

# The Hollow of the Three Hills



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Born and raised in Salem, Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne was a direct descendant of notorious Puritan John Hathorne, a leading judge in the Salem witch trials. After the loss of his father, who died of yellow fever in 1808, Hawthorne moved with his mother and sister to live with relatives. At the age of 17, at his uncle's insistence, Hawthorne reluctantly attended Bowdoin college and, despite his disinterest in education, graduated in 1825. He then returned to Salem, where he briefly worked as an editor and published several short stories in local magazines, many of which he compiled in his collection *Twice-told Tales*. In 1836, he met illustrator and transcendentalist Sophia Peabody, to whom he became engaged. In order to raise funds for their wedding, Hawthorne invested in Brook Farm, a Transcendentalist Utopia commune where he spent much of his time shoveling manure. On finding that the endless physical labor left him no time or energy to write, he left the commune less than a year later. In 1850, Hawthorne entered the most lucrative and successful period of his career, publishing three novels and three short story collections within the span of three years. Following this, however, President Franklin Pierce—an old friend and classmate of Hawthorne's—awarded him the position of United States consul in Liverpool, and it was another seven years before Hawthorne wrote his fourth and final novel, *The Marble Faun*. In 1863, Hawthorne's health declined suddenly, and what little he wrote during this time was incoherent. A year later, he died in his sleep at the age of 59.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When "The Hollow of the Three Hills" was published in 1830, Transcendentalism had begun to emerge in the Eastern United States. Transcendentalism was a reactionary philosophical movement that arose in response to Unitarianism, a liberal branch of Christianity with an emphasis on rationality. While Transcendentalists did not fully reject the teachings of Unitarianism, they sought to balance out the intellectualism and reason of the movement with spirituality and an emphasis on emotion. Above all, Transcendentalists believed in the intrinsic goodness of humanity and had faith that individuals are at their best when self-reliant. This Christian sensibility is evident in "The Hollow of Three Hills," as the young woman is tortured by a sense of (arguably religious) guilt over abandoning her family. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution—a period between the 18th and 19th centuries during which Western societies began to adopt mass manufacturing

methods on a large scale—was causing an increased divide between men and women. Where previously work had been largely home-based, the rise in factory production meant more men left the home in order to earn wages, while woman remained behind to oversee unpaid domestic duties. It was during this period that the idea of the "separate spheres," a patriarchal ideology that suggested woman were biologically predisposed to motherhood and housework, rose to prominence. This notion of gender roles is also present in the story, as the young woman is tortured by shame over abandoning her duties as a wife and mother.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Hollow of the Three Hills" was among the 36 stories featured in Hawthorne's collection *Twice-told Tales* (1837), the majority of which covered similar themes of morality, repentance, and hopelessness. These topics, as well as Hawthorne's critical view of Transcendentalism, were also prevalent in his longer works of fiction. Perhaps the most notable of these works was *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), which contained direct parallels to Hawthorne's time in a Transcendentalist Utopia commune and cast the experience in a negative light. Comparable contemporary authors in the Gothic romance genre include Edgar Allan Poe ("The Tell-Tale Heart," 1843), whose morbid fiction similarly contradicted Transcendentalist ideals, and Herman Melville (*Moby-Dick*, 1851), who drew direct inspiration from Hawthorne's works. Stories that, like "The Hollow of Three Hills," explore 19th-century gender dynamics using elements of the Gothic include Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Hollow of the Three Hills
- **When Written:** 1830
- **Where Written:** Salem, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1830
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A hollow that lies at the base of three hills
- **Climax:** The young woman witnesses a vision of her own child's funeral before dying at the old crone's feet.
- **Antagonist:** The Old Crone
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Book Burner.** Hawthorne anonymously published his first novel, *Fanshawe*, in 1828. But despite the book's positive reception, it was a commercial failure. Ashamed of his work, Hawthorne burned the unsold copies and refused to acknowledge his authorship of the novel until the day he died. Hawthorne expressed a similar wish to burn the remaining copies of *Twice-told Tales* when it undersold, but he lacked the funds to do so.

**Medical Mystery.** At nine years old, Hawthorne sustained an injury while playing "bat and ball" and became bedridden. Though physicians could find nothing wrong with the boy, Hawthorne remained incapacitated for a year, during which he discovered a love of reading.

woman ever expected that there would be so much joy in a madhouse. The young woman responds that there is joy but also misery.

The old crone states that there is one last vision remaining. For a third and final time, she covers the young woman's face and begins her incantation. The young woman now hears the mournful ringing of a church bell, which grows increasingly loud until she can distinguish the sounds of a funeral procession, led by a priest reading burial rites. Though the gathered mourners do not speak aloud, there are whisperings of a daughter who abandoned her parents, a wife who betrayed her husband, and a mother who left her child to die. With this final vision done, the old crone attempts to awaken the young woman, but she is no longer moving. The old crone chuckles to herself.



## PLOT SUMMARY

As the October sun sets, a beautiful young woman and a withered old crone meet at an appointed time in a darkened hollow between **the three hills**. The old crone asks that the young woman state her business quickly, as they can only remain here for one hour. The young woman states that she is a stranger to this land, but that it does not matter where she comes from. She is here because she has abandoned her loved ones, and she's now cut off from them forever. Unable to rid herself of the guilt, she has come to the hollow to ask about their welfare. The old crone promises that the young woman will receive the information she seeks before the sun sets, and the young woman agrees to do the old crone's bidding, even though doing so will certainly kill her.

With their agreement made, the young woman lies with her head on the old crone's knees. The crone draws a cloak over the young woman's face and begins to mutter a dark incantation. Soon, the young woman begins to hear sounds. Though initially indistinct, they become clearer and clearer, until eventually she can make out an entire scene: a ticking clock, the roar of a fire, and the despondent voices of a man and a woman. The man and woman speak sorrowfully of their missing daughter, who has brought a shame upon their family that will follow them until the day they die. They also speak of a second, more recent misfortune, but their voices fade in the wind.

The young woman finds the vision humiliating, but there is more to come. Once again, the crone draws her cloak over the young woman's face and begins her prayer. Soon, the young woman hears a second scene, in which chains rattle and a cacophony of voices shriek, laugh, and sob in unison. Eventually, the young woman can make out the voice of a man who speaks desperately to anyone who will listen about his wife, who betrayed her wedding vows and abandoned her home. However, his voice is quickly drowned out by the screams and shouts of the people around him, and their collective voices once more fade into the wind. The old crone asks if the young



## CHARACTERS

**The Young Woman** – The young woman arrives in the titular hollow between **the three hills** after having abandoned her family, and she seeks audience with the old crone in order to see how her loved ones are faring without her. Though the young woman is the story's protagonist, she is a morally ambiguous and rather mysterious figure. The narration reveals very little about her personality or motives beyond the fact that she feels intense guilt over her actions and is willing to sacrifice her life to the crone in order to lift the weight of her shame. However, despite the young woman's wrongdoing, the narration suggests that her self-sacrificial attitude is unnecessary and that her guilt is causing her to act irrationally. This is most evident in the young woman's naïve willingness to trust the old crone, whose visions the young woman takes at face value despite the crone's obviously malevolent nature. Over the course of the story, the young woman becomes increasingly distressed by the crone's disturbing revelations. Upon learning in the third and final vision that her child has died in her absence, the young woman becomes overwhelmed by her shame and perishes at the crone's feet. The narration treats the young woman's death as a tragic consequence of guilt and as a victory for the evil crone.

**The Old Crone** – The old crone is an ancient and wicked sorceress who meets with the young woman in the titular hollow between **the three hills**. The young woman has betrayed her family, and the old crone—at the young woman's request—grants her three visions, each one detailing how this betrayal has torn her family apart. The old crone is a purely evil an unholy force, depicted using prayers "that were not meant to be acceptable in Heaven" and taking several opportunities to taunt the young woman over her grief. Due to the old crone's blatantly malevolent nature and the fact that she refers to the young woman's ordeal and ultimate death as "a sweet hour's sport," the truthfulness of the old crone's "visions" is questionable at best.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## GUILT AND SHAME

“The Hollow of the Three Hills” tells the story of an unnamed young woman burdened with guilt after having abandoned her family for unspecified

reasons. Desperate to learn how her loved ones are faring without her, the woman seeks audience with a wicked old crone in a **hollow between three hills** and willingly trades her life in exchange for three visions. These visions detail how the woman's betrayal has affected those she left behind, each one more harrowing than the last. After the final and most devastating vision, in which the young woman learns that her child has died in her absence, she herself dies at the crone's feet, fulfilling the terms of their agreement. Through this grim and fatalistic narrative, in which an otherwise empathetic and self-sacrificing young woman chooses to end her own life rather than live with the guilt of her failures, Hawthorne highlights shame as a destructive and ineffective feeling that disproportionately punishes those who do not necessarily deserve it and ultimately allows evil to triumph.

“The Hollow of the Three Hills” presents guilt not just as an emotion, but also as a form of punishment, self-appointed or otherwise. Hawthorne achieves this through his depiction of the titular hollow itself, which acts as a symbolic representation of these two concepts combined. In the story's opening, the omniscient narrator describes the young woman as having been “smitten with an untimely blight in what should have been the fullest bloom of her years,” the “untimely blight” in question being her shame over her past. Meanwhile, decaying tree trunks are scattered around the hollow itself, one of which was once a “majestic oak.” This suggests that the hollow, much like the woman, has been cut down in its “fullest bloom,” symbolically tying the location to the woman's guilty conscience. Meanwhile, the hollow may also act as a punishment, and more specifically a representation of a Christian Hell. Hawthorne signifies this through the use of twisted religious imagery—for instance, the old crone's evil “prayers”—as well as the surrounding three hills. Though these hills have several potential symbolic meanings, given Hawthorne's recurring exploration of religion in his works, it is possible to interpret them as a representation of the Holy Trinity. Under this reading, the hollow's position beneath the hills, shrouded in complete darkness, conjures an image of condemnation from God. With these symbolic meanings in mind, the woman's voluntary choice to enter the hollow and

engage with the old crone can be read as her succumbing to her own shame and subsequently choosing to punish herself for her actions.

However, the story implies that the woman's intense feelings of guilt may not be entirely rational, rendering her self-confinement and ultimate sacrifice in the hollow meaningless. Hawthorne implies this irrationality through the old crone. While it is easy to take the crone's visions at face value, Hawthorne makes several suggestions that call her reliability into question, the first and most obvious of which being that she is explicitly stated to be an “evil woman.” Furthermore, the crone conducts her magic by drawing a cloak over the young woman's face, both literally and figuratively pulling the wool over her eyes. However, despite the implicitly wicked nature of the old crone, the young woman trusts her word completely and judges herself according to the crone's ambiguously truthful visions. Through the young woman's naïve willingness to believe this “decrepit” woman, Hawthorne seems to suggest that those suffering with a guilty conscience become blinded by their shame, willing believe the worst possible consequences of their actions have come to pass, no matter how unreliable the source.

Ultimately, Hawthorne does not portray the young woman's death as a fitting punishment for her crimes, but instead as a victory for the forces of evil. Hawthorne highlights the story as a tragedy through his portrayal of the young woman. Though she is a morally complex character, her appearance and personality paint her as the only real source of goodness in the hollow. While she abandoned her family, she displays sincere concern for their wellbeing, so much so that she is willing to sacrifice herself to see them once more. Additionally, in stark contrast to the death and gloom of the hollow, the opening paragraph describes her as being “graceful in form and fair of feature,” the emphasis on her fairness highlighting her as a metaphorical light in the darkness. With the young woman's death, this light is extinguished, and the wicked crone expresses joy at this fact, proclaiming that the woman's ordeal has been a “sweet hour's sport.” This final line affirms Hawthorne's stance that the young woman's self-condemnation is no cause for celebration, but instead a victory for malevolent forces.

Overall, through its depiction of a morally complex character who has indeed done wrong, but who becomes blinded by her own shame and dies tragically, “The Hollow of the Three Hills” presents itself as a cautionary tale, warning its readers against the dangers of needless self-punishment and asking them to consider the irrational and often destructive nature of shame.



## WOMEN AND SOCIAL EXPECTATION

In “The Hollow of the Three Hills,” the protagonist, an unnamed young woman, feels immense guilt over abandoning her family and faces harsh criticism from others for her inability to perform her duties as a

daughter, wife, and mother. This story of a woman punished for her failure to act the way society demands is reflective of 19th-century attitudes towards women and in particular addresses the concept of the “separate spheres.” A patriarchal ideology that rose to prominence during the Industrial Revolution, the theory of the separate spheres claimed that in an ideal world, men should hold power over the “public” sphere (which entailed paid labor, law, and politics), while women should concern themselves with the “domestic” sphere (which included housework and childcare). The young woman’s failure to uphold the standards of her gender and her subsequent exile acts as a representation of the era’s judgmental attitudes towards women who attempted to break free of their assigned “sphere.”

Throughout the story, Hawthorne suggests that society does not judge people (and in particular women) based upon their own personal merits, but instead values them exclusively for the gendered roles they are expected to perform. The narrative demonstrates this point through the characters’ names—or, more specifically, the distinct lack thereof. In choosing to leave the story’s cast unnamed, Hawthorne strips his characters of personal identity and consequently reduces them to the roles they perform. This is most evident in the unnamed protagonist, whom the narrator and other characters refer to as “young woman,” “daughter,” “wife,” and “mother”—all implicitly gendered terms which define the woman not by her traits, but by her femininity and expected functions within the domestic sphere. In stripping the young woman of any real identity beyond her gender, Hawthorne suggests that in the eyes of 19th-century America, this is all that matters: like a proper name, the woman’s character beyond this is just an irrelevant detail that need not be included.

Having emphasized the prevalence of strict gender roles in American culture, Hawthorne then goes on to suggest that Western society looks down upon and punishes those who reject the responsibilities of their assigned “sphere,” considering these people to be guilty of a moral failing. During the old crone’s third and final vision, in which the young woman witnesses the funeral of her own child, the gathered mourners explicitly state this, whispering among themselves that the young woman has “sinned against natural affection, and left her child to die.” This reference to sin affirms the 19th-century stance that those who challenge their biological role are committing a crime against their own nature and are thus deserving of punishment. Furthermore, the woman implies that her community has exiled her for her infraction. While it is true that she initially abandoned her family of her own volition, she states that she has now been “cut off forever” from her loved ones, despite wishing to see them once more. This would suggest that the woman’s banishment to the **hollow** is not entirely self-imposed, and that it is indicative of the way in which society casts aside women who fail to perform their

duties.

However, “The Hollow of the Three Hills” is not unequivocally critical of the separate spheres. The story’s ultimate stance on the issue comes into question primarily due to its protagonist. Though the young woman often appears in a favorable light, assuming that the old crone’s visions are true, the woman’s betrayal did indeed tear her family apart, resulting in her husband’s confinement to a madhouse and the her own child’s death. This suggests that there is some truth to the notion that when a woman fails to perform her duties, the “home and heart [is] made desolate,” and it throws the domestic sphere into chaos. However, Hawthorne does appear sympathetic towards the woman, and he treats her death as a tragic victory for the evil old crone nonetheless. Additionally, the woman never reveals the true motivations underpinning her departure. These facts combined would suggest that the young woman is an intentionally ambiguous character, and that Hawthorne expects his readers to decide for themselves whether the woman is truly deserving of her fate, or if she has been unfairly and prematurely judged by a biased social system.

Ultimately, “The Hollow of the Three Hills” is a reflection of the era’s attitudes towards gender, especially relating to the depersonalization of women under the theory of the separate spheres. In his depiction of a morally ambiguous female protagonist who has caused chaos by abandoning her family—but who is sympathetic nevertheless—Hawthorne invites his readers to consider the immense social pressure placed upon women to fulfill a specific role, and he suggests that while this role may be integral to the fabric of society, people should not condemn those who cannot perform their duties, but instead offer them sympathy.



## THE TRIUMPH OF EVIL

“The Hollow of the Three Hills” presents the story of a young woman who, out of desperation and shame, strikes an unholy deal with an “ill-favored” and “decrepit” old crone. This agreement between the two leads to the young woman’s untimely death, and in the story’s closing lines the crone celebrates the woman’s demise, proclaiming their transaction to have been a “sweet hour’s sport.” Through this pessimistic narrative, in which no character is truly blameless and the forces of evil ultimately triumph, it appears that Hawthorne is critiquing the notion of transcendentalism, a philosophical movement originating in the early 19th century which suggested that humans, when removed from societal influence, are innately good. Through this exaggeratedly cynical story of a woman succumbing to malevolent forces, Hawthorne dismisses these notions of inherent goodness as overly optimistic.

In “The Hollow of the Three Hills,” Hawthorne critiques the transcendentalist idea of intrinsic human goodness by subverting the movement’s primary narrative, which stated

that individuals could find faith and redemption by shrugging off the corrupting power of modern civilization and returning instead to the purifying presence of nature. The young woman's journey, in which she leaves her old life behind and turns to the **hollow** in search of closure, directly mirrors this narrative. However, instead of reaching spiritual fulfillment in the nature of the hollow, as transcendentalism would imply, the young woman instead encounters nothing but evil and corruption. Hawthorne highlights this point through his use of twisted religious imagery. Where transcendentalists believed that they could find God through nature, the young woman instead finds a pool once used by a "Power of Evil" for an "impious baptismal rite," as well as the old crone, who recites a "prayer that was not meant to be acceptable in Heaven." In describing these blasphemous rituals, Hawthorne paints the natural world not as a source of innate goodness, but as a refuge of the unholy and occult. The story further stresses this idea of nature as a source of corruption when the young woman kneels at the old crone's feet and the "border of her garment [is] dipped into the pool." In having the young woman touch the same waters once used for "impious" baptisms, Hawthorne implies that rather than finding faith on her journey to the hollow, she has instead become tainted by evil.

Having now firmly established that there is no such thing as innate natural goodness, Hawthorne goes on to assert the existence of innate and unconquerable evil. The story reflects this attitude through its depiction of light and shadow, representing good and evil, respectively. Despite the story taking place at sunset, the hollow itself remains permanently shrouded in darkness, the narrator stating that while "the golden skirts of day were yet lingering upon the hills [...] deep shades obscured the hollow and the pool, as if sombre night were rising thence to overspread the world." The hollow's seeming resistance to light paints the location as a permanent and unmovable monument to evil. Meanwhile, the young woman, whom Hawthorne emphasizes for her "fair" and "pale" complexion, acts as the one source of light in the hollow. However, contrary to the transcendentalist belief that even the smallest ray of light can penetrate the darkness, the young woman dies at the hands of the old crone, once more leaving the hollow in complete shadow, and ultimately demonstrating Hawthorne's view that evil can easily overpower goodness.

Overall, "The Hollow of the Three Hills" is a reactionary criticism of the transcendentalist philosophers of the era, whose sincere belief in human virtue Hawthorne paints as naivety, incompatible with the grim realities of life. Through the pervasive darkness of the hollow and victory of the old crone, Hawthorne instead portrays a world in which evil is a permanent and inevitable facet of life.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE THREE HILLS

The three hills to symbolise the young woman's inescapable guilt. Each of the individual hills represents one of the old crone's visions and, by extension, one of the ways in which the young woman has failed her family. Throughout the story, the young woman is surrounded by these hills—her failings—which cast the hollow below in a darkness so intense that it threatens to "overspread the world." This is reflective of the overwhelming nature of the woman's guilt over abandoning her husband and leaving her child to die, and it highlights her feelings of hopelessness and confinement.

Notably, the story contains religious imagery that takes on an unholy connotation given the contrasting presence of evil in the story. For instance, the narration references an "Evil" figure using the pool in the hollow is used for "an impious baptismal rite," and the way in which the young woman lays her head in the witch's lap reads like a perversion of the biblical John the Apostle laying his head on Christ. In this light, the three hills could alternatively be read as a metaphorical representation of the Holy Trinity. The recurring unholy imagery in the hollow, as well as the woman's inexplicable inability to leave, might suggest that the hollow is intended to represent a kind of biblical purgatory or hell. With this interpretation in mind, the woman's presence here, shrouded in darkness and hidden from God, is a form of punishment for her wrongdoings.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

### The Hollow of the Three Hills Quotes

●● One was a lady, graceful in form and fair of feature, though pale and troubled, and smitten with an untimely blight in what should have been the fullest bloom of her years; the other was an ancient and meanly dressed woman, of ill-favored aspect, and so withered, shrunken and decrepit, that even the space since she began to decay must have exceeded the ordinary term of human existence.

**Related Characters:** The Old Crone , The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrative establishes a strong contrast between its two primary characters, both in physical appearance and, consequently, moral alignment, setting the stage for the story's central theme of evil's inevitable triumph over good. In the 19th century, the pseudoscientific practice of physiognomy—the art of determining an individual's personality through their external appearance—had grown in popularity and was commonly used in literary works of the era to signify a character's moral leanings. In this instance, 19th-century readers would have automatically interpreted the young woman, emphasized for her fairness and beauty, as a source of goodness, and the decrepit old crone, by contrast, as a force of evil. The story affirms the young woman's goodness further still through her relation to nature, referring to her as being in the “fullest bloom” of her life. This is significant given the transcendentalist view of the time that nature is a source of inherent goodness.

However, despite the young woman's implied moral purity, she has been stricken with an “untimely blight”: her guilt. By drawing a comparison between the young woman's shame and a plant-killing disease, Hawthorn both suggests that the young woman is “tainted,” and therefore more morally complex than her initial appearance would imply, and introduces the notion of guilt as a force of destruction.

●● Dwarf pines were numerous upon the hills, and partly fringed the outer verge of the intermediate hollow; within which there was nothing but the brown grass of October, and here and there a tree-trunk, that had fallen long ago, and lay mouldering with no green successor from its roots.

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which appears at the beginning of the story, the narrator describes the bleak and desolate hollow. Despite the abundance of life on the surrounding hills, the hollow itself contains nothing but death and decay, making it a sort of epicenter of evil and foreshadowing that the young

woman's death will take place there. Given the young woman's previously established connection to the natural world, the sharp contrast between the two areas acts as a representation of her emotional state: externally beautiful and in “full bloom,” but dark and blighted on the inside. Additionally, the prevalence of dead plant life in the hollow heavily foreshadows the young woman's eventual fate, in particular the imagery of the “mouldering” tree-trunk with “no green successor from its roots.” This reference to having “no successor” alludes to the old crone's third and final vision, in which the young woman learns that her child has died.

●● One of these masses of decaying wood, formerly a majestic oak, rested close beside a pool of green and sluggish water at the bottom of the basin. Such scenes as this (so gray tradition tells) were once the resort of a Power of Evil and his plighted subjects; and here, at midnight or on the dim verge of evening, they were said to stand round the mantling pool, disturbing its putrid waters in the performance of an impious baptismal rite.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator describes the stagnant, decaying hollow and provides its legendary backstory. This passage firmly establishes the hollow as a source of evil, directly contradicting the views of 19th-century transcendentalists that nature is a well of inherent goodness. The narration achieves this through its explicit reference to a “Power of Evil and his plighted subjects” using the hollow to perform their initiation ceremonies. This allusion to baptism is particularly telling of Hawthorne's anti-transcendentalist stance. While transcendentalists believed that journeying to nature encouraged spiritual enlightenment and a closer connection to God, Hawthorne's choice to twist an existing religious ceremony into something deeply unholy directly refutes this belief, and instead suggests that evil is more inherent to nature than goodness.

In addition, Hawthorne's reference to the “formerly majestic oak” implies that despite its current decrepitude, the hollow was once full of life. This image of a once strong and beautiful oak tree now overcome with rot and decay foreshadows the story's central theme of evil's inevitable triumph over good and points back to the earlier line that

the young woman has experienced “an untimely blight in what should have been the fullest bloom of her years.”

☞ As the old withered woman spoke, a smile glimmered on her countenance, like lamplight on the wall of a sepulchre. The lady trembled, and cast her eyes upward to the verge of the basin, as if meditating to return with her purpose unaccomplished. But it was not so ordained.

**Related Characters:** The Old Crone , The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

Despite her supposedly voluntary presence in the hollow, the young woman is plainly distressed by her surroundings and fearful of the old crone, whose chilling smile, compared here to a sepulcher—a small stone room in which a dead person is buried—clearly broadcasts her grim intentions. However, while the young woman expresses a desire to leave the hollow on several occasions, the narration states that it is “not so ordained.” This implies that the young woman is not exclusively acting of her own volition, but that she is instead following some form of external order. The term “ordained,” in particular, carries connotations of a religious command, or God-given destiny. These factors combined support the notion that the hollow is a symbolic representation of a biblical Hell, and that the young woman is there, voluntarily or otherwise, to pay for her wrongdoings. As the story unfolds, readers learn that the young woman is guilty for abandoning her family (albeit for reasons the story never divulges), thus failing to fulfil her duties as a wife, mother, and daughter in the 19th century.

☞ ‘Kneel down,’ she said, ‘and lay your forehead on my knees.’ She hesitated a moment, but the anxiety, that had long been kindling, burned fiercely up within her. As she knelt down, the border of her garment was dipped into the pool; she laid her forehead on the old woman’s knees, and the latter drew a cloak about the lady’s face, so that she was in darkness. Then she heard the muttered words of a prayer, in the midst of which she started, and would have arisen.

**Related Characters:** The Old Crone , The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

The young woman, now having agreed to give her life in exchange for the old crone’s knowledge of what’s become of the woman’s family, kneels at the crone’s feet. The crone then proceeds to draw a cloak over the young woman’s face and begins to recite a prayer. Here, Hawthorne once more presents the reader with twisted religious imagery in order to critique transcendentalist ideals, as well as to highlight the irrational nature of the young woman’s guilt. The crone using her cloak in order to cover the young woman’s face is particularly noteworthy, as it implies that her visions may not be accurate prophecies, but instead a deliberate attempt to deceive, leaving the young woman both literally and figuratively in the dark with the wool pulled over her eyes. This suggests that in journeying to nature, the young woman has not found spiritual fulfillment or clarity as transcendentalists would claim, but is instead fooled by the wicked prayers of a false idol.

☞ By a melancholy hearth sat these two old people, the man calmly despondent, the woman querulous and tearful, and their words were all of sorrow. They spoke of a daughter, a wanderer they knew not where, bearing dishonour along with her, and leaving shame and affliction to bring their gray heads to the grave.

**Related Characters:** The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

In the first of the old crone’s visions, the young woman hears her parents discuss their daughter’s disappearance. Significantly, neither of them appear to miss the young woman herself, and they grieve instead for the damage she has done to their social reputation, stating that she has brought them a shame that will follow them “to the grave.” This suggests that the woman’s family places high value on social standing, and furthermore that they considered the young woman’s own personal merits to be of little importance. This is the story’s first hint towards the theme of social expectation, particularly in regards to what is expected of women as daughters, wives, and mothers in the

19th century. Notably, even in this brief glimpse, both of the young woman's parents appear to adhere to the stereotypes and expectations of their respective genders, her mother emotional and expressive, her father stoic and calm.

●● In each member of that frenzied company, whose own burning thoughts had become their exclusive world, he sought an auditor for the story of his individual wrong, and interpreted their laughter and tears as his reward of scorn or pity. He spoke of woman's perfidy, of a wife who had broken her holiest vows, of a home and heart made desolate.

**Related Characters:** The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

In the old crone's second vision, the women witnesses her husband, now confined to a madhouse, desperately seeking an audience to tell his tale of woe. Here the story makes a more explicit allusion to the concept of the separate spheres, with the husband complaining that his wife has broken her "holiest vows" and, in doing so, made a "home [...] desolate." This dialogue implies that in abandoning her assigned duties in the domestic sphere, the young woman has committed an unholy act and subsequently disrupted the entire fabric of her family unit.

In addition to this exploration of the separate spheres, Hawthorne once again hints that the young woman's experiences in the hollow may not be entirely reliable. He achieves this through his depiction of the madhouse's residents, whose "burning thoughts had become their exclusive world." The phrase "burning" is significant, as in an earlier scene Hawthorne also describes the young woman's own anxiety as "burn[ing] fiercely up within her." In drawing a connection between the two, Hawthorne subtly implies that the young woman, too, is in world exclusively comprised of her own thoughts.

●● The golden skirts of day were yet lingering upon the hills, but deep shades obscured the hollow and the pool, as if sombre night were rising thence to overspread the world.

**Related Characters:** The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

As the story nears its conclusion, and the old crone begins to recite her final incantation, the sun continues to set on the hollow of the three hills. However, while the hills remain lit with golden sunshine, granting them a heavenly quality, the hollow itself remains in its permanent state of darkness, which now appears to be "rising thence to overspread the world." This single line encompasses several of the story's core themes, as well as its key symbol of the three hills. The darkness of the hollow, which was previously established to reflect the young woman's "blight[ed]" misery, now threatens to cover the hills, foreshadowing her imminent death due to the overpowering nature of her own shame. Alternatively, the "sombre" shadow of the hollow is representative of evil, and in threatening to overspread the world, Hawthorne bleakly forecasts the old crone's twisted victory and the inescapable nature of evil.

●● Stronger it grew and sadder, and deepened into the tone of a death bell, knolling dolefully from some ivy-mantled tower, and bearing tidings of mortality and woe to the cottage, to the hall, and to the solitary wayfarer, that all might weep for the doom appointed in turn to them.

**Related Characters:** The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which comes from the old crone's chilling third and final vision, the young woman hears the mournful toll of a death bell, which is ringing louder and louder over the funeral procession of her own child. The repetition of the bell, which grows "Stronger" and "sadder" with each chime, speaks to how the young woman's guilt and shame flank her constantly, growing in intensity. This death bell serves not only to raise the tensions of the scene, but also to forecast the imminent and "appointed" death of the "solitary wayfarer"—namely, the young woman herself, who has abandoned her family and is wandering alone. This narration once more emphasizes the bleak and hopeless

nature of the story, and Hawthorne highlights the wide reach of the bell (“bearing tidings of mortality and woe to the cottage, to the hall, and to the solitary wayfarer”) in order to create a sense of inescapable doom in his readers, reminding them that they, too, are within its reach and will meet their “doom.”

●● And though no voice but his was heard to speak aloud, still there were revilings and anathemas, whispered but distinct, from women and from men, breathed against the daughter who had wrung the aged hearts of her parents, - the wife who had betrayed the trusting fondness of her husband, - the mother who had sinned against natural affection, and left her child to die.

**Related Characters:** The Young Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the old crone’s final vision, the priest reads the child’s funeral rites to a silent gathering of mourners. However, despite their silence, the young woman feels their collective judgment against her. The crowd’s unspoken criticisms once more relate to the theory of the separate spheres, in particular their suggestion that the young woman has “sinned against natural affection” by abandoning her child. This reference to “natural affection” is suggestive of the 19th-century notion that women are biologically adept to childcare, and the crowd condemn the young woman as a sinner for her failure to adequately perform this predetermined role.

However, as previously noted, the mourners do not speak these thoughts aloud. This once more suggests that the young woman’s experiences in the hollow may not be entirely reliable, and that these voices of judgment are not the product of the old crone’s witchcraft, but of the young woman’s own guilty conscience. In creating this sense of confusion and unreliability, Hawthorne emphasizes the illogical nature of shame, and questions how much of the young woman’s condemnation is self-imposed.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE HOLLOW OF THE THREE HILLS

In a long-gone era, two people meet at sunset in the hollow between **three hills**. The first is a beautiful but troubled young woman, who has been “smitten with an untimely blight in what should have been the fullest bloom of her years.” The second is an ancient and “meanly dressed” old crone, who has far outlived any ordinary human.

Though the **hills** are abundant with trees, the hollow itself contains nothing but the dying brown grass of October, several decaying tree stumps, and a stagnant green pond. According to hearsay, the hollow was once home to a powerful force of evil and his subjects, who would gather at midnight to perform an “impious baptismal rite” in the pool’s rancid waters.

The old crone asks that the young woman speak quickly, as their meeting may only last an hour. Though the young woman briefly considers fleeing the hollow, she finds herself unable to do so. She professes that she is new to this place but that it does not matter where she originally came from. She reveals that she has left behind her loved ones, and is now “cut off forever.” The young woman is heavily weighed down by her actions, and she reveals that she has simply come to see how her family is faring without her.

*In this opening scene, the story immediately establishes a narrative divide between the forces of good and evil, represented by its starkly contrasting main characters. The description of the beautiful young woman as being in the “fullest bloom of her years” symbolically links her to nature, which according to transcendentalist views of the era would have highlighted her as a force of goodness. The old crone, on the other hand, with her “mean” attire and implied supernatural abilities, is instead evocative of the archetypal evil witch character found in folklore. However, Hawthorne notes that the young woman is suffering with an “untimely blight,” suggesting that she is perhaps less pure than her outward appearance would imply.*



*Despite its natural environment, which transcendentalist narratives would interpret as a symbol of goodness, Hawthorne instead paints the location as an unambiguous source of evil, describing an “impious” cult using the hollow’s waters in order to induct new members. Given the young woman’s previously established connection to nature, the abundance of dead foliage within the hollow heavily foreshadows her eventual fate.*



*The young woman reveals her true motives for having come to the hollow, and in doing so introduces the story’s core theme of guilt and shame. Though it would at first appear that she has approached the hollow voluntarily, she explicitly wishes to leave, and her dialogue suggests that in truth she may have little choice in the matter, the statement “cut off forever” implying that she has been exiled by external forces.*



The crone mockingly tells the young woman that she does not have the information she seeks, but that she will nevertheless have her wish granted before the sun sets. In desperation, the young woman agrees to do the crone's bidding, though she knows that doing so will kill her. The old crone sits upon a stump and beckons the young woman to lay her head on the crone's lap. Though hesitant and burning with anxiety, the young woman obliges. As she kneels at the crone's feet, the hem of her dress dips into the fetid green pool. The crone draws her cloak over the young woman's head, shrouding her in darkness, and begins a prayer.

The young woman is initially startled by the prayer and expresses her desire to run and hide, but she composes herself when she hears hushed yet familiar voices mingling with the crone's incantation. As the young woman listens, these voices—along with the sounds of a ticking clock and a roaring fire—become stronger, until at last she can hear a distinct scene. Two people, a man and a woman, sit by a fire and speak sorrowfully of their missing daughter, who “bear[s] dishonor along with her” and has left them with nothing but “shame and affliction.” They begin to speak of another, more recent tragedy, but their voices suddenly fade in the wind amid the rustling leaves.

The old crone smiles and notes that the old couple appear to be having a difficult time. The revelation that the crone can also hear these scenes humiliates the young woman. However, there is no time to spare; the crone states that there is more to hear, and she draws her cloak back around the young woman's head. Again, the crone begins her prayer.

Once more, new voices begin to intermingle with the crone's words. This time, however, it is a discordant mess of shrieks, screams, love songs, and funeral hymns. In the midst of this cacophony, the voice of a single man emerges: he speaks in a frenzy to anyone who will listen about his wife, the woman who has “broken her holiest of vows” and left “a home and heart [...] desolate.” At once, the screeching and laughter around him swells, and the voices fade in the wind.

*The young woman readily offers her life in exchange for knowledge of her family, despite the fact that the old crone did not demand it of her. This highlights both the young woman's self-sacrificial nature, and the extreme (and perhaps unnecessary) lengths a person will go to when suffering with guilt. She then proceeds to kneel at the crone's feet in a twisted act of prayer, and the hem of her dress dips into the pool once used to baptize the unholy cult members. This directly contradicts the transcendentalist belief that returning to nature brings individuals closer to God: the young woman's journey to the hollow has not instilled her with faith, but instead lead her to become tainted with evil by a false prophet.*



*The young woman's parents do not mention the ways in which they miss their daughter, but instead lament the “dishonor” and “shame” she has brought upon the family by leaving. This implies that the young woman's parents find their tarnished reputation far more damaging than the loss of a loved one, and it is the story's first suggestion that the young woman's family did not value her for her merits as an individual, but for her ability to adhere to social expectations.*



*The vision clearly amuses the old crone, and she deliberately provokes the young woman further by commenting on the difficulties her parents are facing. The personal joy the crone derives from the young woman's suffering hints towards her sadistic motives and raises the question of whether her visions are truly trustworthy, or if they are simply a means of tormenting her victim.*



*Again, the young woman's husband does not appear to miss her based upon individual merits, but instead complains of her failure to perform her duties as a wife. His grievance that she has left their “home [...] desolate” is evocative of the philosophical concept of the separate spheres, a theory that suggested men belonged at work in the “public” sphere, and women at home in the “domestic” sphere. In abandoning her assigned sphere, the woman has thrown her home into chaos.*



The old crone asks the young woman if she knew there could be so much merriment in a madhouse. The woman concedes that this is partially true, but that there is misery also. The crone tells her that there is one final voice, if she wishes to hear it. As the sun sets further still, and the darkness of the hollow threatens to “overspread the world,” the young woman lays her head down once more.

As the crone recites her spell, a death bell begins to toll, “bearing tidings of mortality and woe [...] that all might weep for the doom appointed to them in turn.” Eventually, the bell makes way for the steady footsteps of mourners carrying a coffin, led by a priest reading burial rites. Though the mourners do not speak aloud, there are whispers and suggestions among the crowd. They tell of a woman who has abandoned her family, who has betrayed the trust of her husband, and who has “sinned against natural affection” by leaving her child to die.

For the final time, the voices fade in the wind, and the old crone attempts to rouse the young woman. However, the young woman does not lift her head. The old crone laughs and declares the woman’s ordeal to have been a “sweet hour’s sport!”

*Once more the old crone appears to mock the young woman with her commentary, and the growing darkness in the hollow reflects the young woman’s increasing hopelessness. As the story approaches its conclusion, the young woman’s guilt, much like the shadow of the hollow, threatens to “overspread” her.*



*In this third and final vision, the story once more alludes to the notion of the separate spheres, with the crowd of mourners stating that in failing to perform her God-given duties as a mother, the young woman has committed an unnatural and sinful act worthy of condemnation. However, the narrator notes that the crowd does not actually speak these thoughts aloud. This may imply that the mourner’s whisperings are not the result of the crone’s visions, but instead a product of the young woman’s own guilty conscience. The tolling of the death bell which bears “tidings of mortality and woe” raises the suspense of the scene, and forecasts the story’s upcoming tragic conclusion.*



*The old crone’s reference to “sport” once more suggests that her visions were not accurate prophetic readings, but instead a deliberate attempt to toy with the young woman for no other reason than sadistic glee. In this final scene, Hawthorne suggests that despite the young woman’s wrongdoing, her condemnation was not necessarily deserved, and that her guilt has merely lead to the ultimate victory of evil forces.*





## HOW TO CITE

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