

Dr. Heidegger's Experiment

by Nathaniel Hawthorne **Biography**

Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804-64) ancestors were among the first settlers to colonize New England. Unlike Washington Irving (1783-1859), who played a major part in the birth of the American short story, Hawthorne was not influenced by European literature. He was strongly attached to his native country, its history and landscape.

It is from the author's notebooks that we know about his liking for uncommon or even weird situations in his stories. He did not primarily aim at realistic presentation but tended to prefer the psychological and moral interpretation of what he was presenting. As a writer of "romance" he felt at liberty to describe things that are unlikely to happen in real life. He felt entitled to neglect the laws of verisimilitude in order to present a higher reality, a deeper psychology, e.g. in *The Birthmark*, *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*. In addition he had a special liking for symbolism and allegory. His language is strongly latinized and often contains archaisms to create a special atmosphere.

In 1837 he published the first collection of his works under the title *Twice-Told Tales*, followed in 1842 by an expanded edition under the same title. His first novel, *The Scarlet Lener* (1850), immediately became a bestseller. From 1853 to **1860 Hawthorne worked and travelled in Europe (England, Italy, France)**. After his return to **America his creative urge was checked, the Civil War being for him a deplorable national disaster**. Even today Hawthorne ranks among the **foremost short story writers in the world**.

First Unit Structure and Function of the Exposition

1. *What is the general function of an introduction to a short story?*

Characters, setting and **theme must be presented. The characteristic** features of a good introduction to a short story are shortness and compactness.

2. *How many lines does the exposition comprise?*

3. *How are the four guests introduced ?*

The author makes us acquainted with their names, background, outward appearance, their psychological and moral nature. Before the main action is related, the author tells us everything that is worth knowing about the four people:

Mr. Medbourne:

Colonel Killigrew

Mr. Gascoigne

Widow Wycherly ——

4. How is Dr. Heidegger introduced and characterized?

Why does the author not tell us more about him?

How then is he described?

He is characterized by the description of his study (environment) and his experiments (former actions). Dr. Heidegger is not a normal general practitioner, his study resembling a chamber of horrors :

where dangerous experiments are made, for his own and his guests' amusement. The mention of the spirits of Dr.: Heidegger's "deceased patients" and the mysterious impression of the study indicate that the "little" experiments may become a life and death business for the participants (indication of the central theme).

5. What are the relations between the host and his guests?

Second Unit

The Three Phases of the Experiment

1. How is the scene for the main action prepared?

Description of the scene:

What is the function of this experiment with the withered rose?

How do the subjects of the experiment react to this introductory experiment?

2. Into how many phases can the experiment be divided?

First phase: Dr. Heidegger fills the four glasses for the first time with the magic

Second phase: The subjects of the experiment feel that some magic power is taking away "the deep and sad inscriptions which Father Time had been so long engraving on their brows" (p. 7., 11. 14-15); they ask for more.

Third phase: Step by step the subjects of the experiment come under the spell of growing illusion, they begin to feel young again, age is no more than a dream from which they have awoken.

3. How is the experiment ended?

The experiment is stopped by the overturning of the table and the spilling of the magic water; then Dr. Heidegger personally interferes, protesting against this "riot" The main experiment is well prepared and terminated by the parallel experiment with the withered rose. Dr. Heidegger observes

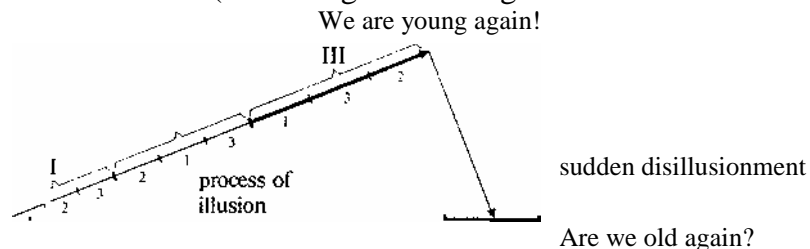
4. Is there a development of the action as well as of the characters?

The melancholy old people of the beginning soon become young again. But their temporary transfiguration ends in the sudden realization that they are old again. Thus, the state of the subjects at the beginning of the experiment is identical with that in the end. Although the different phases underline the external progress of the experiment (i.e. the main action), there is no real development of the characters of the story. The three phases of their lives (age—youth—age) turn out to move along a senseless circular line. There is no true direction or aim in their lives. As their goal of eternal youth and beauty is illusory, their attempt to break this law of nature is doomed to fail.

Summary

The process of the main action is identical with that of the main experiment, taking place in three phases or stages and incorporating the process of growing illusion (or the gradual loss of the realistic outlook of the participants in the experiment). Each phase of the experiment gain consists of three parts: the filling of the glasses by Dr. Heidegger, a moral admonition given by him, and the description of the effect of the magic water on the subjects of the experiment (becoming more extensive with each phase because of the growing effect of the magic liquid). This main experiment is prepared and terminated by the parallel experiment with the rose. The rising action moves up to the climax ("We are young!") and the turning-point (the magic water is spilled) ending in the sudden catastrophe, the sudden disillusionment ("Are we grown old again

Melancholy
Old creatures



Third Unit

The Exposure of Truth by Means of Irony

Verbal Irony

1. What part does Dr. Heidegger play in the story

What kind of man is Dr. Heidegger?

2. What sort of language does he employ when admonishing his friends" not to fall prey to the „perils of youth" a second time? p. 6, 27-32:

To what extent is there an obvious contradiction?

Dr. Heidegger need not exhort his guests if they really possess "the experience of a lifetime". This exhortation, which seems superfluous at first sight, makes the reader suspicious as to the real meaning of the whole passage. Dr. Heidegger, the keen observer, is an ironical man, who is in the habit of exposing man's hidden weaknesses. His words are not to be taken literally. He uses *verbal irony* (see Glossary) as a stinging weapon for discovery. He rightly prides himself on having so well selected the subjects of his experiment. He best knows about the foolishness of the four old creatures, whom he constantly addresses as "my respectable old friends". The more often he repeats this special phrase the more we feel that it must mean quite the contrary, namely "my foolish old friends". They ought to have "the experience of a lifetime", but they do not.

3. Does Dr. Heidegger really give them rules for their conduct?

Trying seriously to give them rules for their conduct would be wasting one's time. He knows that they are incorrigible fools. In order to lay special emphasis on this fact the author uses irony, thus exposing the objective truth that man's true nature never changes. So the old fools are in search of "the perils of youth", they are sure to become "patterns of sin and shame" and not "patterns of virtue and wisdom". Dr. Heidegger, the ironical observer, employs verbal irony as a personal outlook on things, a personal way of keen observation and interpreting reality. He proves that his ironical comments are right by performing a seemingly ridiculous experiment in which the four old people think themselves young again and repeat their former errors.

Dramatic Irony

1. *What parts can the rising action be divided into?*

2. *What are the reactions of the old people at the climax of their delirium?*

Feeling really young they become frolicsome and unrestrained. They poke fun at themselves, laugh at the discrepancy between their youthful bodies and their old-fashioned and ill-fitting attire. They now can afford to imitate themselves in their old age: "The most singular effect of their gaiety was an impulse to mock the infirmity and decrepitude of which they had so lately been the victims." (p. 9,11. 15-17)

What roles do they play in their youthful ecstasy?

One of them limps about like a gouty grandfather; another puts on a pair of glasses pretending to pore over Dr. Heidegger's book of magic. A third strives to imitate the dignity of Dr. Heidegger, seating himself in an arm-chair. They challenge Dr. Heidegger, because, in their eyes, he symbolizes Father Time. They riot against him as their real antagonist who causes old age, weakness, and disease.

3. *How is the reader informed that the disillusionment is soon to follow?*

What do we call the device of letting the audience (the reader) know more than the characters?

This literary device is called *dramatic irony*). It exposes the truth about a situation before it is revealed to the characters themselves.

The Exposure of Truth through Irony

a) *Verbal Irony:*

The actual intention is put into words of slightly different or opposite meaning. Dr. H.'s ironical language serves to lay bare the truth.

b) *Dramatic Irony:*

The spectators or readers know more than the characters. Function of the play within the play: it demonstrates that the four guests misunderstand their situation

c) *Common function*

Irony (verbal and dramatic) serves to reveal contradictions between appearance (seeming) and reality (being), to expose the objective truth.

Fourth Unit

Central Theme and Moral Lesson

1. *What is the reaction of Dr. Heidegger's friends to the experiment with the rose?*
(p. 6, ll. 10-11.)

2. *What are the reasons for their wrong decisions?*
The four fail to see

Quote a passage where their attitude towards youth and age is described.
(p. 9, ll. 4-10)

What does age mean to them? , , , .

What effect has the magic water on their outlook on old age?

How did they see life after they had passed the prime of youth?

Life ("the world's successive scenes") was to them "but a gallery of faded pictures". At every stage of one's life (youth—middle age—old age) one must regard things from a different point of view. The four old people, at every stage of their lives, have tried to see things with the eyes of youth. Real life to them means youth; age can be nothing but a faded picture of youth. Thus the misinterpretation of age makes them feel discontented, makes them long for eternal youth. At the same time, youth as a state of enchantment, prevents them from seeing things as they really are. So, at every phase of their lives, their view of reality is unrealistic or illusory.

What, therefore, according to those conclusions, is the central theme of the narrative?

3. How is the moral lesson exemplified?

4. Where is the moral lesson pronounced ? In the last two paragraphs the lesson is formulated positively as well as negatively. Dr. Heidegger could not be tempted by the prospect of becoming young again. Therefore he restricted himself to the role of a keen observer of the experiment, whose function it is to lay bare the follies and weaknesses of the old people who cannot put up with growing old. His conclusion: "Well—I bemoan it not; for if the fountain gushed at my doorstep, I would not stoop to bathe my lips in it—no, though its delirium were for years instead of moments. Such is the lesson you have taught me!" (p. 11, 11. 11-14)

Have they really taught Dr. Heidegger a lesson?