by his writing built up his early career. His motivation to write history for children was not only a personal monetary reward but also pedagogical involvement as an American author and a citizen. Brown points out Hawthorne wrote juvenile history to produce national identity (139).

In addition, his sisters-in-law Elizabeth Peabody was so engaged in early childhood education as to introduce to the United States Fredric Froebel (1782-1852), the father of modern kindergartens system, who also influenced Hawthorne; *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* used Froebel’s retelling of Pandora story’s title (141). Writing children books had a lot of meanings for Hawthorne: lucrative, educational, patriotic tasks to meet his expectations for American children.

Expectations for Young Americans

In the 1840s, America expanded its territory, acquiring Oregon Country, Texas, New Mexico, and California under the Jacksonian Democracy. John OSullivan, the influential editor of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, coined the term “manifest destiny” in 1845 to describe America’s the expansionist cause. Without an ambition to be a politician, Hawthorne called the narrator related himself “Locofoco” who had a reform-minded faction of the Democratic party, in “Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (3). Obviously, Hawthorne supported the Democratic Party and frequently contributed to *The Democratic Review*.¹⁰ After 1837, he wrote twenty-four out of thirty-one tales to this magazine including his remarkable works today: “Rappacini’s Daughter,” “The Celestial Railroad” and other tales before four Romances.

For a rapid social, economic, and demographic change in mid-nineteenth century America made the quest for a reformistic new idea. Particularly, the demographic trend was a matter of great importance. The 1840 census shows over 12 million people, about 73 percent, in America were under thirty years old (Widmer 4). America, the country of younger

¹⁰ With his college friend, Franklin Pierce, a politician in the Democratic Party, Hawthorne had opportunities to serve as a customs officer and as the American consul in Liverpool. F. O. Matthiessen recognizes that Hawthorne was one of five devotees to the “possibilities of democracy” (ix) and “wrote literature for democracy” (xv).

generations, grew more and more prosperous. It means that a large number of young people were waiting for educational opportunities. Besides that, there have been demands of younger political leadership of the rising generation's representative. Hawthorne and OSullivan worked together to meet their educational and political demands for young Americans who would have fully a sense of American citizen responsibility. Both of them devoted to the flowering of democracy and *The Democratic Review* was a fitting vehicle for their purpose. It was not just a once-over reading material, but it educated people to stimulate a political consciousness to develop their nation. Hawthorne made a great contribution to this political magazine through the medium of literature.

Needless to say, Hawthorne's political concern kept going during this period. It must have led to his writing about the ideology of Democracy.¹¹ Under this political consciousness, Hawthorne's child protagonists must grow up wise and become men/women of the ability to aid the development of America.¹² American offspring will spread and thrive in these new lands like an invasive species. For Hawthorne, writing children books was a significant calling for achieving his educational intention to create American nationalism for a bright future of children and the nation. Hawthorne is a visionary writer who foresaw the distant national future and fancied the infinity of America.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the child figure is significant and essential for Hawthorne's writings. The flower name children greatly influenced his writings, enabling him to create not only the "neutral territory" but also literary nationalism. Now his flowers of speech as well as the language of flowers constitute Hawthorne's essential rhetoric for Romance. The presence of educated children is also an important motif: he believed that children were the key to the prosperity of America. This is related to the democratic tendencies of America throughout his life. In his Romance, Hawthorne's masterful use of children suggests a hidden attempt to bury his wish for American children. Hawthorne hoped his children would grow and flourish in his Romantic America, as Young America metamorphosed itself into a nation of maturity.

¹¹ Bercovitch emphasizes Hawthorne's political consciousness buried in *The Scarlet Letter*. For instance, Hester's returning to New England can be read as the Compromise of 1850, the political confrontation about the emancipation of slaves.

¹² Griswold points out that this evidence suggests that "many American children's book must be seen as nationalistic tracts" (15)

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