

## *Un Uncertain Ramble*

*Julieta Ojeda Alba*

UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA

### RESUMEN

El intenso y posiblemente patológico interés de Charles L. Dodgson por las niñas inmaduras en general, y por Alice Liddell en particular, es de sobra conocido. Esta fuerte inclinación fue sin duda el motor que lo impulsó a escribir y publicar en 1865 con el seudónimo de Lewis Carroll *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*, y el resto de sus obras para niños. Estas obras le proporcionaron un puesto de honor entre los pioneros de la literatura infantil. Sin embargo, Carroll no fue el primer autor cuya literatura fuera influenciada por un sesgo análogo; en 1832, fecha de su nacimiento, el americano Nathaniel Hawthorne ya había dejado sentir la influencia de sus amistades infantiles en personajes tales como Annie de "Little Annie's Ramble". El presente artículo pretende hacer ver que, si la amistad y el interés de Hawthorne por las niñas no fueron tan manifiestos como los de Carroll, sí pueden ahora demostrarse suficientemente para dar pie a conjeturas, que sin duda nos conducen a una mejor comprensión de su obra.

### ABSTRACT

It is widely known that Lewis Carroll's remarkable attraction to prepubescent little girls in general, and to Alice Lidell in particular, compelled him to write and publish in 1865 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the first of his 'Alice books' which secured him a place in literature among the pioneers of children's books. However it is fair to remark that he was by no means the first writer to feel this sway and reflect it in his literary work; by the time Carroll was born in 1832 the American Nathaniel Hawthorne in a much less conspicuous way had already felt the influence of some "beautiful little girls" who made the creation of literary characters such as Annie of "Little Annie's Ramble" possible. Our intention in this article is to demonstrate that, although Hawthorne's penchant may not have been as noticeable as Lewis's, it was still perceptible enough to raise suspicions that now lead us to a better understanding of his fiction.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Little Annie's Ramble" was first published anonymously in *Youth Keepsake* in 1835 and then two years later in March 1837 it was included in *Twice-Told Tales*. Through the years it has customarily been considered to be children's literature; two decades ago in the *Centenary Edition* one of its editors, Roy H. Pearce, equated it to "Little Daffydowndilly" in the introduction to *True Stories from History and Biography*. Much more recently Laura Laffrado, a foremost commentator of Hawthorne's children's stories, also discussed it as such (1992, 13). In addition to this classification as youth literature it has also acquired a reputation of being either dull or harmless. For instance, F. O. Matthiessen, in spite of his frank admiration for the author, referred to it as "drearly innocuous" (1941, 218). For Thomas Inge "the spirit of childhood innocence informs the narrative" (1994, 46), while David S. Reynolds reports that in the story "... an angelic child revives and cheers an old man" (1989, 369). We must here point out that if Annie revives and cheers anyone, the text does not provide any evidence that it is an old man.

In this short paper we would like to assert that we consider it to deserve neither of these opinions. On the contrary, we believe that there is far deeper substance and meaning in the tale than one sees at first and that it has long been neglected or superficially read. Mary M. Van Tassel noting this neglect stated, "it is overlooked by modern scholars, who consider its tone sentimental and who slight it and its companion sketches. . . ." (1987, 170). Undoubtedly whether we are analysing it with either intrinsic or extrinsic approaches, we can find clear indications that its content might easily be interpreted in a quite different and more disturbing way.

First we must firmly establish that the narrator through whose descriptions Annie is presented to us is Hawthorne himself. At the beginning of the tale he comments: "If I pride myself of anything it is because I have a smile that children love" (147) <sup>1</sup>, and relating to Hawthorne Sophia wrote in a letter to her sister Elizabeth soon after they first met him: "What a beautiful smile he has! In 'Annie's Rambles,' he says that if there is anything he prides himself upon it is in having a smile that children love. I should think they would, indeed. There is the innocence and purity and frankness of a child's soul in it"<sup>2</sup>. If Sophia takes for granted that Hawthorne is the narrator we should have no reason to doubt her, but if her own written recognition does not supply enough

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1 All references to "Little Annie's Ramble" correspond to the Houghton & Mifflin of *Twice-Told Tales* listed in the bibliography.

2 Quoted from Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's and His Wife, p. 185.

documentation there are still other ways of establishing the identity of the author-narrator.

Annie is charmed by the narrator's smile and that is precisely the reputation Hawthorne seems to have had among children. In a letter to her mother Mrs. Hawthorne refers to a conversation between her two children, Una and Julian, about a friend of the family's charming smile. According to Sophia Una said: "But you know, Julian, that there is no smile like papa's!", and to this Julian's immediate answer was: "Oh no, . . . Not like papa's". This seems to ascertain well enough the reputation of Hawthorne's smile; at least as it was among children<sup>3</sup>.

In relation to the indictment of being dull, that description does not seem to have been universally shared and is in fact contrary to the opinions of many of Hawthorne's literary contemporaries. We can let some of these authors speak for us with far more authority. For Longfellow the tale is: "one of those beautiful sketches, which are interspersed among the stories, like green leaves among flowers"; For the bluestocking Elizabeth P. Peabody this story is: "replete with heart-touching thought"; while for the implacable and overcritical Edgar Allan Poe, who was so given to underestimate his colleagues, it is "beautiful without being characterised by the polish and adaptation so visible in the tales proper"<sup>4</sup>. Other critics have made similar comments.

A far more intriguing issue for us deals with the presumed naiveté of the story, for if the tale is anything it is not innocuous. Like the rest of Hawthorne's children's stories or sketches it has not been particularly heeded and the essays on it are extremely scarce. However, Polly L. Whitney called attention to "Hawthorne's fascination with pure little girls" (1985, 65), and no doubt this is an idea that deserves much closer study than has been done, while at the same time generates some suspicions.

The story line is rather slight and little is going on. It tells the reader of a ramble which Annie, a five-year-old girl, and the narrator, a male adult, take around a village on a day when a circus is performing. Both characters provide the tale with their individual vision of what they contemplate. Apparently this simple plot line seems rather commonplace and offers little that needs to be hidden. Nevertheless, if we look more carefully into the story we are bound to be surprised at how easily it lends itself to some unexpected and darker interpretations.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Rose Lathrop, *Memories of Hawthorne*, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Albert J. Von Frank, *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's Short Stories*, pp. 24; 27; 33

First of all, it is difficult not to agree with Whitney that Hawthorne seems to have had a strange fondness for untouched female children. In 1842 Sophia Peabody specifically reported in a letter to her sister that "Mr. Hawthorne said he wished he could have intercourse with some beautiful children,-beautiful little girls, he did not care for boys"<sup>5</sup>. The meaning of the word "intercourse" in the 1828 edition of the Webster dictionary is, as could be expected, "Communication; commerce; connection by reciprocal dealings." etc. Nevertheless it is relevant to note that Walter Herbert remarks that the word acquired its sexual connotation during this period reflecting the new ethos of family life that placed emphasis upon a companionate relation of husband and wife (1989, 46). We have reasons to believe that long before this time he had frequent relationships with little girls and that he enjoyed them considerably. Elizabeth Hawthorne implies the deep affection that a little girl in the neighbourhood had for Nathaniel when she writes: "I believe people liked to tease her about him-to say something to his disadvantage, in order to see her kindle into wrath in his defense"<sup>6</sup>. This affection logically would not be just in one direction.

In the same line the famous editor of *The Scarlet Letter*, James Fields, informs:

A lady of my acquaintance (the identical 'Little Annie' of the 'Ramble' in 'Twice-Told Tales') recalls . . . that when she was a child, and before Hawthorne had printed any of his stories, she used to sit on his knee and lean her head on his shoulder, while by the hour he would fascinate her with delightful legends, much more wonderful and beautiful than any she has ever read since in printed books<sup>7</sup>.

Obviously in spite of his reputed twelve year isolation in the Mannings' bleak residence he socialised enough to have close relationships with some little girls. It seems also that one of the reasons Hawthorne married Sophia was because everyone, including herself, considered her to be a child-woman who "having grown up with the feeling that she never was to be married looked upon herself as practically a child"<sup>8</sup>. Much later in life when Una was five years old,

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5 Letter from Sophia Peabody to her sister Elizabeth written between the 26 April and May 1st. Quoted from Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, p. 185.

6 Letter from Elizabeth Hawthorne to James T. Fields. Quoted from Randall Stewart, "Recollections of Hawthorne by His Sister Elizabeth" p. 330.

7 James T. Fields, *Yesterday with Authors*, p. 47.

8 Julian Hawthorne attributes this statement to his aunt Elizabeth Peabody. Quoted from Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, p. 181.

the same as Annie, Hawthorne reacts to her “exhibitionism” as if she were a monster and Walter T. Herbert goes as far as to say that this happened “especially when he was sexually aroused”<sup>9</sup>.

The same fondness for little girls is true in his literature. His first novel, *Fanshawe*, had already presented in 1828 a child-like woman who is abducted by a male; then came the “Annie” we are now studying and sometime after *The Whole History of Grandfather’s Chair*, in which collection a grandfather enjoys an outstanding rapport with Alice, one of those innocent little girls. There are several other examples of adult male-little girl couples: Marygold and Midas in “The Golden Touch”, Proserpina and Pluto in “The Pomegranate Seeds”, Elsie and Doctor Grimshawe in *Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret*, and finally, Pansy and Doctor Dolliver in *The Dolliver Romance*. These are some examples of the same repeated association that we see in “Little Annie’s Ramble”.

Focusing our attention again on Annie we pointedly note that Hawthorne intentionally makes use of an excuse in attempting to justify his abduction. Annie has the recurrent traits of the child-characters that Hawthorne created before his paternity; she is notably resilient, heedless, innocent, and is supposed to have pure thoughts. However, she is not completely adapted to her circumstances and is searching and reaching for something beyond her immediate world. As Pandora in Hawthorne’s story, “The Paradise of Children”, she considers her clean organised existence somewhat dull. In fact, according to the narrator, we meet at the beginning of the story a child quite ready for her initiation. Let’s not forget that when he sees the girl and entertains the idea of taking her away with him, he remarks almost echoing Shakespeare’s Portia<sup>10</sup>:

I can see that the pretty child is weary of this wide and pleasant street, with the green trees flinging their shade across the quiet sunshine, and the pavements and the sidewalks all as clean as if the housemaid had just swept them with her broom. She feels that impulse to go strolling away-that longing after the mystery of the great world-which many children feel, and which I felt in my childhood. (146).

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<sup>9</sup> Walter T. Herbert, *Dearest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family*, p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> In “The Merchant of Venice”, that Hawthorne read frequently, Portia exclaims in act one scene II: “Nerisa, my little body is a-weary of this great world ....”, and her reasons are as vague and nebulous as Annie’s.

Nevertheless the picture of a bored Annie is somewhat surprising for anyone familiar with the characteristic vivacity that five-year-olds possess in Hawthorne's literary universe, as well as in real life. We then are tempted to suspect that the narrator's opinion about what prompts Annie to go with him is not necessarily accurate and objective. First of all he is an internal narrator, and consequently an interested party in the events, which admits the possibility of some distortions. Ascribing to Annie the longing for adventure that he himself experiences, he finds perhaps a justification for his own behaviour. His interpretation of Annie's desires morally authorises him to take her away without permission, indeed without even her mother's knowledge.

Hawthorne, author-narrator, had himself a lifelong personal interest in adventure, which seems to suggest a bias on his part. He wrote to his mother in 1822: "Oh, no, mother, I was not born to vegetate forever in one place, and to live and die as tranquil as a puddle of wate."<sup>11</sup> His uncle Manning Hawthorne said about him: "There was the adventurous, restless strain within him, which would never submit to a stool in the office of his uncles"<sup>12</sup>. His extreme attraction for roving youth also seems to have had something to do with his admiration for the author of *Moby-Dick*. Notably at home he was indeed inclined to see his personal desires reflected in his children. Of Una he wrote once as he was watching her at play in the garden:

She is infinitely adventurous, and spends much of her time, in this Summer weather, hanging on that gate, and peeping forth into the great, unknown world that lies beyond. Ever and anon, without giving us the slightest notice, she is apt to take a flight into the said unknown<sup>13</sup>.

One of the most important but overlooked issues concerning the propriety in the story is that of the narrator's authority to take Annie away. Who is this person who endows himself with the right to take her away without permission? It is true that she immediately complies with his wishes when he beckons her, but it is also possible that this promptness might be due to the narrator's ascendancy over her. We must not forget that he is an adult who is dressed in black and walks "with a measured step and a heavy brow" (147); it is befitting to surmise that this type of individual must represent an indisputable source of authority to a five year old nineteenth century child.

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11 *The Letters* 1813-1843, p. 138.

12 Hawthorne's uncle Manning Hawthorne expresses this opinion in "Parental and Family Influences on Hawthorne", p. 12.

13 *The American Notebooks*, p. 345.

If the narrator is responsible for the negligence of taking the girl away from her mother without previous consent, we are beset by some questions: what exactly urges him and what right, if any, has he to do so? Since Hawthorne had already introduced in *Fanshawe* the theme of adults' abuse of children, we cannot but consider the possibility that the author's *Doppelgänger* is endangering Annie to satisfy some personal motive, as his own words suggest when he exclaims:

As the pure breath of children revives the life of aged men, so is our moral nature revived by their free and simple thoughts, their native feeling, their airy mirth, for little cause or none, their grief soon rised and soon allayed. Their influence on us is at least reciprocal with ours on them. (156).

The narrator declares that the influence is reciprocal, but he is unable to identify in which way this is manifest and how the girl benefited from the ramble.

We have mentioned that Annie's companion presumes, we do not know if justifiably, that Annie is anxious to live the experience that the ramble symbolises and therefore he takes her with him without permission. More importantly, he openly shows off to the reader his ascendancy over the girl. Right after he has made his decision to take her he remarks: "Little Annie shall take a ramble with me! I do but hold out my hand, and, like some bright bird in the sunny air, with her blue silk frock fluttering upwards from her white pantalets, she comes bounding on tiptoe across the street" (146). We must here recall that the modal verb "shall" used with the third person singular may have the connotation of an order from the speaker to the subject of "shall". At the same time he clearly indicates that only a motion is enough to persuade the girl to follow him. It is therefore not unreasonable to speculate about these dilemmas that unfortunately we cannot clearly resolve. Who wishes to take the walk, the girl, the narrator, or both? What exactly is the narrator's authority on Annie and what is their relationship? <sup>14</sup>

Thus the story is a frustrated *Bildungsroman*. A precise event that would constitute Annie's loss of innocence does not materialise, and we return, after a circular trip, to just where we were at the very beginning of the story. Nevertheless the fact that Annie is finally released from whatever experiences

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to recall that Hawthorne was fascinated by the theme of a human being dominated by another. He deals with it in "The Birth-mark", "Ethan Brand" and *The Scarlet Letter* among others.

her companion had imagined for her does not eliminate the risk to which she had been exposed, or the responsibility of the narrator. On the contrary, when turning back towards Annie's house he says to her after listening to the town crier's call: "forget not to thank heaven, my Annie, that after wandering a little way into the world, you may return at the first summons, with an untainted and unwary heart, and be a happy child again" (155). It is reasonable to believe that if the narrator himself considers that Annie should be thankful because she has been allowed to turn back with a clean heart, we can surely infer that during their walk she has been exposed to the risk of tainting forces. The venture with the narrator in the open space symbolises therefore that risk, versus the security of the closed space of the girl's home where the adventure starts and ends.

There is also some other internal evidence that danger for little girls is bound to come from men; after all, the only shade of fear that we perceive in the little girl when she is among the animals of the circus is that caused by the monkeys, whose ugliness affects her because "it bears a wild and dark resemblance to humanity" (153). The idea was apparently ingrained in Hawthorne; years later he observed how Una was scared in the same way. In his notebooks, after the description of a street musician and his monkey Hawthorne adds: "Una was with me, holding by my forefinger, and walking decorously along the pavement. She stopped to contemplate the monkey, and after a while, shocked by his horrible ugliness, began to cry"<sup>15</sup>. Is it highly significant that among the lions, the bears, the elephants, and the wolf Annie is only frightened by the monkey precisely because it "resembles humanity". Hawthorne obviously sees man as the worst enemy of Annie, and therefore of childhood. Significantly it is the mother's call which finally secures Annie and by doing so reveals Hawthorne's idealised opinion of mothers and their beneficial effects.

To summarise, all we can attempt to do in this short study is to point out that to call "innocuous" a sketch in which an adult, according to his own words, puts a child in danger of losing her innocence is judging too lightly. We cannot but say that indeed it is one of his least innocuous stories, especially in view of the fact that Hawthorne was a reputed expert, as it has often been observed, in hiding the truth and keeping things out of his writing and also that in the thirties he had written other tales of hidden corruption.

We should bear in mind as well that the common stereotypical image of puritanical America does not include the many realities of that time. Perverse sexuality was common in the literature of the thirties and, as Reynolds remarks, "The ante-bellum social and literary scene was deeply riddled with sexual

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15 The American Notebooks, p. 271.



tensions and perversions" (1989, 211). Sex with children was not unknown either and, although we do not go so far as to say that Annie's companion had the slightest conscious mind to molest her, it is undeniable that the danger she was exposed to was something more than the mere observation of the circus animals in their cages.

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