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The Unpardonable Reader

Cover Page Footnote

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THE UNPARDONABLE READER

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Hawthorne's prefaces to his romances, though largely ignored as a composite body of work, contain key insights into reading his fiction. Each preface is a sort of instruction manual directed toward the reader. Though the presentation is gentle, an underlying firmness shows Hawthorne's sincerity and decisiveness. Hawthorne's prefaces consistently require two things of the reader: empathy and a willingness to engage in magical thinking. These qualities are directly linked to Hawthorne's representation of the unpardonable sin as a cold lack of empathy and tendency toward disbelief. Therefore, a reader lacking empathy and an openness to magical thinking would commit a readerly version of the unpardonable sin. Hawthorne provides examples of these unpardonable readers in three of his tales: "A Christmas Banquet," "The Devil in the Manuscript," and "Alice Doane's Appeal." Though these readers' attitudes are unpardonable, in "Alice Doane's Appeal" Hawthorne provides the possibility of redemption.

Critics have long been fascinated by Hawthorne's handling of the "unpardonable sin." In regular Hawthornian fashion, the details of what this sin is are left ambiguous.

Dwight points out that Hawthorne scholars tend to treat the concept of the unpardonable sin as something that originated with Hawthorne, when in fact the origination is biblical (451). The unpardonable sin is a term referring to a New Testament description of a "sin against the Holy Ghost" that cannot be forgiven on earth or in heaven (Dwight 449). With this in mind, Dwight suggests "it might well be that the unpardonable sin in Hawthorne, as in the Bible, is a transgression against the Holy Spirit" (452). McCullen further limits this definition to "presumption, despair, and impenitence" (223). Dwight's in-depth definition of the unpardonable sin according to Hawthorne suggests:

The unpardonable sin—the self-destruction of the heart—is not an individual sin in the same sense as an 'ordinary' sin. The latter, regardless of how great the offence, is a specific act against God and no matter how many of these sins are committed, or how often they are repeated, they can be forgiven as specific offences if God so wills it. The unpardonable sin, as here defined, is not a specific act. It is more in the nature of a process or procedure whose end result the hardening of the heart is not achieved in any fixed length

of time. It is the gradual transformation of good into evil absolute. (455)

We see this hardening of the heart enacted repeatedly in Hawthorne's characters. His villains are nearly always cold, hard, and detached. Often this hardening is a process, but once accomplished it is impossible for the sinner to be repentant. Even though the eventual coldness is impermeable, Dwight suggests that on this journey into the unpardonable sin the sinner can be given the opportunity to repent and so redeem himself (455-56). This view of the unpardonable sin is more nuanced than some: the sin of coldness is unpardonable, but those who have not yet reached the final destination have the opportunity to escape.

Many other critics define the unpardonable sin based off one of Hawthorne's entries in *The American Notebooks*:

The Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into its dark depths, not with a hope or purpose of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity,—content that it should be wicked in whatever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out. Would not this, in other words, be the separation of the intellect from the heart? (qtd. in McCullen 222)

McCullen, among others, makes the point that this definition is “speculative” (223). The question mark and tone imply that Hawthorne's statement is not declarative, leaving some room for doubt. As Baym points out, Hawthorne's notebooks were for working out story ideas primarily, not his own philosophizing (32). This awareness has made some critics wary of flatly accepting the definition of the unpardonable sin as

“the separation of the intellect from the heart” (Hawthorne, *Notebooks*, 106). Still, a close reading of “Ethan Brand” seems to reinforce this definition, particularly the “cold philosophical curiosity” (Hawthorne, *Notebooks*, 106). In my reading, the unpardonable sin is a combination of coldness of heart and intellectual disbelief.

Though much of Hawthorne's work revolves around complicated questions of sin and secrecy, “Ethan Brand” handles this concept more bluntly by suggesting an “unpardonable sin.” The story, subtitled “A Chapter From an Abortive Romance” in some ways resembles more strongly a sketch rather than one of Hawthorne's chapters or even his tales, due to its structure and plot (Wegner 58). In the story, Ethan Brand is a lime-burner who has just returned from a quest to discover the unpardonable sin. When his old friends ask him where he has found such a sin, he places “his finger on his own heart” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1054). Though Ethan readily admits to having committed the unpardonable sin, he is more secretive about the specifics of the sin itself. Even in their curiosity, the townspeople shrink from him. The new lime-burner, Ethan's successor, finds himself overwhelmed when left alone with Ethan and “must now deal, heart to heart, with a man who, on his own confession, had committed the only crime for which Heaven could afford no mercy. That crime, in its indistinct blackness, seemed to overshadow him” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1055). When asked what the unpardonable sin is, Ethan defines it as “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!” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1057). Essentially, Ethan is saying that the unpardonable sin is the result of a lack of empathy, a coldness that keeps the sinner from forming the natural God-created bond with humanity. It is also a sin that separates the sinner from spirituality, creating a distance between the sinner and God. The unpardonable sin is the absence of empathy and of faith.

Eventually more details of Ethan’s specific sin emerge. A father asks Ethan for news about his daughter. It is here that the reader, though none of the characters, learns that Ethan has committed the unpardonable sin against this man’s daughter. She was “the very girl whom, with such cold and remorseless purpose, Ethan Brand had made the subject of a psychological experiment, and wasted, absorbed, and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1060). This is Hawthorne at his most chilling. Ethan’s lack of empathy has caused him to lose sight of the young girl’s humanity. The specifics are unclear; the “psychological experiment” could be many things, from sexual assault to emotional abuse to a more detached manipulation. Whatever the manifestation, the consequence of Ethan’s coldness is the destruction of another’s soul. Ethan recalls his previous “love and sympathy for mankind” and with what “reverence he had then looked into the heart of man, viewing it as a temple originally divine” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1064). Throughout Ethan’s search for the unpardonable sin, his heart “had withered—had contracted—had hardened—had perished! It had ceased to partake of the universal throb” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1064). This hardening of heart is what led him to commit the unpardonable sin against the young woman. Ethan becomes “a cold

observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets, and pulling the wires that moved them to such degrees of crime as were demanded for his study” (Hawthorne, “Ethan Brand,” 1064). By losing sight of the girl’s humanity, Ethan has destroyed them both. His lack of empathy toward her is his unpardonable sin.

Tied up in the unpardonable sin’s lack of empathy is also disbelief. Cold detachment leads not only to cruelty toward fellow humans, but also a withering of the mind, a desecration of wonder. The unpardonable sin is nurtured in an environment of disbelief, and a rejection of magical thinking. In addition to empathy a belief in magic and the supernatural is required. In his reaction to his puritan ancestor’s truly unpardonable sins during the Salem witch trials, Hawthorne does not ask us to say “witches do not exist!” but instead assumes witches exist, while suggesting that we should perhaps not hang them. He includes witches, unquestioned, in many of his works—*The Scarlet Letter*, “Young Goodman Brown,” and “Feathertop,” to name a few. In many ways, Hawthorne’s romances could be considered an early form of magical realism, a literary technique often assigned to Latin American literature, but in reality it is transcontinental and far reaching (Clark 76). Clark defines magical realism as fiction that “integrates elements of fantasy, or an imagined world into a life-like, or realistic text. Magical realist authors include magical occurrences in texts that essentially and primarily mirror daily existence, or present recognizable human experiences that authors identify in their writing” (76). Magical realism, then, is quite literally the merging of magic and what is real. This, I believe, is a reasonable way to approach Hawthorne’s fiction. His writing often

includes fantastical details which we, and the characters, are expected to accept without question. And yet Hawthorne's characters and situations remain consistently relevant to and reflective of real life. Hawthorne's magic is subtle at times; in some stories it is simply a vague hint of the impossible, while in others we are blatantly commanded to accept bizarre circumstances as if they are plausible. Considering this working definition of magical realism as it applies to Hawthorne, we can see that an unspoken part of the unpardonable sin is a refusal to suspend disbelief. A cold lack of empathy serves to separate humans from each other emotionally. Empathy requires a certain amount of trust, of believing in another's goodness and worth; it is an openness to another's experience. In Hawthorne's writing, a good reader empathizes with the characters in the story and with Hawthorne himself. Readers must suspend their disbelief by trusting Hawthorne as an author in order to truly comprehend and appreciate his use of magical realism. A willingness to engage in magical thinking is crucial for a Hawthorne reader. A reader who lacks these qualities of empathy and openness to magic would commit the unpardonable sin of readership. Though this may not be as serious a sin as Ethan Brand's, Hawthorne makes it clear that it is the worst sin a person could commit as a reader. An unpardonable reader destroys the possibility of story. This identity of the unpardonable reader becomes clear when we examine Hawthorne's prefaces as instructions for readers, and his tales for depictions of unpardonable readers.

Hawthorne's prefaces serve as instruction manuals for the reader. At times self-deprecating, always modest, Hawthorne uses the prefaces to create a familiarity with the reader that the texts themselves

may not establish on their own. At first the cause for this self-deprecating tone seems to be insecurity, not an inconceivable stance from a man who once said, "if I were to meet with such books as mine, by another writer, I don't believe I should be able to get through them" (Hawthorne qtd. in Wallace 207). This betrays a crippling self-image that followed Hawthorne throughout his career. Certainly, these prefaces allow us to creep much closer to Hawthorne's self than we are generally permitted in his fiction, and this familiarity does reveal some self-doubt. Still, I believe another effect is at work as well. Hawthorne uses these prefaces as a kind of guidebook, instructing readers on the appropriate way to read his writing. Though some of his words appear to be flippant asides, behind this gentleness is a firm, unflinching opinion of Hawthorne's: he is writing for the kind of reader who will approach him and his characters with empathy and willingly follow him into magical thinking.

The Preface to *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne's last romance, contains the clearest description of this ideal reader for whom he hopes. He describes himself as writing for "that one congenial friend—more comprehensive of his purposes, more appreciative of his success, more indulgent of his short-comings, and, in all respects, closer and kinder than a brother" (Hawthorne, Preface to *The Marble Faun*, 853). Though he admits this reader is not a distinct person with whom he has corresponded, he explains that when he writes he addresses the imaginary "Representative Essence of all delightful and desirable qualities which a Reader can possess" (Hawthorne, Preface to *The Marble Faun*, 853). This idea of the reader as friend is a common theme throughout the prefaces. This "Representative Essence" is an empathetic reader for the "fanciful story," a reader who is

willing to revel in fancy, to suspend disbelief on the path of magical thinking (Hawthorne, Preface to *The Marble Faun*, 854). This is the reader Hawthorne is instructing us to be.

The “Representative Essence” Hawthorne addresses may only be named as such in the Preface to *The Marble Faun*, but it exists in all the preceding prefaces as well. In “The Old Manse,” Hawthorne’s Preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*, he also asks for a sympathetic and magically minded reader. Because the locale in this case is his house, Hawthorne treats the reader as his “guest in the old Manse, and entitled to all courtesy in the way of sight-showing” (“The Old Manse” 1125). Treating his readers as houseguests elevates them to “a circle of friends” whom he hopes will show empathy and openness to the fantastical. As Weldon points out, there is also a paternalistic quality to Hawthorne’s attitude because he “leads his readers into his work and hopes to control closely their response” (43). This enforces my belief that the preface is not as humble and unassuming as would at first appear; Hawthorne has an agenda for his ideal reader. The forthcoming story, he tells this “Representative Essence,” occurs in a sort of “fairy-land” where “there is no measurement of time” (Hawthorne, “The Old Manse,” 1148). He wants readers to enter into magical thinking, even while he takes them on a tour of his home. Hawthorne often scorns “the public” but welcomes readers who will show empathy and an appreciation for the magical fairy lands he creates (“The Old Manse” 1149). His congeniality with the reader is for a purpose: modification of the reader’s behavior into being the kind of reader he wants.

The *Scarlet Letter*’s Preface, “The Custom-House,” which is one of Hawthorne’s longer prefaces, he again asks for a certain type of reader. In this preface Hawthorne alludes

to the “The Old Manse,” describing it as an instance where he “favored the reader—inexcusably, and for no earthly reason, that either the indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine—with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse” (“The Custom-House” 121). With typical self-deprecating humor, Hawthorne sets the stage for yet another “autobiographical impulse” (“The Custom-House” 121). After this self-deprecation, Hawthorne again describes the ideal type of reader he is looking for. He is clear that “the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates” (Hawthorne, “The Custom-House,” 121). He is instructing the reader to read with empathy, even more than he expects from his closest associates. This is a high expectation for his readers. In this preface he is more explicit about what it would mean if a reader lacked these qualities, and it is here we begin to see the correlation between the unforgivable sin and Hawthorne’s instructions for readers. He says that “thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience” (Hawthorne, “The Custom-House,” 121). Here we see the coldness referenced in Hawthorne’s discussions of the unpardonable sin. If readers lack empathy, they lack warmth. Cold readers shatter a story, an unpardonable offense from a reader. Hawthorne says, for his part as an author, “it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us” (“The Custom-House,” 121). The empathetic reader will thaw what is frozen, warming a story and its characters. This

is the kind of reader Hawthorne requires.

Hawthorne also describes himself as a “man of thought, fancy, and sensibility” (“The Custom-House,” 141). Again, he has chosen to emphasize fancy, the fantastical, alongside more conventional realism. He then tells the artificial history of how he learned of Hester Prynne’s story, describing finding her letter A, holding it against his chest, and feeling a “sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat” (Hawthorne, “The Custom-House,” 146). Here, at this moment of magical thinking—can a cloth letter A truly cause such sensations?—Hawthorne addresses readers who might doubt, saying, “the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word” (“The Custom-House” 143). Though Hawthorne’s account is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, I think he means what he says. He is asking readers to suspend their disbelief, be empathetic, and engage in the story. He even presents some whimsical imaginings of the ghost of Surveyor Pue, furthering the magical atmosphere. This is how Hawthorne approaches writing; stories happen when “the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (“The Custom-House” 149). Hawthorne writes using magical thinking, and to read his work we must do likewise. He describes his time working at the Custom-House as a time where he is unable to engage in magical thinking, and therefore unable to write (Hawthorne, “The Custom-House,” 150). Here, again, refusing to engage in magical thinking destroys story, making it impossible to engage. A reader who lacks both empathy and the capacity for magical thinking is an unpardonable reader indeed.

Hawthorne also reveals perhaps where he got his ideas about unpardonable readers. He assumes his puritan ancestors’ reactions to his chosen profession as a storyteller

would be cold and negative. He imagines one of them saying, “[w]hat is he? . . . A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” (Hawthorne, “The Custom-House,” 127). Here his puritan forefathers represent his idea of the unpardonable reader: one who is cold and skeptical. These, of course, are also the ancestors whose lack of empathy led to their heavy involvement in the Salem witch trials. This, truly, was an unpardonable sin if such a thing exists. That these ancestors are also the ones who lack empathy to be good readers is surely significant.

In the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne directly addresses magical thinking again. It is here that he provides his famous definition of a “Romance” as opposed to a “Novel” (Hawthorne, Preface to *Seven Gables*, 351). Hawthorne says that if “a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel” (Preface to *Seven Gables*, 351). A Hawthornian Romance is an early form of magical realism, offering Hawthorne unlimited artistic license. In contrast, a novel “is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” (Hawthorne, Preface to *Seven Gables*, 351). For Hawthorne, the term “novel” means realism. No magical thinking is required.

A novel, though fictional, is concerned with the truth of normal, realistic life. A romance “has fairly a right to present that truth [of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing

or creation” (Hawthorne, Preface to *Seven Gables*, 351). Magical realism offers another way of telling the truth, of showing the spirit of the truth while disregarding some of the basic facts of realism. Romances free the imagination of the author, but require more from the reader. An author, Hawthorne tells us, would “be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public” (Preface to *Seven Gables* 351). Here, it would seem, Hawthorne is defining a subtle form of magical realism, and instructing the reader to approach this type of writing with a willingness to engage in magical thinking. Though he has high expectations of his readers, he does not want to ask too much. It is as though he is agreeing to meet the reader halfway: if the reader will be empathetic and open to magic, he as the author will not take advantage of the freedom he has given himself. Still, ultimately, his instructions are clear. He requests that the book “be read strictly as Romance, having a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead, than with any portion of the actual soil” (Hawthorne, Preface to *Seven Gables*, 353). He requires a reader who is open to whimsy, a reader who will engage in magical thinking.

The Preface to *The Blithedale Romance* provides specific reading instructions for the truth of the story he is about to tell. Hawthorne uses the preface to clarify the fictionality of his characters and situations in the novel to avoid confusion with his actual time spent in a commune. He uses this opportunity to continue the definition of a Romance that he began in the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*. He reminds his readers that “Fiction has long been conversant, a certain

conventional privilege seems to be awarded to the romancer; his work is not put exactly side by side with nature; and he is allowed a license with regard to every-day Probability, in view of the improved effects which he is bound to produce thereby” (Hawthorne, Preface to *Blithedale*, 633). He is invoking the magical realism definition as a guide to reading his current work. He practically scolds readers not to compare the book to real life, and to see it as magical art. Hawthorne says that a Romance has “an atmosphere of strange enchantment, beheld through which the inhabitants have a propriety of their own” (Preface to *Blithedale* 633). This is the sort of environment he is instructing readers to accept. He knows that readers must take this approach for his story to be effective.

One thing is clear: Hawthorne’s instructions require two things of readers: empathy and a willingness to engage in magical thinking. This is necessary for a reader to enter the magical realism of Hawthorne’s Romances, and to treat kindly the characters found within. Hawthorne also makes it clear that readers who lack empathy and willingness to suspend their disbelief are associated with a sort of unpardonable sin. The unpardonable sin of calculated coldness, a complete absence of empathy, shatters a person’s relationships, and such a reader approaches a story with coldness and disbelief. Hawthorne is clear that he does not want this to happen to his stories. Readers’ coldness and refusal to suspend their disbelief causes a story to fizzle, derailing the author’s hopes and intentions. This is the representative essence of an unpardonable reader.

Hawthorne demonstrates the unpardonable reader in some of his tales, which frequently star writers and story-tellers, and their audiences provide mixed responses. In three tales in particular, “A Christmas Banquet,”

“The Devil in the Manuscript,” and “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” Hawthorne provides examples of unpardonable readers and how they experience fiction. For the purposes of my argument I am considering those who listen to an oral tale to be “readers” in the sense that their interpretation requires the same empathy and magical thinking as one reading from a page.

“The Christmas Banquet” is a particularly interesting tale in this regard because it deals with unpardonable sins on multiple levels. In the tale Roderick reads his story to his wife, Rosina, and their friend, the sculptor. Roderick’s story is about the epitome of the unforgivable sin as Hawthorne has described it: a man named Gervayse Hastings. The readers, Rosina and the sculptor, respond in ways that show they are similar to Gervayse, and are therefore unpardonable readers.

In the tale, Gervayse Hastings is the one guest who is invited, year after year, to a Christmas dinner for “the most miserable persons that could be found” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 850). Though the other guests have clear sources of misery, Gervayse seems at first to have a successful life. In his own preface to his readers, Roderick describes Gervayse as a person with “a sense of cold unreality, wherewith he would go shivering through the world, longing to exchange his load of ice for any burthen of real grief that fate could fling upon a human being” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 849). In Roderick’s story, the first indication that something is amiss comes when a mentally disabled guest “touched the stranger’s hand, but immediately drew back his own, shaking his head and shivering” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 854). The disabled man shuffles away, muttering about how unnaturally cold Gervayse’s hand is, but Gervayse “shivered too—and smiled” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,”

854). This coldness comes back repeatedly, as well as Gervayse’s lack of empathy. He lacks warmth, both literally and metaphorically.

Though Gervayse is outwardly successful, with a family and career, he is “a cold abstraction, wholly destitute of those rich hues of personality, that living warmth” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 862). He is unable to feel any sort of empathy, even at a banquet for miserable people he is unable to “catch its pervading spirit” and when the other guests share their woes, he is “mystified and bewildered” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 855). Even with his family, Gervayse has no empathy; his children and wife find him cold and emotionless. Perhaps the most shocking instance of Gervayse’s coldness is at one of the Christmas banquets. One of the guests dies in his chair, a gust of laughter having extinguished his diseased heart. At this horrifying sight, the other guests are naturally upset, but Gervayse feels no empathy. Instead of being startled, Gervayse is “gazing at the dead man with singular intentness” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 860). Another guest confronts him about how he can be so passive, but Gervayse only responds that “men pass before me like shadows on the wall—their actions, passions, feelings, are flickerings of the light—and then they vanish!” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 860). He feels no warmth, no connection with other people. Another person can die in front of him and he feels only cold, intellectual curiosity. He is the embodiment of the unpardonable sin; his coldness toward people makes everyone shudder.

Because of Gervayse’s inability to empathize with others, at the end of the story he has learned nothing. Even after years of attending a banquet for miserable people, Gervayse thinks his own misfortune is the worst (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 866). He

describes his affliction as “a chillness—a want of earnestness—a feeling as if what should be my heart were a thing of vapor” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 866). Gervayse’s unpardonable sin may or may not be the most miserable affliction, but a crucial component of it is that he must think it the worst because he cannot empathize with any other than himself.

So goes Roderick’s story. Rosina and the sculptor’s responses, as readers, are what we are now concerned with. After the story is told, Roderick asks Rosina’s opinion. Rosina is unimpressed. “Frankly,” she tells him, “your success is by no means complete . . . It is true, I have an idea of the character you endeavor to describe; but it is rather by dint of my own thought than your expression” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 867). Rosina, unknowingly, is responding in just the way Gervayse Hastings would: she is unable to understand and identify with someone else. Her cold detachment as a reader prevents her from engaging in the story and even with her husband the author. As a reader, she lacks empathy both for Roderick and for the characters within. Still, she has at least the openness to magical thinking, willing to use her own imagination to try to comprehend the character of Gervayse.

The sculptor responds poorly as well. After Rosina provides her feedback, he agrees with her. He lacks the ability for magical thinking necessary to appreciate the story. He is concerned with how realistic Gervayse Hastings is as a character. Because the description of Gervayse only says what he cannot feel—empathy—the sculptor says he cannot identify with him. The sculptor quibbles that “we do meet with these moral monsters now and then—it is difficult to conceive how they came to exist here, or what there is in them capable of existence hereafter” (Hawthorne, “Christmas,” 867).

Though the sculptor does not criticize Roderick’s handling of the story, he is caught up in the literal creation of these “moral monsters,” rather than suspending his disbelief and getting into the spirit of the story. The sculptor cannot see past the real world and engage in the magical thinking required to enjoy it. Combined together, Rosina and the sculptor provide the response of an unpardonable reader who is unable to empathize with the characters and unwilling to engage in magical thinking.

In “The Christmas Banquet” we have two readers who are unpardonable due to lack of empathy and magical thinking, unable to appreciate and appropriately interpret the story. We only see these readers for two short moments, before and after Roderick’s tale, and during that brief time we see no growth. By way of contrast, we do see growth of a reader in “The Devil in the Manuscript.” Here the reader starts out unpardonable but begins to have a change of heart.

The narrator in “The Devil in the Manuscript” is visiting his friend, called Oberon, who is ranting about his collection of unpublished stories, which Oberon has begun to resent as a source of pain and humiliation. He has even begun to believe that a fiend lurks within them. The narrator has read the stories in question, and is unimpressed. When Oberon exclaims, “I have a horror of what was created in my own brain, and shudder at the manuscripts in which I have that dark idea a sort of material existence. Would they were out of my sight!” the narrator thinks “[a]nd of mine, too” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 331). The narrator lacks empathy for the stories he has read and to some degree lacks empathy for Oberon himself. Though he has enough tact to refrain from telling Oberon what he really thinks of the manuscript, he remains quietly amused. When Oberon

announces his plan to burn his manuscript in the fireplace, the narrator does “not very strenuously oppose this determination, being privately of [his] opinion, in spite of [his] partiality for the author, that his tales would make a more brilliant appearance in the fire than anywhere else” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 332-33). He has no sympathy with what he has read, no connection, making him an unpardonable reader.

The narrator also ignores Oberon’s repeated claim that there is a Devil in his manuscript; he is unwilling to engage in magical thinking. When Oberon asks him if he has felt the influence of the devil while reading the manuscript, the narrator denies it and makes a joke that perhaps the “spell be hid in a desire to turn novelist, after reading your delightful tales” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 331). There is biting sarcasm in this reply, since we know the narrator does not find the tales delightful at all. He brushes off the possibility of any sort of magical influence in the stories. His inability to engage in magical thinking makes his reading of them unpardonable.

This reader, however, undergoes a slight change of heart. When Oberon is about to throw his papers into the fire, the narrator has “remembered passages of high imagination, deep pathos, original thoughts, and points of such varied excellence, that the vastness of the sacrifice struck [him] most forcibly” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 334). Now that he feels empathy for the good in the stories, he tries to stop Oberon from burning the tales. He is unsuccessful; Oberon is determined and it is too late. Though the narrator now feels empathetic toward the tales in the fire, he still lacks magical thinking. He does not believe there truly is a fiend in the stories. As Oberon watches the tales burn, the narrator tells us Oberon “described objects he appeared to discern in the fire, fed by his own precious

thoughts” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 335). It is clear the reader is still skeptical, even snide. Still, Oberon’s enthusiasm gradually begins to influence him. As he keeps watching Oberon, he thinks “the writer’s magic had incorporated . . . the aspect of varied scenery” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 335). He is beginning to believe and see what Oberon sees in the manuscript.

When the fire is almost out, the flame suddenly blazes up the chimney and the reader realizes it has “flickered as if with laughter” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 335). The narrator is surprised by this unforeseen occurrence. Oberon exclaims that this flame is the devil that was in the manuscript, saying, “[y]ou saw him? You must have seen him!” (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 335). The narrator does not respond. In the moment of his surprise, he seems almost ready to believe, but never fully commits. Instead, he is drawn back into practical matters. At the end of the tale, he is the one who realizes that the chimney is on fire, while Oberon stomps around the room ranting about his fire demon (Hawthorne, “Devil,” 336). Ultimately, the narrator has gained empathy but is still unable to engage in magical thinking. He remains partly an unpardonable reader.

In “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” we finally see two readers who start out unpardonable but truly change by the end. The story also has a unique form where the narrator is telling a tale to listeners but summarizes large parts of it for the reader. The narrator, a writer, is on an excursion with two female companions through a wood associated with the Salem witch trials. The ground of graves has a sort of aura about it; the narrator says that with “feminine susceptibility, my companions caught all the melancholy associations of the scene” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 206). It is a place of gloom and evil. In spite of this, the girls soon forget their

melancholia, and “Their emotions came and went with quick vicissitude, and sometimes combined to form a peculiar and delicious excitement, the mirth brightening the gloom into a sunny shower of feeling, and a rainbow in the mind” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 206). Hawthorne has established that the girls’ feelings are transitory, and it is difficult to truly affect their sympathies.

The narrator decides to read one of his manuscripts to the girls. He hesitates, suffering from “a dread of renewing [his] acquaintance with fantasies that had lost their charm” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 207-8). After seeing their insufficient empathy, he worries the girls will also lack the willingness or ability to engage in magical thinking. Still, he proceeds. His story is one of murder and jealousy and accidental incest and magic. At one point, the narrator pauses to observe his “readers,” the girls. They have been attentive, and “Their bright eyes were fixed on [him]; their lips apart” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 212). Thinking his audience is showing empathy and suspending their disbelief, the narrator plunges into the final scenes. As a last dramatic touch, the narrator tells the girls that they sit upon the grave of the evil wizard in the tale. He finally gets a reaction; “The ladies started; perhaps their cheeks might have grown pale, had not the crimson west been blushing on them” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 214). The narrator is pleased, thinking his readers have given him the response he hoped for, one of empathy and suspension of disbelief. Soon, however, the readers’ true feelings become apparent. To his chagrin, the girls “began to laugh, while the breeze took a livelier motion, as if responsive to their mirth” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 214). The girls have no empathy for the characters in the story and the horrors they have faced, and are unimpressed by

the wizard’s sorcery and power. They refuse to engage in magical thinking. The girls are the definition of unpardonable readers.

The narrator describes his displeasure at their unpardonable reaction. After they begin to laugh at his tale, he says, “I kept an awful solemnity of visage, being indeed a little piqued, that a narrative which had good authority in our ancient superstitions, and would have brought even a church deacon to Gallows Hill, in old witch times, should now be considered too grotesque and extravagant, for timid maids to tremble at” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 214-15). He decides to try again, to teach them a lesson. The next story he tells is true, and he hopes this will incite a better response from his readers.

This time, his story is about the Salem witch trials, linked to the ground where he and his readers sit. This time the readers are enthralled. They are willing to engage in magical thinking even more than the story requires; when Cotton Mather comes onto the scene, the girls “mistook him for the visible presence of the fiend himself” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 216). They leap from man to fiend without being asked. The narrator is pleased that his readers are engaging with magical thinking, and next reaches for their empathy. He probes his “imagination for a blacker horror, and a deeper woe, and pictured the scaffold—” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 216). Here the narrator’s appeal to his readers’ emotions is interrupted by just that: empathy. His “companions seized an arm on each side; their nerves were trembling; and sweeter victory still, I had reached the seldom trodden places of their hearts, and found the wellspring of their tears” (Hawthorne, “Alice Doane,” 216). The readers have developed the capacity for empathizing with the characters in his story. Now that they have expressed both empathy and magical thinking, the two

readers are no longer unpardonable readers. They have reformed. In fact, they share the narrator's disappointment "that there is nothing on its barren summit . . . to assist the imagination in appealing to the heart" (Hawthorne, "Alice Doane," 216). The two girls, once given a second chance, have now changed into the type of reader Hawthorne describes in his prefaces. They are no longer unpardonable readers. They truly are the "Representative Essence" of the kind and gentle reader Hawthorne instructs us to be.

Hawthorne's instructions to his readers in his prefaces are firm. He expects empathy from his readers and openness to his version of magical realism. A reader must have these characteristics to fully understand and appreciate Hawthorne's romances as he defines them. A look at his exploration of the biblical concept of the unpardonable sin, exemplified primarily in "Ethan Brand" shows that these qualities are precisely what an unpardonable sinner is lacking. Cold detachment from others and disbelief are the ultimate crime. On a much smaller scale, then, it becomes clear that a reader who does not follow Hawthorne's instructions would be an unpardonable reader. Though perhaps not literally sinful, unpardonable readers have the unfortunate power to freeze a story and crush an author. Story cannot exist in the presence of such a reader. Hawthorne demonstrates this in his depiction of readers in his tales. Fortunately, in one tale, "Alice Doane's Appeal," Hawthorne offers an opportunity for redemption. Though unpardonable sinners may be beyond repentance and salvation, unpardonable readers are not. Hawthorne instructs, scolds, and offers forgiveness to those readers who ask for it. Hawthorne is the deity of his readership, saving us from ourselves.

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