The Healing Arts of Play:
Scenes of Self-Determination in Hawthorne's Biographical Stories for Children

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Article Excerpt

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*The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life* ...

*Friedrich Froebel, The Education of Man* (55) (1826)

One August evening, visiting the Berkshires in 1838, Nathaniel Hawthorne joined a funeral procession, as locals and even passersby were wont to do in small New England towns. "About sunset a coffin of a boy about ten years old" is laid in "a one horse wagon among some straw--two or three barouches and wagons following." After a slow climb, a grave is dug "on the steep side of a hill." Father and mother stand "weeping at the upper end of the grave, at the head of the little procession." But when the coffin is lowered, it will not settle in the grave: too much earth left at the bottom. "The mother sobbing with stifled violence" peeps forth "to discover why the coffin had to be drawn up." As hard lifting stalls into grim finality, straw is strewn upon the coffin, "this being the custom here, because 'the clods on the coffin lid have an ugly sound'" (8:126).
This note on how to muffle the noise of pelting stones upon a boy's casket reflects Hawthorne's macabre interest in burial rites as well as the mourning practice of generations who tilled the rough soil of Massachusetts. In The Puritan Way of Death, David Stannard estimates that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a young married couple could anticipate the probable death of two or three children before they reached the age of ten (55-56). Hawthorne's keen eye for the grief-stricken parents and ear for this ritual of comfort anticipate the Victorian cult of beautiful deaths about to flower as he published his first children's books in the early 1840s. Yet ironically "the sudden turn between 1840 and 1910 to searching treatments of childhood death and dying both in works intended for children and those for adults" did not result from any drop in mortality rates for infants and children. As Judith Plotz has shown, child mortality did not decline in the United States until the last part of the nineteenth century (168-169). Meanwhile, "the invention of the idea of childhood" burgeoned, crossing national borders, "occasionally being stopped and discouraged but always continuing on its journey" (Postman 55). In Massachusetts an educational theorist and Transcendentalist publisher of Hawthorne's first books for young readers was cultivating a philosophy of the human potential that connected men of genius to children. "Does the becoming interest the human heart more than the arrived?" Elizabeth Palmer Peabody asked herself in a journal entry (August 10, 1838).

As the concept of the child was altering rapidly during their lifetimes, Peabody and Hawthorne, both born in 1804, witnessed a child's death paradoxically become the least tolerable of all losses (Zelizer 25) when this trauma was still highly likely to occur. (22) Hawthorne's fascination with such contradictions does not separate from the search for his own strange intermediate realm, a "neutral territory," where imagination takes root. Such dark and light truths
amalgamated in his brain as romantic ideas about the child's divine innocence permeated Transcendentalist thought, educational reforms, the Sunday school movement, the growth of pediatrics and the spawning of a new secular literature for and about children. While the Calvinist notion of infant damnation was finally discarded, gentler discipline was advocated in child-rearing manuals, now addressed to mothers, which proliferated after 1830. He egalitarian and child-centered family impressed Alexis de Tocqueville on his visit in 1831. Reflecting on this shift in sentiment that privileged the young during his own generation, Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted a "witty Physician" who lamented that "it was a misfortune to have been born when children were nothing and to live until men were nothing" (Cable 101).

At thirty-four, neither husband, father, nor financially secure writer, Hawthorne struggled in 1838 with his own sense of "nothing. …