Mrs. Bullfrog Short Guide

Mrs. Bullfrog by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Contents

Mrs. Bullfrog Short Guide....1
Contents....2
Characters....3
Social Concerns....4
Techniques....10
Themes....11
Key Questions....12
Literary Precedents....13
Related Titles....15
Copyright Information....20

Characters

Hawthorne's characters here are weirdly fashioned, perhaps more so than the characters in any other story of his. Why for example did he make Mr. Bullfrog an effeminate, prissy little man who actively sought and found a bride so ravaged by age and experience that without her artificial replacement parts she would look like a witch, a hobgoblin, a gorgon? And why, after Mr. Bullfrog proved man enough to seek and bring back a wife, was he still so residually feminine that he could say the following, after toying with her curls: "Even your fair hand could not manage a curl more delicately than mine. I propose myself the pleasure of doing up your hair in papers every evening at the same time with my own."

As for Mrs. Bullfrog's supposedly being so suitable a wife, considering her money, her outward good looks (when all her parts—wig, teeth, etc.—were put in place), and her willingness to be a helpmate to her husband, the matter requires another look from the outside. However satisfied and gratified Mr. Bullfrog in his telling of what befell him seemed to be, because his "match was fundamentally a good one," there is no overlooking the fact that his bride appeared as a kind of hideous monster after their accident in the coach. It is at this point in the narrative that Mr. Bullfrog expressed a particularly sensitive response to the sight, and Hawthorne might have tipped his hand as to his deeper motive in writing the story.

"In my terror and turmoil of mind I could imagine nothing less than that the Old Nick, at the moment of our overturn, had annihilated my wife and jumped into her petticoats." Since he "could nowhere perceive [her] alive, nor . . . detect any traces of that beloved woman's dead body," that "idea seemed the most probable." In view of Hawthorne's predilection for bringing in the devil to keep his readers reminded of Original Sin, the Unpardonble Sin, or, simply, sin as a high concept in this corrupt materialistic world, this reference could almost have been anticipated by the reader.

But it opens up a new window on the Bullfrog family saga. Considering Hawthorne's deeply ingrained authorial habit of merely suggesting the working of the devil ("Some said" or "It was said," etc.), he just may have intended to hint or imply that the frightful Mrs. Bullfrog (i.e., when aroused to anger) was somehow in league with the devil after all. This of course (and admittedly it is a speculation but not an implausible one, given Hawthorne's psychology) would ironically refute the very thesis of the Bullfrog story! Ascertain that the match isfundamentally a good one, and take for granted the vanishing of all minor objections, if they are let alone? And what if the match is made, all unwittingly, with one of the Old Nick's minions?

Social Concerns

One of Hawthorne's unfortunately neglected fictions, and arguably the liveliest in his sizable collection of "marriage tales," "Mrs. Bullfrog" (1837) is refreshingly different from the bulk of his moralizing, life-rejecting stories. "Mrs. Bullfrog" not only runs counter to what the common reader would expect to find in Hawthorne, for example a keen awareness of Original Sin, it reflects an amoral viewpoint, a guiltfree, self-expedient or survivalist outlook somewhat like what is reflected in certain Edgar Allan Poe stories. However, while "Mrs. Bullfrog" is one of the small group of clearly atypical Hawthorne stories, it does show some similarity to his normative shorter fictions. For example, it is keen on giving controversial advice—to a specialized audience. But beyond the important issue of how "Mrs. Bullfrog" fits into the canon of Hawthorne's short stories, the tale has an element of whimsy suggesting mock seriousness in its comical premise and setting, the very thing to evoke reader curiosity and sustain reader interest. The reader is hereby cautioned, however. Despite that suggestion of mock seriousness, the story actually makes a very serious point—which is considerably obscured by symbolism and literary style. Thus even a seasoned scholar, author, and Hawthorne expert may misconstrue the story. Mark Van Doren, in his critical biography, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1949), remarks that any of a number of Hawthorne's "less forced exertions" (i.e., modest pieces such as "Night Sketches," "The Toll-Gatherer's Day," or "Footprints on the Sea-shore") "wears better than . . . 'Mrs. Bullfrog,' a narrative indeed but the only vulgar one its author wrote." Present day readers, however, would probably redirect Van Doren's shabby "tribute" to a more deserving story, "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" (1834), which is more than vulgar— it is racist and tawdry.

The social concerns are many, but first it is necessary to mention certain preliminary matters including the fact that Hawthorne wrote the story when he was thirty-one. It was published in 1836 in the periodical Token and then in the Atlantic Souvenir, dated 1937, according to Lea Bertani Vozar Newman's compendium, A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1979). Hawthorne had lost his father at the age of three, and his family, left without funds, was obliged to depend on his mother's wealthy relatives in Maine. In his early years, Hawthorne became accustomed to a life of constraints and compensatory flights of fancy, to replace his limited horizons in Salem, Massachusetts, and rural Maine. The women he was closest to, his reclusive mother and two sisters in Salem, were frail, lacking in energy and spirit—a not unfamiliar combination in New England women of their social class at this time. Hawthorne, for whatever reason, was occupied throughout much of his creative life with the subject of woman, woman in a variety of settings, including woman as pining maiden, as bride, as wife, as man's object of worship, as problem for man to deal with, and as concept in her own right. James R. Mellow in his biography Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times (1980) observes, "It is women of all ages who exercise a fascination for Hawthorne. He is attracted to women's essential otherness." The mystery of woman, as "Mrs. Bullfrog" will show, was a potent source of inspiration for Hawthorne. There was another very powerful source of inspiration, closely related to the subject of women— marriage.

Hawthorne's many fictional variations on the theme of the marital state range from the fanciful to the grotesque and the psychopathic.

Marriage of course involves also the male principle. Deeply reflective, Hawthorne may have written his own character into some of his "marriage tales," a fascinating possibility for serious readers of this author to speculate upon. Edwin H. Miller, in his biography Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1991), remarks, "It is no mistake that in the self-portraiture of his fiction the males, most of whom are descendants of Narcissus, establish no enduring bonds." Mellow, in his biography cited above, describes Hawthorne and Sophia Peabody (married in 1842, when Hawthorne was thirty-eight) in their love for each other as "the perfect matching of two solitudes."

The social concerns in "Mrs. Bullfrog" deal largely with self-centeredness as opposed to social awareness, ethics, enlightened self-interest, honesty versus duplicity in domestic relations and business matters, and a realistic, practical approach in dealing with life's problems. Since these matters are so closely intertwined in the story, just as they are in real life, the social concerns here will not be categorized on the basis of the above topics, but rather will be discussed more loosely in connection with certain important elements of the storyline.

An outline of the plot is necessary for a proper understanding of what Hawthorne attempted to convey in this marriage tale, which, like each of his other marriage tales, is peculiar in its own special way. The narrator, Mr. Bullfrog, an "accomplished graduate of a dry goods store," had become so familiar with the close details of women's needs and tastes in clothing, that he "grew up a very ladylike sort of a gentleman."

Something happened to him as a result of this. His "sense of female imperfection" became so acute, and he came to require "such varied excellence" in a female love object—"above all, a virgin heart"—that he would quite likely never find a woman to marry, or he would be forced to marry his own looking-glass image.

However, before he could turn into "a most miserable old bachelor," he experienced the best possible luck in his quest for a mate. Journeying into another state, he encountered, and was so taken with, a certain lady he met there, that within a fortnight he was able to court her and make her his wife. Now Mr. Bullfrog, demanding as he was of female perfection in a bride, happened to make allowances in this instance, giving her "credit for certain perfections" yet unrevealed, and overlooking "a few trifling defects" that came to light during the honeymoon journey back to his home.

It is also in this part of the story that Hawthorne's curious folklore pattern, based on an initial symbolic element, becomes clearer. Mr. Bullfrog's feminine nature and his own name were so at odds with each other that he just might be taken for a kind of transformed Frog Prince (cf. John M. Solensten's "Hawthorne's Ribald Classic: 'Mrs. Bullfrog' and the Folktale," Journal of Popular Culture, 7 {1973}, 582—88). However, as he and his Mrs. were being conveyed homeward, the coachman in a careless moment lost control, and the coach overturned. For a moment, Mr. Bullfrog forgot about his wife, who was not to be seen. Then, as if to replace the attractive, delectable Mrs. Bullfrog

there suddenly appeared a furious elderly harridan, a gruesome monstrosity really, who had lost her hair and teeth, and was beating the coachman for causing the mishap. A number of horrific terms are used in the story to refer to the creature, among them, witch, gorgon, hobgoblin, and Old Nick.

Once the overturned coach was set upright, at the irate urging of this strange female, and with the help of Mr.Bullfrog, his missing bride suddenly appeared, whole and wholesome as when she had first stolen his heart. He remembered "the tale of a fairy, who half the time was a beautiful woman and half the time a hideous monster. Had I taken that very fairy to be the wife of my bosom?" The folklore pattern is not far to seek. It would seem that Hawthorne has made use of the "loathsome hag" motif, which was treated earlier in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (late fourteenth century), specifically, in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." The essence of the "loathsome hag" theme, in a word, is that a man, for one of a number of cogent reasons, is obliged to accept and remain with his mate, however frightful and unappealing she may appear (or has already appeared) some of the time.

But there is more to Hawthorne's story about a loathsome hag and an immature male than a mere remodeled folktale, whose origin may be lost in antiquity, or may be traceable to some ancient source. That is, an ancient source (which "Mrs. Bullfrog" evokes) such as a primitive tribal initiation ritual for boys, or a timeworn bawdy tale about what the bridegroom discovered on the wedding night. The word "more" here concerns Mr. Bullfrog's own initiation on his wedding journey. His initiation is an intellectual and educational one, rather than a physical one.

As Mr. Bullfrog and his bride resumed their journey, he found in her picnic-basket an old newspaper with an account of a sordid breach-of-promise trial. The plaintiff, as it happened, was his own blushing bride. Horrified, he remonstrated with her, but the disingenuous woman reasoned away his misgivings and doubts. Had he found in her '"some little imperfections"'? Did he think a woman should reveal her shortcomings before marriage? As for the breach-ofpromise trial he found so hateful, she won the case and was awarded five thousand dollars, which she was giving him to stock his dry goods emporium. Hawthorne, after showing that her responses have won Mr. Bullfrog over to her way of thinking, ends the story more or less the way it began—as the narrator validates what he has recently been taught, regarding the requirements for marital happiness.

Hawthorne's major social concern here and in in many of his other stories was the tendency of certain individuals to isolate themselves from the rest of society by overestimating their own importance and depreciating, or expecting too much (perfection, for example) from, their fellow humans.

A number of Hawthorne's characters have for a very different reason shunned society—and in particular, women who would love them—because of a sense of ineradicable and universal sinfulness, given the Calvinistic Original Sin theology underlying many of Hawthorne's stories. In the present story, Mr. Bullfrog as a bachelor, insisting on

feminine perfection in a bride, illustrates one kind of self-isolation—although in a milder form—that Hawthorne deplored and feared.

This rejection of human society, coupled with a deepseated self-love, was to Hawthorne the Unpardonable Sin, the sin of Pride, in fact the human equivalent of Satan's sin against God.

By way of illustration and amplification, three of the author's characters, far more guilty of this sin of Pride than the mild, effeminate Mr. Bullfrog, are to be found in "Wakefield" (1835), "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent" (1843), and "Ethan Brand" (1850). "Wakefield" is more a speculation about a man referred to in an old paper somewhere, than a conventional narrative.

The namesake, Wakefield, leaves his wife and their London lodging, and remains away for over twenty years, though never residing far from home. One day he returns and without difficulty resumes his marital relationship. Hawthorne ponders the implications of this character's picking up where he had left off so long ago. "Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe."

In "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent," the protagonist, Roderick Elliston, had not only separated from his wife (almost four years before the time of the story), but also scornfully considered himself "above the common lot of men." As a result, a gnawing snake appeared and remained in his bosom, to mark the nature of his disease and its point of origin in his body. He complained vainly of the ongoing pain.

"'Could I for one moment forget myself, the serpent might not abide within me. It is my diseased self-contemplation that has engendered and nourished him.'" And in "Ethan Brand" (1850), the namesake of the story, who formerly worked in a lime-kiln and then left his trade to travel in search of the Unpardonable Sin, returned after a lengthy quest, finally able to provide an answer. As he stood "erect with a pride that distinguishes all [such] enthusiasts," he announced that the Unpardonable Sin was a sin that grew only within his own breast!

"'The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims! The only sin that deserves a recompense of immortal agony!'"

Another social concern in "Mrs. Bullfrog" has to do with ethics—the ethics of a stranger from out of town, who is brought in, given a social role of some importance, and then somehow arouses the suspicion, locally, of dishonesty and unsuitability for citizenship. The person referred to here, Mrs. Bullfrog, had a shady past—at least as her new husband interpreted her former relationship with an inconstant suitor and the resulting breach of promise action she brought against him. Added to this was her spooky-witch appearance and her violent outburst when the coach accidentally overturned. But this

sometime termagant-hobgoblin from out of town could after all be more than a hideous harsh scold under threatening conditions. She could, it would seem, transform her new husband, redeem him, make a man out of him. The effeminate Mr. Bullfrog, with his unreasonable demands in a mate, risked incurring a remaining lifetime of wretched bachelorhood, when he experienced "the best luck in the world."

Making "a journey into another state," he "was smitten by, and smote again, and wooed, won, and married, the present Mrs. Bullfrog, all in ... a fortnight."

But there still is another matter that colors Mrs. Bullfrog in a special way, and its significance points strangely to the future rather than to the past. Stephen Crane's story "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), oddly enough, shares a number of plot elements with Hawthorne's "Mrs. Bullfrog"—among them, the strange bride brought in from out of town, the exciting journey, after the wedding, her arousing suspicions, her potential as a valuable resource in the community, and her transforming effect on her husband's behavior.

(See "THE BRIDE COMES TO YELLOW SKY" article in Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction, vol. 14 (2001), pp. 79-94).

Enlightened self-interest is another social concern here. However uneasy Mr. Bullfrog may feel after learning that his bride has had some sort of close—and ultimately litigious—relationship with another man, he is not only willing but eager to personally benefit from her cash settlement. It is difficult to know how to take Hawthorne's winking at the greedy cynicism and hypocrisy of this prim bridegroom because the story blends satire and deadpan seriousness so skillfully. Thus, Mr. Bullfrog's easy capitulation to the pragmatic imperative (i.e., take the cash and let the moralistic minutiae go!) is quite consistent with the other elements of the storyline. The same thing may be said of Mrs. Bullfrog's beating of the poor coachman. What would be a social issue in another frame of reference, i.e., Dostoyevsky's 1880 novel The Brothers Kammazov (in which the fatal beating of a helpless horse is a touching vignette), in this story seems somewhat like a comic stage effect.

But there is a social concern that gives this story its special strength—partly because it embodies at least two other important social concerns: the danger of expecting perfection in one's partner, and the harm resulting from isolating oneself from the rest of society. Hawthorne expresses the matter so cogently that his ideas could well serve as a mini-text for thoughtful marriage counselors. Serving as a cautionary advisory as well as a direction-finder in the area of domestic relations, his statement, which opens "Mrs. Bullfrog," captures its very essence as well as defining the tale.

"A kind Providence," he writes, "has so skilfully adapted sex to sex and the mass of individuals to each other, that," leaving out clearly unsuited pairs, "any male and female may achieve moderate happiness in marriage." The true rule is to "make certain" the match is fundamentally a good one, then take it for granted that all minor objections, assuming there are any, will disappear if they are let alone. Do not make a mistake in determining "the real basis of matrimonial bliss, and it is scarcely to be imagined what

miracles," as far as "recognizing smaller incongruities," will be brought about by "connubial love."

Techniques

Hawthorne has blended different techniques and types of fiction in this firstperson narrative. There is for example an undercurrent of satire in the story of Mr. Bullfrog's supposedly successful marriage.

One "giveaway" of the author's satirical intent is Mr. Bullfrog's afterthought (following the coach accident) when he imagined that the Old Nick had killed his wife and jumped into her clothes. Given the context of this passage, which highlights the female ogre's furious beating of the coachman, the bridegroom's tender sentiments seem ludicrously out of place—and deliberately out of place as well. His idea of what the Old Nick did to Mrs. Bullfrog "seemed the most probable," he remarked, because he could not perceive her alive anywhere, nor, for all his close inspection of the area of the coach, could he find "any traces of that beloved woman's dead body.

There would have been a comfort in giving her Christian burial."

The folktale aspects of this tale have been dealt with earlier, in connection with the "loathsome hag" motif. The cautionary tale, with an advisory such as "marry in haste, repent at leisure," and the stag party anecdote about "what the bridegroom discovered after the wedding," have also been touched on in connection with "Mrs. Bullfrog". For all its spookiness provided by the metamorphosis of Mr. Bullfrog's wife, this is not really a horror tale nor is it a mystery tale. Moreover, despite its suggestive reference to the devil at work, it is not just another one of Hawthorne's morality fables, like "Young Goodman Brown" or "The Minister's Black Veil." "Mrs. Bullfrog" is not a revenge tale either, or a "moralized legend," as is "Feathertop". It is not a "dream story," in the manner of "The Celestial Railroad," neither is it an allegory, like "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent."

Instead, "Mrs. Bullfrog" is perhaps best seen as one more interesting specimen of the Hawthorne marriage tale.

In the subgenre of Hawthorne's short fictions that may be called his marriage tales, there are many curious yet memorable narratives about the hazards, disappointments, and blights of matrimony.

Examples of these will be given below, to place Hawthorne's "Mrs. Bullfrog" in proper perspective, as regards authorial attitude toward marriage, its burdens and its benefits. In the interests of cogency, brevity, and economy of space, these individual marriage tales will be treated in broad, general terms, rather than in terms that will judge them too precisely in every part.

Themes

This story contains a number of interesting folklore elements. Among them are: transformations of character and/or transformation of physical appearance—Mrs. Bullfrog and to a limited extent Mr. Bullfrog; taboo— Mr. Bullfrog must not object to his bride's grotesque natural looks [however temporary] and must not touch her curls, or he will regret it; a talismanic object—money from Mrs. Bullfrog and connubial love (which can work miracles) from Mr. Bullfrog; mysteries—how did Mrs. Bullfrog happen to disappear after the coach overturned, who had taken her place ("Old Nick"?), where did she return from? But essentially "Mrs. Bullfrog" is yet one more of Hawthorne's "marriage tales" and thus the themes here have to do with the marriage relation.

Among the more significant themes here under the "marriage relation" heading are the following: "The importance of making an effort to preserve a marriage despite uncertainties and serious difficulties"; "The misguided search for perfection in one's spouse"; "The misleading nature of a marriage partner's outward appearance"; "The importance of maintaining a flexible attitude toward important matters"; "The principle that there's no accounting for taste, in others' choices of marriage partners"; "Marriage involves making sacrifices, keeping secrets, and anticipating sizable benefits"; "The fundamental thing that applies in marriage: the match must be a good one, at the outset." Enough has already been said about the plot of "Mrs. Bullfrog" to clarify the relationship of each of the above themes to the story.

Key Questions

1. What, in your own opinion, is Hawthorne trying to tell us about marriage and its discontents? Explain and support your reasoning.

2. How realistic a figure is Mr. Bullfrog?

Assume for the sake of argument that there could be such a person, and try to describe the domestic life of Mr. and Mrs. Bullfrog. That is, apply Hawthorne's rule for a successful marriage to the Bullfrogs a year or two after their marriage, and describe factors that would strengthen their union, and factors that would weaken their union.

3. What is your opinion about Hawthorne's clearly laid out view, expressed as a simple rule, of what is required for a successful marriage? Do you think he was really serious or not very serious, when he made that rule so basic to the story of the Bullfrogs? How would you define "the real basis of matrimonial bliss"?

4. An old but useful maxim about marriage runs as follows: "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." In this connection, can you draw any conclusions from the fact that Mr. Bullfrog met, wooed, won, and married the woman "all in the space of a fortnight"?

5. Is there an audience now, early in the twenty-first century, for a story such as "Mrs. Bullfrog"? Can it hold any strong interest for college students? If so, what particular group or groups do you think it would appeal to? Explain.

6. In light of what was said about Hawthorne's marriage tales and their negative and pessimistic attitude toward marriage, how would you compare his marriage fiction with the marriage fiction of contemporary writers you are familiar with? Explain, in terms of the relevant features of each author you name.

7. Do the references to the marriage fiction of Geoffrey Chaucer and Theodore Dreiser help you in interpreting or gaining a better understanding of Hawthorne's marriage fiction? If so, how? Explain.

8. The stage-coach driver in "Mrs. Bullfrog" is referred to as "Our Jehu." Who was the Jehu in the Bible that Hawthorne had in mind, and what was the connection that he intended? What did Hawthorne intend by another Bible reference in the story, "a son of Anak"?

Explain.

Literary Precedents

Probably the most important precedent relative to "Mrs. Bullfrog" and the other marriage tales of Hawthorne is Geoffrey Chaucer's collection, found in his Canterbury Tales (late 1380s-1390s). According to F. N. Robinson's text, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), there are seven tales, not completely connected but constituting a series that apparently was prepared in a kind of final form by Chaucer. These were labeled "The Marriage Group" by Professor George Lyman Kittredge of Harvard, who called attention to this series' sequential pattern, which separates them from the other Canterbury Tales.

These seven are concerned "with a single subject or topic, the seat and conduct of authority in married life." The seven narrators or tale-tellers in "The Marriage Group" are: the Wife of Bath, the Friar, the Summoner, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Squire, and the Franklin. Perhaps the two best-known tales in this septet are "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale." In the former, the narrator, making use of the "loathsome hag" figure, "argues for the supreme authority—the souverainetee—of a woman over her husband." In the latter, the narrator offers an account of the gladly accepted degradation of "Patient Griselda," daughter of a humble vassal of a noble feudal lord—who is determined to test her subservience to the utmost.

By way of contrast with both Chaucer's and Hawthorne's tales of married life, Theodore Dreiser's three marriage tales of loss, written in the earlier years of the twentieth century, deserve passing mention. In "The Lost Phoebe" (1912,1916) he depicts a lonely old widower living in a rural emptiness, on his own at last, after forty-eight years of marriage. He and his wife had jested repeatedly, after a fashion, about her leaving him if he did not behave, which had led to his claim that if she left him he could find her again, and her response that she would go where he could not find her. For upwards of six years, beset by fast-disappearing apparitions and hallucinations of his lost Phoebe, he roamed all over the countryside searching for her and calling her name. At last, coming near the edge of a cliff one night, he sensed her image but it receded and, as if luring him ever onward, drew him over the edge, to his doom. "No one of all the simple population [that found his broken body at the foot of the cliff a few days later] knew how eagerly and joyously he had found his lost mate."

Dreiser's other two marriage tales defy one's expectations, if based only on "The Lost Phoebe." "Marriage—For One" (1922) is the melancholy account of a somewhat knowledgeable city man who marries an unsophisticated, inexperienced young woman and brings her out of her shell so to speak— to the point where she goes far beyond him in her grasp of life's possibilities. Unable now to endure someone so far behind her mentally and emotionally, she leaves him and his much too narrow mode of existence. After a period of moping and surviving, he advances in the white-collar job market and somehow wins her back. They try married life once more, and have a child. However, he still has not developed enough for her, considering how far she has grown, and she leaves him again. But, never, wanting to let her out of his sight or his range of observation, he tracks her movements as much as conditions allow. Thus he remains in

thrall to her, despite all the times she tortured him, as he claims. The narrator remarks, "'this is love, for one at least. And this is marriage, for one at least. He is spiritually wedded to that woman, who despises him, and she may be spiritually wedded to another man who may despise her.'"

Dreiser's third story, "Free" (1918), is like "The Lost Phoebe" in that it deals with the death of a man's wife, and it is like both of the earlier stories mentioned in that the husband left behind is wretchedly mired in his past, unable to build a future. In "Free," through a lengthy psychological self-examination, the widower-to-be experiences "the variability of his own moods," that is, his disposition toward his terminally ill wife. While she is still alive he reflects on how unsuitable she has been for him, on how he never really loved her (except for the time when they first met), on how she has prevented him from living a life of freedom and self-realization with a dreamgirl wife, and so forth. He even wishes she would die and get the business over with.

Soon he regrets that base reaction. When she finally dies, he realizes it is too late for him to really live and enjoy what he has missed for so long. "No thing of beauty would have him now." His youth's "glorious dream . . . gone forever. . . . His wife might just as well have lived as died, for all the difference it" makes. But he is free at last—"'to die!'"

Related Titles

A goodly number of Hawthorne's short stories may be considered as marriage tales.

This instructive and amusing literary form has, at least since the time of Chaucer and Boccaccio (the fourteenth century), delighted popular audiences with the endless possibilities of two-part harmony and/or domestic discord. Best known perhaps for his novel of Puritan life in which a May and December union is rent asunder by adultery, The Scarlet Letter (1850), Hawthorne produced his marriage tales during the 1830s and 1840s. More often than not, presided over by a nemesis, they make for a strange assortment.

The author's vision of marriage as some kind of fearful trauma occurs early in his fiction, in "The Wives of the Dead" (1832), an atypical story whose plot has no end in sight unless the reader supplies it. In the Massachusetts Bay Province, two "recent brides of two brothers, a sailor and a landsman," had on "two successive days [received] tidings of the death of each, by the chances of Canadian warfare, and the tempestuous Atantic." The sisters-in-law, Mary and Margaret, retired to their separate beds and each one in turn, but unbeknownst to the other, was notified by a nocturnal caller at the window that her husband was actually alive. At story's end the second woman to hear glad tidings, Mary, went to the other's bedside to tell her the news, decided against it for fear of accentuating Margaret's loss, and chose rather to tuck Margaret in against the chill night air. "But her hand trembled against Margaret's neck, a tear also fell upon her cheek, and she suddenly awoke."

While textual evidence suggests that both good-news reports were real, there is a marginal possibility that following the traumatic death reports, each sister-in-law or only one sister-in-law dreamt her glad tidings!

"The Canterbury Pilgrims" (1833) opposes two married couples. A youhful pair, leaving their Shaker village to wed and begin anew in the great world outside, is contrasted with a wretched, impoverished couple who with their two surviving children are seeking sanctuary in that Shaker village, feeling themselves hopeless failures unable to survive in the outside world.

At least one scholar, James R. Mellow, in his biography, Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times (1980), has noted an addendum to the tale of woe told by the wife bound with her husband for the Shaker village. Their sweet affection when they were newly married yielded to gloom and discontent on the husband's part. She then became annoyed, angry, and peevish. Thus their love dwindled away, leaving them wretchedly unhappy. As it was with her husband and herself, the sorely afflicted wife tells the young couple, so it will be with them. "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), is the story of a newlywed (in the 1690s, about the time of the Salem Witch trials) who is compelled to leave his wife Faith, over her protests, and have a nocturnal tryst in the forest with the Devil. Meeting with the Devil disguised as "a man, in grave and decent attire," Goodman Brown, filled with misgivings and against his better judgement, is led deep into the forest. There his

companion, who has spoken proprietorially of Goodman Brown's ancestors, conducts him to a kind of Witches' Sabbath ceremony, where he sees many familiar faces and discovers that his wife Faith is to be initiated into this Satanic society. Calling out for her to resist, Goodman Brown loses consciousness and later wakes up in the forest as if arousing from a dream.

Ever afterward he is soured on his wife, everybody, and everything else. Hawthorne leaves us with a pretty picture of young marrieds: a hopelessly alienated husband, a wife who can't understand what the problem is, and the prospect of a long unhappy life of incompatibility.

"Wakefield" (1835), is more of a "what if" sketch than an actual story. Here Hawthorne muses about a Londoner, described in an old newspaper clipping, who decides to leave his wife of ten years, move to a nearby lodging, and observe (unseen) the effect of his absence on her health. For about twenty years he persists in this mad game. (Wakefield is described as both mad and feeble-minded.) Once they even pass each other on the street, but the shock of recognition is somehow minimal. After twenty years, Wakefield, who has perpetrated "perhaps the strangest instance, on record, of marital delinquency," re-enters his former dwelling, ends "the little joke" he has been playing on his wife, and resumes his domestic existence. The author, reflecting on "the seeming confusion of our mysterious world," opines that "individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever." As Wakefield did, such a man "may become . . . the Outcast of the Universe." But Hawthorne's Outcast also reminds us of Wakefield's literary ancestor, with whom there are certain interesting similarities, marital and otherwise: Rip Van Winkle, as depicted in Washington Irving's 1819 account of the same name.

"The Wedding Knell" (1835), like "Wakefield," deals with a cruel joke played by a man on the woman of his choice. She is the sweetheart of his youth, who had pledged herself to him long ago but broke her promise. After many vicissitudes of life, she finally granted her old suitor his wish. Hawthorne remarks, archly, "The marriage might be considered as the result of an early engagement, though there had been two intermediate weddings on the lady's part, and forty years of celibacy on that of the gentleman." Hitherto she has "refused to grow old and ugly, on any consideration . . ."

Now she is to be united at the altar with a man who reminds her that she has given her two former husbands her vitality, leaving him only her "decay and death"—thus he has attired himself for the grave. The defenseless lady, regarding her eccentric bridegroom in his funeral shroud, realizes that he has scored an important point. And so they are wed, as the death-bell's "deep voice overpower[s] the marriage words . . .

[at] the funeral of earthly hopes."

In "The Minister's Black Veil" [subtitled "A Parable"] (1835) a village parson named Reverend Hooper inexplicably decides to wear a black crepe veil over his face at all times. After presiding over a funeral on a particular day, where his veil causes an unpleasant stir, he officiates at a wedding ceremony, and his queer mask casts a deathly pall over the services. Hawthorne comments, "If ever another wedding were so dismal, it was that famous one, where they tolled the wedding-knell." Hooper's own intended marriage is canceled by his fiancee, who cannot endure living with him if he refuses to remove the veil. Even on his deathbed, when the minister of Westbury pleads and attempts by force to get Reverend Hooper to bare his face, he adamantly refuses. He cries out against the spectators, indicating they should not tremble at him only, they should also tremble at one another. Have men, women, and children shunned him only because of his black veil?

he asks. "'What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful?'" No one, he indicates by way of answering his own question, "'shows his inmost heart to his friend . . . to his bestbeloved . . . [or to] the eye of his Creator'"; people in loathsome fashion treasure up the secrets of their sins. He looks around, Hooper tells his audience, "'and, lo! On every visage a Black Veil!'"

"The Man of Adamant" [subtitled "An Apologue"] (1836) is somewhat like "The Minister's Black Veil," but the latter story had a counterpart in an actual situation involving a clergyman who by accident killed a dear friend, and ever since, veiled his face from others. But the man of adamant, in the old days "of religious gloom and intolerance," was "Richard Digby, the gloomiest and most intolerant of a stern brotherhood." His creed and salvation plan was not only unique but zealously guarded from all other mortals, lest anyone else partake of Heaven's mercy, to which he felt that he alone was entitled. Hawthorne continues his crude satire of an egomaniacal religious fanatic, following him as he left his village and the meeting house he despised "as a temple of heathan idolatry."

With his axe, sword, and gun, Digby made his way through the depths of the forest, until he comes to a sepulchral cave, which would become his dwelling place. Yet despite his stark seclusion and fiercely private worship in this cave (suggesting "Elijah's cave at Horeb"), a young woman— whom his Bible preaching in England had converted—came seeking him, out of both religious faith and personal love. But he cursed her as a "child of sin and wrath," driving her away as he asked her, what did she have to do with his Bible, his prayers, his heaven. Hawthorne now resorts to hearsay and speculation. Legend, he says, had it that at this point Digby's heart, which had been turning into stone, stopped beating, while the woman's form "melted into the last sunbeams, and returned . . . to heaven."

As it happened, she was already dead and buried, in an English churchyard. Digby had been visited either by her ghost or by "a dreamlike spirit, typifying pure Religion." But his body remained long afterward in that cave of dripping mineral deposits, "in the attitude

of repelling the whole race of mortals . . . from the horrible loneliness of his dark, cold sepulchre!"

Four remaining marriage tales give us additional horrors, caveats, and distant early warnings relative to the matrimonial state.

"The Prophetic Pictures" (1837) depicts a young couple shortly before their marriage, having their likenesses taken by a remarkable portrait artist who is able to catch the essence of his subjects' inner being. (Hawthorne's storyline allows for future temporal changes in the subjects' appearance to be shown on the canvas.) Sometime after their marriage Walter Ludlow and his wife Elinor fulfill the artist's prophecy. Fright and sorrow had been reflected in the portrait of her face, and a suggestion of murderous madness, in the portrait of Walter's face. Both of these expressions are validated at the end of the story, when Walter in a frenzy stabs his wife to death.

"The Shaker Bridal" (1838) pictures an unmarried couple not yet middle-aged, Adam and Martha, who many years earlier had wanted to wed but were forestalled by many adversities and by Adam's misgivings about pooling their poverty and poor prospects. At his urging, as a safeguard against further destitution, they join one of the communities of the Shaker Society, which regards celibacy as a primary rule. Ironically they are chosen to become this Shaker community's "Father" and "Mother"— presiding heads. At the installation ceremony Martha, whose "heart could endure the weight of its desolate agony no longer"— dropped dead at Adam's feet. The author includes in this tale three examples of Shaker men. One brought with him to the settlement his spouse and their offspring, only to reject them utterly. A second had abandoned his family when he joined the Shakers. A third, growing up among the Shakers, had never had any contact at all with women except what was permitted within their community.

"The Lily's Quest: An Apologue" (1839) concerns two lovers, Adam Forrester and Lilias Fay, who wish to erect "a little summer house, in the form of an antique Temple," dedicated to proper and respectable enjoyments for the benefit of themselves and their friends. But their movements in search of the right spot (for him a bower) are tracked, and their plans are blighted by a spooky old man of ill omen who, whenever they select a particular site, tells them of terrible things that have happened there.

Finally, when what appears to be a good and proper location is chosen and the marble structure is completed, the frail Lilias dies, and their intended locus of happiness is converted into a tomb for her remains.

Now Adam exults because their Temple is situated on a grave, and their happiness will be for Eternity.

Finally, "The Birthmark" (1843) tells of a man of science, Aylmer, who is absorbed in his arcane experiments and whose wife is well-nigh perfect, except for what might be called a fatal flaw: a hand-shaped birthmark on her left cheek. Once Aylmer becomes fully aware of this modest defect he is unable to remain at ease with his wife. As a consequence she begins feeling its presence acting within her, while he on the other

hand is bent on removing it with one of his chemical preparations. Aylmer's having her swallow a draught of this supposed curative fails of its purpose. His otherwise perfect young wife dies of the remedy's poisonous effect on her system.

Since "Mrs. Bullfrog" is best appreciated against the background of Hawthorne's other marriage tales and stories akin to them, something more should be said about the Related Titles. What is one to make of these stories and heir like, such as "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), wherein a hinted-at future union between would-be lovers is prevented when the girl is poisoned unintentionally, through the agency of her boy friend and her father? The stories, which seem so anti-marriage, for any of numerous reasons, were written by a man of morbid temperament, who was apparently made for marriage and fathered (quite properly) three children of his own.

A few recurring fictional motifs may be pointed out, in lieu of answering here and now why Hawthorne wrote about marriage in just the way he did. Marriage avoidance is perhaps the primary motif (note its significance in "Mrs. Bullfrog"), and Hawthorne offers so many variations on this idea that one begins to detect a serious latent concern on his part, which his stories reflect. That concern, simply put, is fear of failure with a woman, fear of inability to do the office of a man, when it is called for. Another motif, related to marriage avoidance but sufficient unto itself, is male hostility toward women or physical fear of women (again, a significant element in "Mrs. Bullfrog").

The third motif, so quintessential in Hawthorne's thinking, is self-absorption, leading to the devaluation of all other people, and resulting in isolation from society—the Unpardonable Sin, Pride (important once again in "Mrs. Bullfrog").

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