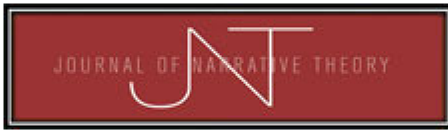

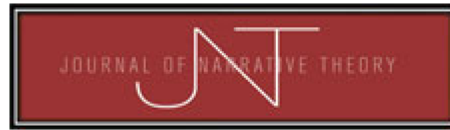

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Narrative Ambivalence in Hawthorne's "Feathertop"

Mark W. Estrin

In *The Nature of Narrative,* Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg draw a distinction between representation and illustration in narrative art. Illustration, they suggest, differs from representation "in that it does not seek to reproduce actuality but to present selected aspects of the actual, essences referable for their meaning not to historical, psychological or sociological truth but to ethical and metaphysical truth. Illustrative characters are concepts in anthropoid shape or fragments of the human psyche masquerading as whole human beings." Citing the tales of Hawthorne as a general example, however, Scholes and Kellogg proceed to identify those narrative works which gain their effects by intentionally straddling

> this precipitous border between the illustrative and the representational. . . . To some critics it seems evident that these stories should be read symbolically or allegorically; to others it seems equally clear that the meaning of Hawthorne's fiction lies in an understanding of the psychology which motivates his characters. . . . It is highly likely that Hawthorne himself never settled consistently into a posture of either representation or illustration, and that the . . . intellectual complexity of his fiction is derived from an intricate process of oscillation between these two ways of creating a simulacrum of the real world.[1]

Nowhere in the Hawthorne canon is this process clearer or more effective than in "Feathertop," a short story in which the central figure is quite literally a "simulacrum of the real world"—a scarecrow. Scholes and Kellogg do not allude to this tale nor, in fact, do most critics of Hawthorne's art. For "Feathertop," which Hawthorne calls a "moralized legend," is a tale that has received only the most fleeting critical attention, despite a rich narrative structure.

The story begins in a tone of voice frequently present in Hawthorne's work and as frequently overlooked by his readers: the narrator is detached, bemused by the figure he describes. Mother Rigby, "one of the most cunning and potent witches in New England," sets herself to the

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task of making a scarecrow for her corn patch, and although she "might, with very little trouble, have made a scarecrow ugly enough to frighten the minister himself," she has on this occasion, Hawthorne's speaker notes, "awakened in an uncommonly pleasant humor," prompting her to produce something "fine, beautiful and splendid, rather than hideous and horrible."[2] At once, the narrator makes his reader conscious that while he is in the act of telling a tale about a witch and the scarecrow which she will make in order to get the story under way, he is also using language which, for the time being at least, points to the joke on which the tale rests. Such detachment will help the reader to become contrastingly more aware of the seriousness which this "moralized legend" will subsequently assume. The making of Feathertop, as the scarecrow will come to be named by his witch-mistress, is described in this consistently bemused tone: "believe it if you will," the narrator seems to say, "but if you don't then at least laugh at what is happening here."

Her scarecrow completed, Mother Rigby dresses him, approves heartily of her handiwork, and decides that her puppet is "'capable of better things'" (p. 1094). The narrator agrees:

> To say the truth, whether it were chance, or skill, or downright witchcraft, there was something wonderfully human in this ridiculous shape, bedizened with its tattered finery; and as for the countenance, it appeared to shrivel its yellow surface into a grin—a funny kind of expression betwixt scorn and merriment, as if it understood itself to be a jest at mankind. (p. 1094)

However, the narrator's relationship to his tale changes subtly in the degree and manner that Goody Rigby's attitude toward her scarecrow changes. For as she begins to observe that her scarecrow is worthy of "better things," capable of being used by her for something considerably darker than a joke, so the narrator of "Feathertop" recognizes—and makes his reader recognize—that the whole tale, like the scarecrow himself, may be more than a "jest at mankind." Discarding her original goal of creating a simple creature to scare crows, Mother Rigby decides to use her powers of witchcraft to make a man of him by thrusting her pipe from her own mouth into that of Feathertop. "'It is,' she tells him, 'the breath of life to ye'" (p. 1095), for so long as he puffs, so long will he "live."

Yet even as the tale assumes a more serious tone, the narrator is conscious, as Hawthorne is so often conscious in his work, that this is the stuff of romance. Lest his threshold of suspended disbelief be low, at the precise moment that the scarecrow is transformed into human shape, the reader is reminded that

> Mother Rigby was a witch of singular power and dexterity; and, keeping this fact duly before our minds, we shall see nothing beyond credibility in the remarkable incidents of our story. Indeed, the great

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> difficulty will be at once got over, if we can only bring ourselves to believe that, as soon as the old dame bade him puff, there came a whiff of smoke from the scarecrow's mouth. It was the very feeblest of whiffs, to be sure; but it was followed by another and another, each more decided than the preceding one. (p. 1094)

The comic detachment and the awareness of the reader's need to "believe" exist simultaneously, are made by the speaker not to pull in opposite directions, but to reinforce each other: Mother Rigby is a witch of superlative powers; believe this much, and the rest will follow. Accordingly, one is directed in this endeavor every step of the way by the narrator himself, so that the reader believes in the event described and, with the teller, is bemused by it at the same time. One is thereby placed in the proper position to be absorbed by what follows as the tale assumes a new seriousness, as the legend becomes "moralized."

Still, the narrator seems dissatisfied. As Feathertop puffs the pipe and gains human likeness, the narrator hints that perhaps the whole transformation is illusory, that the figure has "assumed a show of life, such as we impart to ill-defined shapes among the clouds, and half deceive ourselves with the pastime of our own fancy" (p. 1095). Here then is another proposal for the reader, an alternative to ways into belief that the speaker has already suggested:

> If we must needs pry closely into the matter, it may be doubted whether there was any real change, after all, in the sordid, wornout, worthless, and ill-jointed substance of the scarecrow; but merely a spectral illusion, and a cunning effect of light and shade so colored and contrived as to delude the eyes of most men. The miracles of witchcraft seem always to have had a very shallow subtlety; and, at last, if the above explanation do not hit the truth of the process, I can suggest no better. (p. 1095)

It is common to find in Hawthorne's work such skepticism about the supernatural even while elements of the supernatural are at the same time being suggested as possibilities within the plot of the tale. Indeed the tone of works such as *The House of the Seven Gables* often depends upon the uncertainty. And just as Jaffrey Pyncheon's death for the reader who refuses to believe in the efficacy of curses must be the result of natural causes, so for the reader of "Feathertop" this may be a tale not about a scarecrow who is changed into a man, but about the gullibility of those who think he is one. Take the explanation that suits you, the narrator says to us, for "I can suggest no better," while what he means, of course, is that he *will not tell us* which is the "better."

Mother Rigby commands her creation to step forward, but before permitting him to do so, the narrator comments yet again about the problem of verisimilitude: "Upon my word, if the legend were not one which I heard on my grandmother's knee, and which had established its place

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among things credible before my childish judgment could analyze its probability, I question whether I should have the face to tell it now'' (p. 1095). Feathertop comes forward—"a kind of hitch and jerk, however, rather than a step'' (p. 1095)—and almost loses his balance. "What could the witch expect?'' the narrator asks. "It was nothing, after all, but a scarecrow stuck upon two sticks'' (p. 1095). But *is* it? The narrator never permits us to be sure; he will have us "believe,'' but he will not have us believe—deliberately. And then, once again, he turns the story into still another variation: the entire idea may be a metaphor for an author's—this author's—creation of fiction:

> There it [the scarecrow] stood—poor devil of a contrivance that it was!—with only the thinnest vesture of human similitude about it, through which was evident the stiff, rickety, incongruous, faded, tattered, good-for-nothing patchwork of its substance, ready to sink in a heap upon the floor, as conscious of its own unworthiness to be erect. Shall I confess the truth? At its present point of vivification, the scarecrow reminds me of some of the lukewarm and abortive characters, composed of heterogeneous materials used for the thousandth time, and never worth using, with which romance writers (and myself, no doubt, among the rest) have so overpeopled the world of fiction. (p. 1096)

The reader of Hawthorne is not surprised by such a turn, for the creation by the artist of the work of art is a subject that frequently occupies him: "The Birthmark,'' "The Artist of the Beautiful,'' "Rappaccini's Daughter,'' *The Marble Faun,* for example, are all in some way about this subject; moreover, the many prefaces and passages in Hawthorne's novels that discuss the questions of verisimilitude in fiction and the nature of literary form are by now central to American literary theory.

Of the passage quoted above, in which Hawthorne seems to comment upon his own fiction, Mark Van Doren writes: "When Hawthorne wrote that . . . the year was 1848.[3] It was the year of his decision to be done with tales forever. He was reviewing his own past; and as usual, he was being a little hard on it.''[4] But how seriously should we take Hawthorne here? In his assessment of *Mosses From an Old Manse,* the collection which included "Feathertop,'' Melville—without mentioning this tale specifically—suggests that "like many other geniuses, this Man of Mosses takes great delight in hoodwinking the world—at least with respect to himself. Personally, I doubt not that he rather prefers to be generally esteemed but a so-so sort of author; being willing to reserve the thorough and acute appreciation of what he is to that party most qualified to judge—that is, to himself.''[5] Melville is speaking particularly of Hawthorne's occasionally bland titles which belie (deliberately, he believes) the "blackness'' that delights him so much: "'Who in the name of thunder' (as the country-people say in this neighborhood . . . would anticipate any marvel in a

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piece entitled "Young Goodman Brown" [or "Feathertop"]? You would of course suppose that it was a simple little tale, intended as a supplement to 'Goody Two Shoes.'"[6]

Ironically, it is the admirer of Hawthorne's concern with evil who reminds us that Van Doren probably takes Hawthorne too seriously; the narrator is using a persona, "apologizing" to his reader in an established literary convention, little expecting us to accept the self-assessment. Thus, even this shifting of narrative gears, this sudden interjection into "Feathertop" of what first seems to be a confession of authorial doubt, becomes in fact consistent with the earlier, ironic detachment of the narrative voice.

After endowing him with "denser substance" (p. 1096), including the power of speech, the witch sends the scarecrow-man into local society, suggesting that he introduce himself to certain local magistrates, members of the council and church elders. She hints that she has some hold on these people, particularly on Justice Gookin, who has a lovely daughter that Feathertop ought to meet. Once again, the reader of Hawthorne finds a familiar subject: the secret ties of the most respectable people to the sources of evil.

Feathertop must have his pipe for his life "would terminate simultaneously with the reduction of tobacco to ashes" (p. 1099). To dramatize the fact, Hawthorne's narrator tells us that here Mother Rigby had to refill Feathertop's pipe, and that as she did so, "it was sorrowful to behold how the fine gentleman began to fade back into a scarecrow" (p. 1099). As readers, then, we are happily manipulated once more by the narrator, who wants us to recognize that subsequent events of the tale will rely for much of their interest on the reader's expectation that inevitably this temporary man will fall back to a scarecrow before the eyes of strangers, probably before the eyes of the girl who has just been mentioned by Mother Rigby. The witch, we have been told earlier, is dependent for the magical coals that go into this life-giving pipe upon an invisible messenger who responds to the name of Dickon.[7] "'Another coal for this pipe,'" she cries and once these words are uttered the "intensely red speck of fire was glowing within the pipe bowl" (p. 1099). Dickon in this tale is an agent of the devil but the narrator of "Feathertop" again refuses to commit himself irrevocably to the supernatural. The scarecrow knows that when his pipe begins to go out, he too must call: "Dickon, another coal for my pipe!" He is confident as he departs, and tells Mother Rigby that he will thrive, "if an honest man and a gentleman may," which delights the witch immeasurably for, she tells her creation, "thou playest thy part to perfection" (p. 1099). As he walks down the road from her cottage toward town, in a delightful parody of mother-love, the narrator tells us that Mother Rigby "watched him until [he was] out of sight, and threw a witch benediction after her darling" (p. 1100).

As Feathertop strolls the main street of the town, he resembles, in the

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eyes of the local populace, a man of nobility: well-tailored, his garments richly embroidered, a gold-headed cane (transformed by Mother Rigby from a plain oaken stick) in his hand, and, glistening on his breast, a star, surely betokening his aristocratic heritage. Only two dissenting voices are heard amidst the general awe of the stranger: a dog howls and a child babbles some "unintelligible nonsense about a pumpkin" (p. 1101). Here, Hawthorne's "moral" is heavy-handed; the child and the animal see the truth; the adults are easily deceived, taken in by the finery and grand manners of Feathertop, unable to separate illusion from reality. Mother Rigby's joke is on them, and on the scarecrow-man, too, for he has become infatuated with himself, unable to see himself for what he is, thereby representing for Hawthorne's reader that popular literary target—the man who lacks self-awareness and who becomes ridiculous as a result. But so far, Feathertop is ridiculous only to the reader; it is only a matter of time, the reader already knows, before he will become equally so to those who consider him noble. As Feathertop ascends the steps of Justice Gookin's home, the inquisitive crowd that has followed him notices that he shakes out his pipe and seems to speak in a sharp voice. "'How dim and faded his lordship looks all of a sudden! Bless my wits, what is the matter with me?'" (p. 1102). The member of the crowd who utters this question assumes something is wrong, not with Feathertop, but with himself, with his own eyes. But in a twinkling the stranger is as he first appeared and the star on his breast, another notes, is again ablaze and should "'dazzle pretty Polly Gookin'" (p. 1102), who is peering out the window.

The narrator resumes his commentary, still directly addressing his reader, explaining every step of his method: "Our legend here loses somewhat of its continuity, and passing over the preliminary explanation between Feathertop and the merchant, goes in quest of the pretty Polly Gookin" (p. 1102). The young lady has dashed from the window to her parlor looking-glass, where the narrator introduces her to the reader as she preens before it. This is a silly, pretentious girl, he directs his reader to understand, and the mirror shows her for what she is, but without making the viewer herself conscious of the truth. The illusion-reality theme is again made apparent, as the narrator draws a direct parallel between Feathertop and Polly, who still have not met: "In short, it was the fault of pretty Polly's ability rather than her will if she failed to be as complete an artifice as the illustrious Feathertop himself; and, when she thus tampered with her own simplicity, the witch's phantom might well hope to win her" (p. 1102).

The nervous Justice introduces the guest as Lord Feathertop, "'who hath brought me a token of remembrance from an ancient friend of mine'" (p. 1103). Once again the narrator hints, but does not explain at all fully, that Mother Rigby is blackmailing Gookin into acquiescence here, but the reader feels no sympathy for the Justice; the narrator prevents it

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by referring, for example, to the man's feigned "smile of courtesy," which "had deformed his face with a sort of galvanic grin," and which, behind Feathertop's back, was "exchanged for a scowl," a shake of the fist and a stamp of his "gouty foot" (p. 1103). Indeed, the Justice perceives that the painted figures in the bowl of Feathertop's pipe are in motion and becomes convinced that they are a "party of little demons" (p. 1103). In short, this old man who is himself somehow involved in his own past with Mother Rigby, receives a message from the witch that has been conveyed to him by Feathertop, but which is left unstated for the reader. He thus expects to see something diabolical in Feathertop, and does, just as the other townspeople, including his own daughter, expect to see, in a man of such finery, an aristocrat, and do. Does his star really show actual flames? Probably not. And of course, Hawthorne's point here is that it makes no difference. The beholder sees precisely what he wants to see. Still, for all his consciousness of the presence of evil, Gookin is too frightened to eject Feathertop from his home: "This respectable old gentlemen, we fear, at an earlier period of life, had given some pledge or other to the evil principle, and perhaps was now to redeem it by the sacrifice of his daughter" (p. 1103). What pledge? Under what circumstances? Again, we are not told, and in this tale it does not matter.

Convinced of the "supernatural peril" (p. 1104) threatening his daughter Polly but too fearful to act against it, the Justice conceals himself behind a door and reflects to himself that in Feathertop "a well-digested conventionalism had incorporated itself thoroughly with his substance and transformed him into a work of art" (p. 1104). The point of view of Gookin here coincides with that of the narrator and the reader is again made conscious of the analogy, introduced earlier in the passage cited by Van Doren, between the scarecrow and the work of art.

But Polly is easily captivated; she would have been so charmed by any man of distinguished mien who courted her, for she is in love with the idea of love. "No matter what Feathertop said, his words found depth and reverberation in her ear; no matter what he did, his action was heroic to her eye. . . . O pretty Polly Gookin, why should these imps [on the circumference of Feathertop's pipe bowl] rejoice so madly that a silly maiden's heart was about to be given to a shadow! Is it so unusual a misfortune, so rare a triumph?" (p. 1104). No, of course not. The inability of lunatics, lovers and men in the street to perceive reality is commonplace, and the one man who knows the truth, the girl's father, is too craven to be prompted by that knowledge into action.

But Hawthorne again reverses this multi-faceted plot, partly, one suspects, to bring it to its *denouement,* and partly to offer its central message. For now, just as the pretty girl is nearly won, the scarecrow-man is seen by Polly as he appears in a full-length mirror, before which they stand in the Gookin parlor. "It was one of the truest plates in the world and incapable of flattery" (p. 1105), and shows Feathertop as his "real"

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self of threads and patches. Polly faints, but she is not Hawthorne's concern. It is again Feathertop, still puffed up with his own illusory sense of himself, on whom the story focuses. As he beholds his image in the mirror of truth—a *deus ex machina* out of the world of romance—he becomes, in the very act of seeing his unreality, more "human" than he has ever been:

> The wretched simulacrum! We almost pity him. He threw up his arms with an expression of despair that went further than any of his previous manifestations toward vindicating his claims to be reckoned human; for, perchance the only time since this so often empty and deceptive life of mortals began its course, an illusion had seen and fully recognized itself. (p. 1105)

And here surely, in this tale of several "morals," is the central narrative message: in a universe of fakes who neither wish to know themselves nor to allow others to know them as they really are, an artificial contrivance, a creature of the supernatural, becomes more human than they.

The tormented Feathertop returns hurriedly to Mother Rigby; he looks as he had when he last left her, but "in some indescribable way (as in the case with all that has deluded us when once found out), the poor reality was felt beneath the cunning artifice" (p. 1105). Declaring that he no longer wishes to exist, the scarecrow-man throws the pipe of life to the ground and becomes once again "a medley of straw and tattered garments, with some sticks protruding from the heap, and a shrivelled pumpkin in the midst" (p. 1105). Mother Rigby stands with a fresh pipe of tobacco, unsure of whether or not to put it into his mouth as a restorative. Once again the narrator presents the moral of his legend, through, strangely enough, the mouth of Feathertop's witch-creator who also has learned something from this encounter:

> 'My poor, dear, pretty Feathertop! There are thousands upon thousands of coxcombs and charlatans in the world, made up of just such a jumble of wornout, forgotten, and good-for-nothing trash as he was! Yet they live in fair repute, and never see themselves for what they are. . . . I could easily give him another chance. . . . But no; his feelings are too tender, his sensibilities too deep. He seems to have too much heart to bustle for his own advantage in such an empty and heartless world. Well! well! I'll make a scarecrow of him after all. 'Tis an innocent and useful vocation, and will suit my darling well; and, if each of his human brethren had as fit a one, 't would be the better for mankind.' (p. 1106)

And Mother Rigby, another of those creatures who need their own artifices to survive, "put the stem between her lips. 'Dickon!' cried she in her high, sharp tone, 'another coal for my pipe!'" (p. 1106).

"Feathertop" is a tale that often appears to be heading in several direc-

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tions all at once, or that takes one direction and suddenly veers toward another. But it is a tale rich in narrative accomplishment. What begins as an ironic, detached joke about a witch who creates a man becomes, in the last analysis, a story that takes itself seriously, and that expects its reader to do so too. The narrator's comments in the final pages of the tale do not occur in that bemused tone of voice that so enlivens the first two-thirds of the story. Rather, when he assesses what he has described here, he does so to remind us of the relationship between story and universe, between Feathertop and all men. That same Feathertop who has been the object of the narrator's bemusement is now "almost pitied" and, finally, fully pitied as he confronts his moment of awareness.

Hawthorne is writing a tale about illusion and reality, but he is also writing about the creation of a work of art. His feigned distance from his own material, his delight in telling us not to take the "romance" seriously if we wish not to, may lead us to be caught off guard when Mother Rigby inveighs against "an empty and heartless world"—of which Feathertop has himself been a partial symbol. But the oscillation between levels of reality, of which Scholes and Kellogg speak, is finally what gives "Feathertop" its force. Although certain facts of plot are intentionally withheld from the reader, thereby maintaining that typical Hawthorne balance between what is and what may not be "real," the *process* of narration—the persistent reminders to the reader by the narrator of how he is proceeding to tell his story—is described in as precise and interesting a fashion as Hawthorne ever provided. In no small measure, the reader's participation in that process contributes to the masterful but oddly neglected effect of "Feathertop."

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NOTES

1. *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 89–90.

2. "Feathertop," in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 1092. Subsequent references are cited in my text.

3. Although "Feathertop" is generally believed to have been Hawthorne's last tale, it was written in 1848 but was not published until 1852, when it appeared for the first time in *International Maga-*

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zine. Hawthorne made minor revisions and included it in the revised edition of *Mosses from an Old Manse*, published in 1854.

4. Mark Van Doren, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: Viking, 1949), pp. 86–87.

5. "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *Herman Melville*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York: Dell, 1962), pp. 51–52.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

7. Dickon—spelled Diccon—is the name given to the mischief-maker of Nicholas Udall's play, *Ralph Roister Doister* (c. 1553). As the one who initiates the comic activity of the play, he is a descendant of the witty slave of Roman comedy. As he appears in the Udall play, however, he is a distinctly English type—the "Bedlam" who is destined to wander as a beggar and who appears in a more serious vein as the form of Edgar's disguise in *King Lear*. The connection between Diccon and Hawthorne's Dickon is basically a comic one.

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