Dr. Heidegger's Experiment

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NATHANEL HAWTHORNE

A descendent of infamously harsh Puritans, Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in Salem, Massachusetts. As a child, he developed a love for reading when he injured his leg and was forced to spend a year in bed. He attended Bowdoin College, then worked as an editor and wrote short stories, many of which were published in his 1837 collection *Twice-Told Tales*. In 1841 he joined the transcendentalist Utopian community at Brook Farm, which he left in 1842 to marry Sophia Peabody. In a remarkable streak that lasted from 1850 to 1860, Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, one of the first best-selling novels in the United States; *The House of the Seven Gables*, often regarded as his greatest book; *The Blithedale Romance*, his only work written in the first person; and *The Marble Faun*, a romance set in a fantastical version of Italy. Hawthorne died in 1864, after spending the last six years of his life living in Europe. His reputation in America was so great that the most important writers of the era, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Louisa May Alcott, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, were pallbearers at his funeral.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The work of the Romantic writers—as well as the transcendentalists, with whom Hawthorne was briefly associated—is generally seen as a reaction against the values of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Partly as a consequence of the scientific revolution, Enlightenment thinkers placed an emphasis on science, rationality, and reason as the primary sources of knowledge and authority. Romanticists and Gothic writers alike reacted against the age of Enlightenment by avowing the importance of faith and emotion in their work, and the danger of relying solely on the rational faculties—which explains, at least in part, the treatment of science as a sinister practice by many writers like Hawthorne. Additionally, the history of the witch trials in Salem (where Hawthorne grew up and lived) made a remarkable impact on his writing, despite the fact that Hawthorne lived and worked more than a century after the trials took place. Much of his writing deals explicitly with questions of morality in light of what he saw as the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Puritan moral code.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hawthorne's writing is widely characterized as "Dark Romanticism," a literary style that stems from both Gothic fiction (which includes elements of fear, death, and gloom) and Romanticism (a literary style often concerned with individualism and naturalism). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a great work of Gothic fiction that, like "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," is an ominous tale of a scientist who tampering with the natural order of things. Henry James' novel *The Turn of the Screw* is a work of Gothic fiction that was written several decades after "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" and was likely influenced by Hawthorne's work, if not this story in particular. Both stories are concerned with the supernatural, but they maintain an ambiguity about whether the events are real or illusion. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, while quite different from "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" in subject matter, is a work of American Romanticism that is similarly concerned with timeless and philosophical questions of mortality. Moreover, Melville and Hawthorne were good friends. Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark"—a similarly moralistic tale that takes a grim view of science—tells the story of a scientist who experiments on his wife in order to remove a birthmark from her cheek. Similarly, Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter" tells the story of a scientist's daughter who cares for his poisonous plants and becomes poisonous herself. Both stories show that Hawthorne often seemed to regard scientists, and science more generally, as morally suspect.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dr. Heidegger's Experiment
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1837
- **Literary Period:** American Renaissance, Transcendentalism
- **Genre:** Short story, Dark Romanticism, Gothic fiction
- **Setting:** Dr. Heidegger's study
- **Climax:** The vase of water gets knocked over
- **Antagonist:** The foolishness of youth
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Early Publication: "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" was first published anonymously in 1837, with the title "The Fountain of Yonder." It appeared later the same year in Hawthorne's collection of short stories, *Twice-Told Tales*.

Name Change: Nathaniel Hawthorne was a direct descendent of John Hathorne, (1641-1717), a Puritan justice of the peace. Justice Hathorne is best known for his role as the lead judge in the Salem Witch Trials, in which he sentenced numerous

innocent people to death for allegedly practicing witchcraft. Nathaniel added a "w" to his name to distance himself from his infamous ancestor.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dr. Heidegger, an elderly medical doctor who is the subject of many fantastical rumors, invites four friends into his study to conduct an experiment on them. The friends, Mr. Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, Mr. Gascoigne, and Widow Wycherly, are all elderly people whose reputations have been tarnished in one way or another. The three men, moreover, were once bitter rivals, competing for the affection of Widow Wycherly, who was very beautiful as a young woman (but is now, like all her friends, quite decrepit). All (including Dr. Heidegger) are regarded by others to have gone a bit out of their minds, having suffered greatly in their lives.

Dr. Heidegger's study, where the friends are gathered, is a dusty place full of countless curiosities, among which are a human skeleton, a portrait of Dr. Heidegger's long-dead fiancée, a bust of Hippocrates, an enchanted mirror that is rumored to contain the souls of all Dr. Heidegger's dead patients, and a mysterious **magic book**. Dr. Heidegger removes the book, and takes a pressed **rose** from its pages, explaining that his fiancée, Sylvia Ward, gave it to him fifty years before, and he had intended to wear it at their wedding, but Sylvia had died on the eve of their wedding. Dr. Heidegger places the rose in a vase at the center of the table around which they're gathered, and slowly it comes back to life, until it looks as though it has just bloomed. His friends think it is a deception, but Dr. Heidegger explains that the **water** in the vase is from the fabled Fountain of Youth which was sought after by Ponce de Leon for so long. He then invites his skeptical friends to drink as much of the liquid as they please, and pours a champagne glass for each of them. Dr. Heidegger explains that he won't be drinking any of the liquid—only observing.

Before the four friends drink their glasses, Dr. Heidegger advises them that perhaps they should draw up a few general rules for themselves, since they are about to journey for a second time through "the perils of youth," and perhaps they could benefit from the wisdom of old age. But the friends laugh at Dr. Heidegger's warning and gulp down the water. Almost immediately, they begin to feel somehow revitalized, their spirits lifted. The water restores life and color to their aged bodies, and seems to smooth away some of their wrinkles. Skepticism quickly vanishing, they ask for more, and Dr. Heidegger obliges, filling their glasses.

With the second glass, the group has reached middle age again, and they seem somewhat drunk. Colonel Killigrew remarks that Widow Wycherly is an attractive woman again; she runs to the mirror to check. Mr. Gascoigne begins talking politics, though it's unclear exactly what he's saying or what year he thinks it is. Colonel Killigrew busies himself by singing a drinking song and ogling Widow Wycherly. Mr. Medbourne sets about hatching a half-baked, far-fetched business scheme. Intoxicated by the water's effect, the group asks for another glass to be poured.

Now, they are in the prime of their youth, and they mock Dr. Heidegger's sickly and decrepit appearance, as well as their own old-fashioned clothes, as if they have forgotten that they themselves were, moments prior, also old and infirm. The Widow invites Dr. Heidegger to dance with her, but he explains he's too old. The other three men argue over who will be her dance partner, each of them placing a hand on her and struggling amongst themselves. The narrator remarks that it is said that the mirror on the wall reflected three sickly old men fighting over the body of a withered old woman, rather than the four of them in their youthful prime. In their fighting, they knock over the table, spilling the vase full of water. The water touches a butterfly on the verge of death, which springs back to life and lands on the white-haired head of Dr. Heidegger.

Dr. Heidegger calls for an end to the chaotic fighting, and it is as if Father Time himself were "calling them back from their sunny youth;" the four friends retake their places around the table. Dr. Heidegger exclaims that his rose has wilted again, but reflects that he loves it just as much as when it was freshly-blossomed. In the next instant, the four friends notice that they, too, seem to be aging again with every moment that passes. Soon, they are back to normal, and the Widow remarks that if she can't be beautiful, she'd rather be dead. Dr. Heidegger remarks that watching his friends' behavior has confirmed for him that he would never drink from the Fountain of Youth, even if it gushed at his at doorstep and its effects lasted for years. His friends, however, feel otherwise: they decide to travel to Florida, where the Fountain of Youth is, and drink from it morning, day, and night.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Heidegger – Dr. Heidegger is an enigmatic old medical doctor who performs an experiment on his four elderly friends to test the hypothesis that youth is inseparable from folly. Though Dr. Heidegger is a scientist, his study is filled with magical objects and his experiment involves magical **water** from the Fountain of Youth. Therefore, Dr. Heidegger's outlook is not wholly rational, despite him being a doctor. Furthermore, though Dr. Heidegger is trying to prove a moral hypothesis—that morality is associated with age—the morality of Dr. Heidegger's own behavior is left open-ended. On the one hand, Dr. Heidegger seems moral because he does not drink the magical water, so he does not succumb to foolish behavior.

On the other hand, though, he baits his elderly friends into indulging their worst impulses. At the end of the story, Dr. Heidegger announces that he will never drink from the Fountain of Youth, suggesting that he had considered doing so, but wanted to witness its effects for himself before deciding. Whether this is wise or cruel, Hawthorne never explicitly says. Dr. Heidegger was once in love with Sylvia Ward and was engaged to marry her before she died.

Widow Wycherly – Widow Wycherly (whose first name is actually Clara) was a beautiful woman in her youth, but has lived in "deep seclusion" for many years because a scandal ruined her reputation and turned the townspeople against her. When she drinks from the Fountain of Youth, she becomes beautiful again, and the other three subjects of the experiment vie for her attention and for the right to dance with her. Her vanity is her primary character trait; she spends half of the story preening in front of a mirror, and when she grows old again, says she would rather die than be old and ugly.

Colonel Killigrew – Colonel Killigrew "wasted his best years … in pursuit of sinful pleasures," meaning that, at the very least, he was probably an alcoholic—and now he suffers the negative effects of his behavior, both physically and spiritually. When he drinks from the Fountain of Youth, he becomes intoxicated and sings drinking songs. He is the most aggressive of the men in the experiment in his pursuit of Widow Wycherly.

Sylvia Ward – Sylvia Ward was once the fiancée of Dr. Heidegger, but she died on the eve of their wedding after taking some of Dr. Heidegger's medicine by mistake. Her portrait hangs in his study, and is thought to be enchanted. She gave Dr. Heidegger the **rose** that he revives at the beginning of the story using water from the Fountain of Youth.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Medbourne – Mr. Medbourne was once a successful merchant, but he lost his fortune in a risky business investment and is now very poor. When he drinks from the Fountain of Youth, he begins hatching new business schemes and, like all the others, becomes infatuated with the now-young Widow Wycherly.

Mr. Gascoigne – Mr. Gascoigne was once notorious for being an evil, crooked politician, but time has forgotten him. When he drinks from the Fountain of Youth he begins speaking near-nonsense about vague political issues and ideals—and, like all the others, becomes infatuated with the now-young Widow Wycherly.

TERMS

Hippocrates Hippocrates is regarded as the father of medicine and medical ethics. Every doctor takes a "Hippocratic oath" in which they swear to do no harm to their patients. In **Dr. Heidegger's** study, an enchanted bust of Hippocrates sits atop the central bookcase, which he consults in particularly difficult cases.

Ponce de Leon Juan Ponce de Leon was a Spanish conquistador who is said to have spent many years in search of the fabled Fountain of Youth.

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.

YOUTH, OLD AGE, AND DEATH

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is a moralistic story that cautions readers about the folly of youth. In the experiment of the story's title, Dr. Heidegger offers his four elderly subjects—all of whom made ruinous mistakes when they were young—the opportunity to make their bodies young again by drinking **water** from the Fountain of Youth. By seeing how elderly people react to feeling young, Dr. Heidegger hopes to determine whether a young person—even one who has already learned the lessons of old age—is capable of acting maturely. The results of the experiment, of course, confirm Dr. Heidegger's hypothesis: youth is inseparable from vanity, immaturity, and folly.

To prove his hypothesis beyond a reasonable doubt, Dr. Heidegger tries to coach his subjects into proving him wrong. As they eagerly await the water, he cautions them to use "the experience of a lifetime to direct you…through the perils of youth," reminding them to maintain their virtue and wisdom as they transform. His subjects, however, brush off his warning as ridiculous, thinking that they could never repeat their mistakes, since they have learned in their old age "how closely repentance treads behind the steps of error." Of course, as soon as the subjects' bodies become more youthful, they revert to their most foolish and immoral behaviors: political scheming, vanity, greed, and sinful indulgence. They mock the elderly and the men fight one another for the attentions of the only woman, knocking over the precious water in the process (symbolizing the precarious and fleeting nature of youth). Not even this foolishness dampens their enthusiasm for youth, though, as once the subjects return to their true ages, they all agree to go to Florida so that they might drink constantly from the Fountain of Youth. Overall, youth proves to be intoxicating and unhealthy for the subjects.

In contrast to his subjects, Dr. Heidegger values the wisdom of old age more than the beauty and recklessness of youth. He hints at this twice before his subjects drink the water, first, by

saying that he won't participate in the experiment because "having had much trouble in growing old, I am in no hurry to grow young again," and second in his initial instruction to his subjects not to forget the virtue and wisdom of age. The wilted **rose** Dr. Heidegger revives also shows his appreciation for his own maturity. The rose, given to him by his fiancée who died on the eve of their wedding fifty-five years ago, blooms in the water and then wilts again. Instead of mourning his old losses anew, however, Dr. Heidegger simply remarks that he loves the rose as much in its wilted state as in its "dewy freshness." The rose, then, is a symbol of Dr. Heidegger's acceptance—and even appreciation—of the passage of time and its effects. Heidegger, as a learned man, seems to see youth as a series of experiments that, through trial and error, have made him a much better version of himself. The correctness of this belief is confirmed for him at the end of the experiment when he resolves that he would never drink the water himself, for he wants to avoid the folly of his subjects.

Hawthorne, then, forcefully argues for the moral superiority of old age over youth, since the elderly are more restrained in their choices and behaviors. Notably, this restraint seems to be physical more than mental—transforming the subjects' bodies without transforming their minds and memories still makes them behave as foolishly as they once did. Thus, the wisdom of age is something to be cherished and protected, rather than taken for granted. Furthermore, the folly of youth seems to have enduring consequences, since the mistakes of the subjects' youths have made them bitter and miserable in old age, and their return to old age after drinking the water does not restore them to a mature resignation to their fate—it leaves them almost hungover, desperately and foolishly planning a trip to Florida to find the Fountain of Youth. For Hawthorne, then, youth is a dangerous and fleeting stage of life to be learned from, not one to revisit or admire.

SCIENCE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

In "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," Hawthorne blurs the distinction between science and magic. The objects in Dr. Heidegger's study that are traditionally "scientific" (the human skeleton in the closet, the bust of Hippocrates, the volumes of books) possess magical qualities, and Dr. Heidegger's science experiment—which one might expect to be fully governed by reason—involves the magical properties of the **water** from the Fountain of Youth. This comingling of science and the supernatural suffuses the entire story, upending the traditionally stark distinction between science and magic—a distinction, it's worth noting, that many of Hawthorne's readers would have considered to be morally significant.

Generally speaking, Puritan-influenced New England was not a friendly place to practitioners of magic (think, for instance, of the Salem witch trials). However, far from disparaging Heidegger's use of magic, Hawthorne portrays Heidegger as the only character in the story with any real moral standing, associating him with wisdom, virtue, and reason. Given the era's moral prejudice against magic and the scant but illuminating details about Dr. Heidegger's medical practice, however, it's impossible not to wonder whether Hawthorne's characterization of Heidegger as moral is meant to be taken at face value.

For instance, it's ethically questionable to subject four elderly people to an experiment in which they will almost certainly become intoxicated and act like fools. The presence of Dr. Heidegger's bust of Hippocrates (the father of medicine and medical ethics) underscores the strained ethics of the experiment, particularly since doctors who take the Hippocratic oath are sworn to do no harm to patients, and Dr. Heidegger's experiment seems to cause psychological damage. There is also the slight implication that the death of Heidegger's fiancée may have occurred under similar circumstances. The narrator writes that, "being affected with some slight disorder, she had swallowed one of her lover's prescriptions, and died on the bridal evening." Therefore, despite Hawthorne's portrayal of Dr. Heidegger as moral, nineteenth century readers would be unlikely to wholly accept this characterization. Dr. Heidegger—a practitioner of a supernatural and morally dubious form of science—would have likely alarmed readers, since any suggestion that science and magic could coexist for a moral good would seem menacing and even blasphemous.

Further undermining Dr. Heidegger's credentials as a morally upright, rational scientist is the fact that his science experiment is notably unscientific. While Dr. Heidegger aims to scientifically test his hypothesis that youth necessarily leads to folly, his methodology is haphazard. For instance, he tries to coach his subjects before the experiment, reminding them that they should rely on their wisdom to avoid the perils of youth. Though they disregard this advice, Dr. Heidegger's interference undermines the integrity of the experiment's result. Furthermore, the premise of the experiment is that the wisdom of old age evaporates in the face of youth, but the experiment's subjects are never portrayed as wise to begin with, even in their old age. Thus, their immature behavior after drinking the water hardly proves Dr. Heidegger's hypothesis. Finally, the conclusion that Dr. Heidegger draws from his experiment is a *moral* one, rather than a rational inference. "If the fountain gushed at my very doorstep," he proclaims to his guests, "I would not stoop to bathe my lips in it…. Such is the lesson have taught me." In short, Dr. Heidegger's conclusion is not that endowing his subjects with youth did what he expected, but rather that he's pleased with himself for his moral commitment to avoiding the delirium of his subjects.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Hawthorne himself was unaware of the sloppiness of Dr. Heidegger's "scientific" methodology. On the contrary, it is possible that

Hawthorne's intention was to subtly cast doubt on Dr. Heidegger's morality by showing him engaged in an ethically and scientifically dubious experiment. If that's true, then the moral that Hawthorne might at first seem to be espousing (that the wisdom of age should be valued and the folly of youth should be feared) is not, in fact, the deepest moral of the story. Hawthorne was deeply impacted by the witch trials of the 17th century, which were characterized by judges and religious figures performing pseudo-scientific experiments on women to determine whether they were, in fact, witches (such as throwing them into water to see if they would drown). Perhaps, then, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is not an allegory about old age and youth, but rather a comment on the dangers of unexamined moral superiority and the ways people rationalize their own arrogance, cruelty, and superstition.

REALITY AND ILLUSION

In "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," Hawthorne allows for ambiguity about whether the story's supernatural events are literally occurring, or whether they are all an illusion. On the one hand, the story's many supernatural details—the **rose** un-wilting, the butterfly coming off the floor, the skeleton rattling, or the wrinkles fading away—are described so vividly that Hawthorne seems to be asking readers to believe that they are literally occurring. On the other hand, everything "supernatural" that occurs could be interpreted to have been a mere illusion—either the product of drunkenness, deceit, or an unreliable narrator. The deft ambiguity of the story suggests that Hawthorne deliberately lays the groundwork for a double interpretation, thereby unsettling a reader's assumptions about the reliability of their own perceptions.

Hawthorne gives multiple indications throughout the story that the elderly characters' reversion to youth may not be literally true. One possibility is that the narrator is unreliable. Hawthorne explicitly raises this at the beginning of the story when he writes (in the narrator's voice) that "if any passages of the present tale should startle the reader's faith, I must be content to bear the stigma of a fiction-monger." The narrator also twice interjects to ask directly whether what the characters are experiencing is real or illusory. This opens the door to interpreting not just the fantastical details of the story, but the entire story itself, as an elaborate rumor.

Another possible explanation for the story's events is that the **water** from the Fountain of Youth is actually alcohol. The characters drink the bubbly water out of champagne glasses, and the narrator states that its effects were, at first, indistinguishable from the intoxicating flush of wine. After three glasses of the water, one of the characters has taken to singing a drinking song, and a general state of madness has taken hold of the room. All told, this leaves open the possibility that the physical transformation experienced by Dr. Heidegger's subjects didn't actually occur at all, but was merely a drunken whimsy.

It's also possible that Dr. Heidegger is manipulating the subjects of his experiment using stagecraft and illusion. When the four friends see him bring a **rose** back to life, they're not impressed, remarking that they've seen more convincing staged magic tricks before. At one point during the three friends' jealous brawl over Widow Wycherly, the narrator remarks that the enchanted mirror on the wall had reflected their true forms: "three old, gray, withered grandsires" fighting over "the skinny ugliness of a shriveled grandam." The detail again raises the question of whether the four friends had really undergone a magical transformation, or merely been under the delusion that they had.

Lastly, the narrator explicitly calls into question the sanity of all the characters when he remarks at the outset that "Dr. Heidegger and all his four guests were sometimes thought to be a little beside themselves." It is therefore unclear whether the story that follows is an objective treatment of what took place, or whether it is meant to capture the experience of the characters, who are known to have an unstable relationship with reality.

The fact that Hawthorne was so deliberately ambiguous about whether the events described literally occurred presents yet another complication to the moralistic aspects of the story. If the whole thing was brought about by alcoholic intoxication, for instance, does the story contain a hidden message about temperance? (The story did emerge, it should be noted, at the same time that the temperance movement was gaining broad support in America). Or, if the entire thing was an illusion, how can the reader take seriously Dr. Heidegger's moralizing about the virtues of old age? Ultimately, whether the moralism of the story has any teeth depends entirely upon how the reader interprets what actually occurred—but coming to a clear interpretation is a task that Hawthorne makes nearly impossible.

MISTAKES AND MORALITY

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" can be—and often is—read as an allegory: a tale meant to deliver a clear moral message. On the surface, it's easy to support an argument that this story is an allegory about the virtues of learning from one's youthful mistakes.

Dr. Heidegger's four friends are all characters whose reputations were tarnished in some way by mistakes they made in their youth. He chooses them as subjects because he wishes to see whether they will learn from their mistakes when given a second chance to be young. The three men in Dr. Heidegger's experiment were once romantic rivals, competing for the affection of Widow Wycherly (the fourth friend in the experiment). For this reason, they make good test subjects:

they have a history together, and they can either learn from it, or be doomed to repeat the same mistakes. Dr. Heidegger, before commencing the experiment, offers the four friends an opportunity to reflect on their mistakes and give some advice to their younger selves—an opportunity which the friends decline, thinking they would never repeat the same mistakes. This leads Dr. Heidegger to remark that he has chosen his subjects well, implying that he had anticipated the chaos that is about to unfold. As soon as the four friends have become young again, each reverts to their own foolish, youthful ways: preening in front of the mirror, hatching half-baked business schemes, fighting violently over their beautiful mutual friend. Ultimately, not one of the four friends' behavior suggests they have reflected on the mistakes of their youth enough to avoid making the same mistakes again. Their immaturity is confirmed by their joint decision to travel to the Fountain of Youth and drink its waters forever: they don't *wish* to learn, they wish only to live comfortably in the grasp of illusion. This reveals the story's clearest moral message: that those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Though this message is superficially clear, a deeper examination of the structural flaws of the experiment complicates the story's moral message. Dr. Heidegger and his subjects seem to be fundamentally different types of older people. While Dr. Heidegger learned from his minor youthful mistakes and is living a passionate and successful—if eccentric—elderly life, his subjects seem to have made mistakes so severe that they have been ruined by their pasts. Hawthorne describes them as bitter and miserable with such difficult lives that they no longer even want to be alive. There's little reason to believe, then, that these are the kinds of older people who would keep their wits about them when made young again. Though Dr. Heidegger seems to seek confirmation through the experiment that he should never drink from the Fountain of Youth, he also seems to have lived a reasonably upright youth, so it's not clear that he would actually have become foolish upon drinking the water. After all, he—unlike his subjects—did not ruin his happiness and reputation through youthful recklessness, so it's not logical that he would be in danger of repeating mistakes he never made.

Furthermore, there's evidence that Dr. Heidegger's subjects—even in old age—never had much wisdom or self-knowledge to lose, since they brushed aside Dr. Heidegger's pre-experiment caution so carelessly, insisting that they would never revert to the bad behavior of their youth. Meanwhile, Dr. Heidegger—who is wise enough to not only predict the actions of others, but to refuse the intoxicating water lest it erase his hard-won wisdom—seems to have always been reasonably measured in his choices. Thus, Hawthorne's opposition between youth and old age seems to actually be better described as an opposition between those who are capable of learning from youth and those who can only be ruined by it. Seen this way, the experiment is perhaps less an attempt to test a hypothesis than a cruel demonstration of the innate immorality of Dr. Heidegger's wretched subjects.

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is a story that rewards its readers for probing deeper into the contradictions, presumptions, and inconsistencies of which the story and its characters are full. Peeling back the many layers of the story reveals a work that, quite contrary to what the reader might think based on a first read, resists an easy or uncomplicated moral message.

SYMBOLS

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

ROSE

Half a century before the action of the story, Dr. Heidegger's fiancée gave him a rose to wear to their wedding. She died the night before the wedding, though, and he has preserved the rose within the pages of his **magic book** ever since. The rose, a token of Dr. Heidegger's youth and loss, seems at first to be a symbol of his longing for the past: it's the first thing he revives with the **water** from the Fountain of Youth, which suggests a desire to recapture old times. However, Hawthorne reverses the reader's expectation. When the rose begins to wilt again, Dr. Heidegger does not mourn the symbolism of his youth becoming distant—he simply remarks that he loves the rose as much in its wilted state as in its "dewy freshness." The rose, then, becomes symbolic of Dr. Heidegger's acceptance—and even appreciation—of the passage of time and its effects. This, Hawthorne suggests, is the wisest attitude towards aging. Unlike Widow Wycherly, who says that she would rather be dead than old and unattractive, Dr. Heidegger has learned to accept the withered rose, and, by extension, himself in old age.

WATER

At the center of the story is the vase full of water from the Fountain of Youth. The water, which makes those who drink it temporarily young again, is a symbol of the fleeting and precarious nature of youth. Hawthorne argues in the story that youth is inseparable from foolish behavior—behavior that can permanently ruin one's life, as seen with the experiment's subjects. Therefore, when the subjects knock the vase over and spill the water, Hawthorne calls attention to the risks inherent to youthful folly. In addition, it's significant that the water comes from a fabled source—the Fountain of Youth—that the Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon sought for many years but never found. This echoes the ways in which the subjects of the experiment are consumed by a desire to regain their youth, and the association between the water

and the Fountain of Youth frames the subjects' desire to be young again as delusion. Finally, the water, which is served in champagne glasses, is described as effervescent and sweetly intoxicating, which creates a strong symbolic association with alcoholic drinks. This association underscores that youth, like drunkenness, is fleeting, foolish, and even dangerous. Indeed, the story ends with the four subjects of Dr. Heidegger's experiment deciding to travel together to Florida to find the Fountain of Youth so they can drink from it eternally—as if "hungover" from the drunken revelry of their youth, and addicted to experiencing it again.

MAGIC BOOK

Dr. Heidegger's dark and dusty study is filled with books (just like a real doctor's office) as well as enchanted items, the "greatest curiosity" of which is a large, black, leather-bound book. This book, which has no lettering or discernible title, is nevertheless "well known to be a book of magic." Although books are generally associated with knowledge and reason (and therefore science), this book is immediately and clearly associated with the supernatural (Dr. Heidegger removes from the book's pages a wilted **rose** and places it in a vase of **water**, causing the rose to magically bloom). As the book is associated with both science and magic, it is emblematic of the blending of science and the supernatural that characterizes the story as a whole. This combination seems paradoxical, in large part because Dr. Heidegger is portrayed as a wise and moral character, while the blending of magic and science in an experiment would have been considered sinister by nineteenth century readers, and it also raises serious ethical questions about haphazard experimentation on human subjects. Furthermore, the contents of the book itself remain a mystery to readers and characters alike, and the narrator repeats a rumor that when a chambermaid tried opening the book, the multitude of enchanted objects in the study came to life to chasten her, and the bust of Hippocrates grew stern, telling her to "Forebear" (meaning, essentially, "Cut it out"). Therefore, the book is not only a symbol of the role that magic plays in Dr. Heidegger's medical practice, but also of the sinister mystery that enshrouds his use of magic. Indeed, Heidegger himself is in many ways a "closed book"—an inscrutable figure, who, like his magic book, embodies a seemingly paradoxical blend of science and the supernatural.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Hawthorne's Short Stories* published in 2011.

Dr. Heidegger's Experiment Quotes

❝ And, before proceeding further, I will merely hint that Dr. Heidegger and all his four guests were sometimes thought to be a little beside themselves,—as is not unfrequently the case with old people, when worried either by present troubles or woeful recollections.

Related Characters: Colonel Killigrew , Widow Wycherly, Mr. Medbourne , Mr. Gascoigne , Dr. Heidegger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

With this remark, the narrator gives readers reason to doubt the sanity of the story's characters—and yet, as with so much in this tale, the only evidence provided is rumor. The passage is the first of many to raise the question of whether the characters are actually experiencing what they think they are experiencing, but the text leaves readers with no way of definitively answering this question. The result is that the distinction between reality and illusion (or delusion) is thoroughly blurred from the outset, destabilizing the story's moralistic conclusion—for, if Dr. Heidegger himself is insane, how can the conclusions he draws from his experiment be trusted? And if his subjects are insane, how can their debauched behavior be attributed to the water from the Fountain of Youth? In this way, the confusion the narrator creates surrounding the question of reality helps the story resist a neat, moralistic resolution.

❝ Now Dr. Heidegger was a very strange old gentleman, whose eccentricity had become the nucleus for a thousand fantastic stories. Some of these fables, to my shame be it spoken, might possibly be traced back to my own veracious self; and if any passages of the present tale should startle the reader's faith, I must be content to bear the stigma of a fiction monger.

Related Characters: Dr. Heidegger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator undermines his own credibility by confessing that he himself has originated countless

fantastical tales about Dr. Heidegger. He even states that he would not refute an allegation that the story he's in the midst of telling was fictional. In combination with the questionable sanity of the characters and the intoxicating qualities of the water, having an unreliable narrator makes the project of distinguishing reality from rumor and illusion a near impossibility for the reader. It is not clear what effect Hawthorne might have meant to create by so explicitly identifying his narrator as unreliable, but by creating a sense that the story may not be more than a rumor, Hawthorne further complicates the task of distinguishing fiction from reality in a story already concerned with illusion. Perhaps Hawthorne meant to subtly imply that many moralistic tales such as this are based at least in part on rumor or fiction, and therefore should not be believed unquestioningly.

"Before you drink, my respectable old friends," said he, "it would be well that, with the experience of a lifetime to direct you, you should draw up a few general rules for your guidance, in passing a second time through the perils of youth. Think what a sin and shame it would be, if, with your peculiar advantages, you should not become patterns of virtue and wisdom to all the young people of the age!"

The doctor's four venerable friends made him no answer, except by a feeble and tremulous laugh; so very ridiculous was the idea that, knowing how closely repentance treads behind the steps of error, they should ever go astray again.

"Drink, then," said the doctor, bowing: "I rejoice that I have so well selected the subjects of my experiment."

Related Characters: Colonel Killigrew , Widow Wycherly, Mr. Medbourne , Mr. Gascoigne

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is unusual that a scientist or doctor performing an experiment such as this would give his subjects personal advice or guidance in this way. It's not very scientific, and it raises the question of what Dr. Heidegger aims to accomplish or discover in conducting his experiment. Second, his response (that he has chosen his subjects well) can be read in two different ways. It may be read simply to mean that he is glad that his subjects are so disinclined to repeat mistakes that they have already made, but it seems equally—if not more—likely that his meaning is more sinister: that he is glad to have chosen subjects naïve enough to think they don't need advice, either from others or from themselves. If this second interpretation is true, it means that Dr. Heidegger is conducting his experiment with the explicit intention of watching his subjects devolve into immaturity or intoxication, raising the question of whether such an experiment is ethically defensible in the first place.

Yet, by a strange deception, owing to the duskiness of the chamber, and the antique dresses which they still wore, the tall mirror is said to have reflected the figures of the three old, gray, withered grandsires, ridiculously contending for the skinny ugliness of a shrivelled grandam.

Related Characters: Widow Wycherly, Colonel Killigrew , Mr. Medbourne , Mr. Gascoigne

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

By suggesting that Dr. Heidegger's enchanted mirror may have reflected the bodies of the four friends as elderly rather than youthful, this passage gives another clue that everything the characters think they are experiencing may be no more than an illusion—the product of drunkenness, or trickery, or madness. However, once again, the evidence presented by the narrator is less than concrete—based merely on rumor ("the tall mirror *is said* to have reflected" four old figures, but did it really?). Throughout the story, Hawthorne repeatedly and intentionally blurs the lines between reality and illusion, as well as between science and the supernatural. In this case the implications are both vivid and grim: the image of the "shriveled" figures wrestling in the mirror is not just "ridiculous"—it is almost certainly intended to be unsettling, and to make the reader feel that the collective delusion of the four friends is shameful.

"I love it as well thus as in its dewy freshness," observed he, pressing the withered rose to his withered lips.

Related Characters: Dr. Heidegger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Heidegger proclaims his appreciation for the withered rose immediately after it has wilted again. This statement is an important expression of his contentment with old age, the passage of time, and their effects on the body and mind. Because his fiancée Sylvia gave him the rose 55 years ago, it likely holds sentimental value for him, symbolizing their relationship—so it would make sense for Dr. Heidegger to feel some grief or sorrow at seeing the rose wilt again after it had come back to life. Instead, he immediately reconciles himself to the fact of the rose being withered, just as he himself is withered. It amounts to a symbolic acknowledgement of the inevitability of death, and the inability of humans to reverse or control the passage of time, which is echoed in more explicit terms moments later when Dr. Heidegger proclaims that he will never drink from the Fountain of Youth.

"Yes, friends, ye are old again," said Dr. Heidegger, "and lo! the Water of Youth is all lavished on the ground. Well—I bemoan it not; for if the fountain gushed at my very 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 ye have taught me!"

Related Characters: Dr. Heidegger (speaker), Colonel Killigrew , Mr. Gascoigne , Mr. Medbourne , Widow Wycherly

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Heidegger, at the end of both the story and his experiment, has clearly concluded based on his observations that it would be a mistake to drink from the Fountain of Youth. The moral, it seems, is that to be young is to be immature, and therefore there can be no returning to the prime of one's youth without sacrificing the wisdom and maturity that come with age. But this moralistic conclusion is complicated and perhaps undermined by a significant difference between Dr. Heidegger and his subjects: Hawthorne portrays Heidegger as a wise and moral figure, while his four friends are portrayed as crestfallen and bitter people who never learned from their mistakes. It raises the question: is it true that no one can be young and wise, or is it just that this particular group of four elderly people never learned their lessons in the first place? Furthermore, it raises again the question of what Dr. Heidegger hoped to accomplish or discover in carrying out this experiment: is it an inquiry into a sincerely-held question, conducted with sound scientific methodology, or is it just an elaborate way of rationalizing his own moralistic decision not to drink from the Fountain of Youth? Hawthorne never gives one clear answer, but his ambiguity speaks volumes.

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.

DR. HEIDEGGER'S EXPERIMENT

One day, a "very singular man" named Dr. Heidegger invites four "venerable" friends to his study: Mr. Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, Mr. Gascoigne, and Widow Wycherly. All four friends are very old and have experienced a great deal of misfortune in their lives, but the narrator remarks that their greatest misfortune is that they did not die long ago.

The story immediately establishes Dr. Heidegger as unique and perhaps even strange with its description of him as "singular." The word "venerable" means to have respect because of one's great wisdom and age—it's a term, then, that connects wisdom and age. The story to follow will suggest that age and wisdom, however, should not *be seen as connected. Finally, the line about the four being unlucky to have lived as long as they have could be taken as ironic — how could it be luckier to have died? — except that the story seems to suggest that the four friends themselves seem to feel the same way.*

Mr. Medbourne was once a successful merchant, but he lost his fortune in a risky business investment and is now very poor. Colonel Killigrew "wasted his best years ... in pursuit of sinful pleasures," and now he suffers the negative effects of his behavior, both physically and spiritually. Mr. Gascoigne was once notorious for being an evil, crooked politician, but time has forgotten him. Widow Wycherly was a beautiful woman in her youth, but has lived in "deep seclusion" for many years because a scandal ruined her reputation and turned the townspeople against her.

Dr. Heidegger's four friends are all characters whose careers, lives, and reputations were tarnished in some way by mistakes — ranging from greed for money or power, or sexually scandalous behavior — that they made in their youth. A typical story might proceed with the idea that each of these old people has learned from their mistakes. Dr. Heidegger's is not such a story.

All three men—Medbourne, Killigrew, and Gascoigne—were once Widow Wycherly's lovers, and at one time they had been locked in a bitter rivalry, competing for her attentions. The narrator pauses before proceeding with the story to note that Dr. Heidegger along with his four friends are thought by many to be "a little beside themselves."

Here, the narrator foreshadows the primary conflict that later arises among the four friends (their rivalry over Wycherly). By suggesting that everyone in the room may have lost their minds (that they're all "beside themselves"), the narrator foreshadows the chaos and foolishness that ensue. However, the possible mental instability of the four friends also *raises the question of whether any of the characters' perceptions of what happens in the story can be trusted.*

Dr. Heidegger announces to his friends that he has invited them to his study because he would like their assistance in an experiment of the sort that he often conducts. The narrator then launches into a description of the study, and begins the description by saying: "If all stories were true, Dr. Heidegger's study must have been a very curious place." The study is a dark and dusty chamber, full of curiosities both medical and, as rumor has it, magical.

The narrator begins his description of the study not by actually describing it, but by saying that "if all the stories" about it were true, then it must be a curious place. That even the description of the study seems to be founded on rumor seems to imply that much of the information that the narrator shares may not be more than rumors. Put another way: the narrator seems to constantly cast doubt on the story he is telling.

The study is lined with bookcases, each packed with enormous folios. Over the central bookcase is a bust of Hippocrates, with whom it's said Dr. Heidegger converses when a case has him stumped. In a closet in the corner stands a human skeleton. On the wall hangs a mirror that is rumored to contain the souls of all Dr. Heidegger's deceased patients, who stare at Dr. Heidegger when he gazes at his reflection. On another wall hangs a portrait of a young woman, Heidegger's fiancée, who died 50 years ago on the eve of their wedding, when she took some of Dr. Heidegger's medicine.

The description of the study blends the scientific and the supernatural in unusual and unexpected ways. The bust of Hippocrates—a symbol of medicine, science, and reason—is said to have magical properties, as is the mirror on the wall, raising the question of what kind of doctor Heidegger really is and what types of experiments he conducts. Moreover, Hawthorne makes the slight implication that Dr. Heidegger may have had something to do with his fiancée's death, since the narrator uses ambiguous language to describe the circumstances surrounding her sudden death.

The strangest thing in the entire study is a large, black, leather-bound book that was "well known to be a **book of magic.**" Once, when a chambermaid touched the book, the objects in the study came to life (the skeleton, the painting, the mirror) and the bust of Hippocrates said "Forbear!"

The magic book is presented as the strongest evidence of Dr. Heidegger's use of magic, but the narrator's description of it is based primarily on rumors and tall tales. The story about the study coming to life when someone tried opening the book is symbolic of the shroud of secrecy surrounding Dr. Heidegger more generally..

At the center of Dr. Heidegger's study is a black table with a glass vase full of **water** sitting on it. The sun strikes the vase and refracts its light onto the ashen faces of the old friends gathered there. Four champagne glasses also rest on the table.

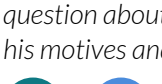
The light from the window hits the vase of water and scatters, brightening the ashen faces in the room; this foreshadows the youth-giving properties of the water inside. However, the champagne glasses are also a visual suggestion that perhaps what's in the vase is actually just alcoholic—that it's inebriating but not actually magic.

Dr. Heidegger asks his friends whether they consent to participating in his "exceedingly curious experiment." The narrator remarks that Dr. Heidegger is very strange indeed, and is the subject of many fantastical stories—some of which might have originated with the narrator himself, he confesses. The narrator writes that if any of the story at hand seems unbelievable to the reader, he "must be content to bear the stigma of a fiction monger."

In this passage, the narrator explicitly undermines his own credibility by admitting to having spread rumors and stories about Dr. Heidegger. This admission further complicates the reader's task in determining what claims in the story can be trusted.

Dr. Heidegger's guests don't expect to be particularly excited by whatever he has planned. Dr. Heidegger, without waiting for their response to his question of whether they consent, fetches the **magic book** off his shelf, and takes from among its pages a withered **rose**, which is very brittle and is now one uniform shade of brown. Dr. Heidegger explains that the rose was given to him fifty-five years ago by Sylvia Ward, his deceased fiancée whose portrait hangs on the wall, and that he had intended to wear it at their wedding.

The language used to describe the rose is similar to the language used to describe the old people's colorless faces. Moreover, the rose was given to Heidegger by his long-dead fiancée, making it a clear symbol for the passage of time and its effects. The fact that Dr. Heidegger doesn't wait for the four friends to respond to his question about consenting to the experiment raises questions about his motives and ethics.



Dr. Heidegger asks the four others in the room whether they think it would be possible for the **rose** to bloom again, and Widow Wycherly responds that it's just as unlikely that an old woman's face could "bloom" again. But when Dr. Heidegger puts the rose in the vase of **water**, it slowly comes back to life. His audience, however, is unimpressed; they remark that they have seen better staged magic tricks performed before.

Immediately, Dr. Heidegger's friends doubt that what they're seeing is real magic. This initial suggestion that the revival of the rose is merely an illusion hangs over the rest of the story, layering even more doubt on what happens by suggesting that perhaps all *of Dr. Heidegger's magic —and what happens to the characters — is just trickery and illusion.*

Dr. Heidegger asks whether anyone in the room has heard of the Fountain of Youth that Ponce De Leon searched for centuries ago. Widow Wycherly asks whether Ponce De Leon ever found the fountain, and Dr. Heidegger says that he never did—but only because he hadn't been looking in the right place. The real Fountain of Youth, Dr. Heidegger explains, is in Florida, overshadowed by ancient magnolias, and an acquaintance of his has sent him **water** from it, which now sits in the vase on the table.

That the water supposedly comes from the mythical Fountain of Youth makes it seem even more dubious. At this point, the narrator is constantly throwing doubt on the story he's telling: is Heidegger actually a practitioner of magic? Is the liquid in the vase magic or just alcoholic? It's worth asking why Hawthorne would write a story in this way. One potential answer is that, by casting doubt on the magic of the story, and making it seem like the whole thing might in fact just be the product of old people getting drunk, Hawthorne actually makes the story seem more credible *to the reader. For the rest of the story, the reader will be caught in wondering whether the characters are being affected by magic or just getting drunk, rather than scoffing at the notion that magic water from the Fountain of Youth is making them younger.*

Not believing Dr. Heidegger's story, Colonel Killigrew asks what effect the **water** has on the human body. Dr. Heidegger responds by saying "You shall judge for yourself," and explains that they may all have as much of the water as is necessary to restore them to their youthful prime. Dr. Heidegger himself, however, will not partake; "having had much trouble in growing old," he says, he's not in a hurry to be young again.

The reason Dr. Heidegger gives for wanting to observe rather than partake in the experiment is interesting. It might mean that growing old was hard, and therefore that youth is dangerous. It might also mean that he spent a lot of effort to grow old, and therefore values what old age has given him. This second reading suggests that Heidegger believes that he, at least, has gained wisdom in growing old, and wants to keep it.

Dr. Heidegger fills the four champagne glasses with the **water** of the Fountain of Youth. The "liquor" is effervescent and has a sweet fragrance, and although the four friends don't believe that it will make them young again, they are eager to drink it.

The water is described exactly as though it were champagne (or some other bubbly form of alcohol), once again suggesting that the supernatural events that follow may be due to the influence of alcohol more than science or magic.

Before the four friends can drink, Dr. Heidegger suggests that they might want to "draw up a few general rules" so that their younger selves might benefit from all the lessons time has taught them. But the friends only laugh at the doctor's advice, thinking it ridiculous that they would ever forget the lessons they had learned. Dr. Heidegger responds that, in that case, they should go ahead and drink, and that he's glad he chose his subjects so well.

Dr. Heidegger's remark—that he has chosen his subjects well—seems sinister rather than reassuring because it comes immediately after they've ignored his advice. In other words: he's glad *they've rejected his advice, suggesting that he may have set up the experiment with the intention not of exploring the magical attributes of the water, or the science of anti-aging. Rather, his experiment seems to be about morality or perhaps, more broadly, about humanity: about how people behave when they get younger. This realization also suggests a second reason why Hawthorne makes it unclear whether the "water" in the story is actually magical water or just alcohol. Ultimately, whether it's one or the other seems not to matter: the story isn't interested in* how *the four characters become young (whether through magic or drunkenness), but rather in what they do once they believe themselves young. By making it unclear how they become young, the story pushes those sorts of questions to the side and brings the moral questions front and center.*

The four miserable, old friends drink the first glass of **water**, and immediately their spirits are lifted, just as they would have been by a glass of wine. Looking at each other around the table, their appearances seem to have improved: they look healthier, cheerier, brighter. Widow Wycherly begins to feel like a woman again. The friends plead for another glass, confessing that, though they were skeptics at first, they do in fact feel younger. Dr. Heidegger, watching "with philosophic coolness," encourages them to have patience, but promptly pours another glass.

The skepticism of the four friends disappears almost instantaneously after drinking a first glass. Once more, the narrator describes the effects of the water (much like its physical appearance and smell) as being like wine, adding to the uncertainty surrounding the question of whether the four are actually *growing younger, or merely* feel *that they are. Meanwhile, Heidegger watches them like* they *are the experiment, which in fact they are.*

The four friends drink their second glass of the **water**. Instantly, their whole bodies seem younger, their hair grows darker, and suddenly they are all middle-aged again. Colonel Killigrew remarks on Widow Wycherly's beautiful appearance. Knowing that the Colonel's compliments were not always measured by "sober truth," she runs to check her reflection in the mirror.

Still, the question of whether the reversal of age is real or an illusion remains open. When the Widow checks the mirror for her reflection, it is worth noting that even the reliability of the mirror has been compromised, since it, too, has been described as being enchanted. Further, it's unclear whether Colonel Killigrew's compliment is based in fact, or is merely the product of drunken excitement.

The friends' behavior seems to prove that the **water** *is* at least slightly intoxicating. Mr. Gascoigne begins muttering nonsense about politics, though it's not clear what he is talking about, or to whom, or what year he thinks it is. Colonel Killigrew is drunkenly singing "bottle songs" and eyeing Widow Wycherly. Mr. Medbourne has begun hatching a far-fetched business scheme involving whales moving polar icebergs. Meanwhile, Widow Wycherly remains at the mirror, adoring her own reflection. She returns to the table at last to ask Dr. Heidegger for another glass, but he has already filled them, and now sits with "gray dignity" in his arm-chair watching his friends like Father Time himself.

All of the characters are now behaving somewhat drunkenly. More interestingly, they all also seem to have reverted to the way they behaved as younger people—with the politician lapsing into nonsensical political speech and the merchant scheming new schemes. Meanwhile, Dr. Heidegger has already poured another glass — he wants them to go further. That the narrator compares the doctor to Father Time suggests that Dr. Heidegger, in the context of this experiment, is in complete control over his subjects just as time is inescapably in control over every human life.

The four friends drink their third glass of the **water**, which turns them into a group of "merry youngsters." An "exuberant frolicsomeness" overtakes them, and they amuse themselves by mocking anything old or infirm: they laugh at their old-fashioned clothes, pretend to walk with a limp, and imitate Dr. Heidegger. Then Widow Wycherly proposes that Dr. Heidegger dance with her, but Dr. Heidegger declines, citing his old age, and suggests that she dance instead with any of the three young gentlemen present.

Despite having been infirm and decrepit mere moments ago, the now-young group of friends seem to have forgotten all about their own former misery and the misery of old age in general. Rather than view old age with understanding, they mock it. Their behavior seems like a direct defiance of Dr. Heidegger's earlier advice that they try not to lose sight of the valuable lessons of old age. This, in turn, raises the question of whether they ever learned such lessons. Or, even more profoundly, whether there actually are *any lessons to be learned form old age.*

Colonel Killigrew, Mr. Gascoigne, and Mr. Medbourne argue over who will be Widow Wycherly's dance partner. One of the men takes her by the hands, another by the waist, and a third by the hair. The three men struggle with one another over the widow's young body, while the widow struggles to free herself—all of them laughing and breathing heavily. The scene is a lively image of youthful rivalry, and yet the narrator remarks that the mirror is said to have reflected, "by a strange deception," the figures of three old, gray men struggling over the body of an ugly, shriveled, elderly woman.

Now restored to youth, the men and the woman engage in a ridiculously unsubtle sexual rivalry that they all find incredibly stimulating. The narrator's description of the four actually still looking like their old selves in the mirror suggests once again that perhaps the group is under the spell of some sort of illusion rather than having actually grown young. More importantly, though, that they still look old in the mirror even as they grapple in youthful sexual vigor suggests that they were always the same people when old and when young. They didn't gain wisdom as they grew old, they merely got old — and it was solely the limits of their physical age that stopped them from acting like young fools.

The playful brawl between the three men turns menacing as they begin to exchange more threatening glances, and finally they grapple violently at one another's throats. In the shuffle, they overturn the table at the center of the room, dashing the vase of **water** onto the floor. The spilled water wets the wings of a dying butterfly, giving it new life. The butterfly takes flight and lands on Dr. Heidegger's white head.

As the sexual rivalry grows fiercer, the men's throat-grabbing echoes the narrator's earlier remark about their rivalry (that the men were at one time ready to slit each other's throats over Widow Wycherly). Once more, this highlights how little they have changed—age brought them no learning or wisdom. Meanwhile, the brawl among the friends results in the spilling and wasting of the rest of the water. Their youthful folly leads to the destruction of the very thing that gave them their youth back. It's as if Hawthorne is saying that youth is wasted on the young.

Dr. Heidegger reprimands the group of friends for their riotous behavior. They all stand still, feeling as if "gray Time were calling them back from their sunny youth"—and indeed, there sits stately Dr. Heidegger in his arm chair, holding the **rose**, which he has rescued from among the broken glass of the vase. He beckons them to sit, and they do, weary from their activity. Dr. Heidegger exclaims that his rose is fading again, and indeed it is. They all watch as the rose wilts. Dr. Heidegger remarks that he loves the rose as much in its wilted state as in its "dewy freshness," and kisses the withered rose with his withered lips. Then the butterfly falls from his head to the floor.

Once again Dr. Heidegger is described as though he himself were Father Time — and suddenly when he admonishes them they become, once again, old. This might suggest that Heidegger is in magical control of the spell they are under, but also could more metaphorically indicate how his admonishment calls them back to remember that they are, in fact, old. Meanwhile, Heidegger's comments about the rose are interesting. Even though the wilting rose could make him mourn his lost youth and his long-dead fiancé, he instead seems fully at peace. Therefore, the rose is symbolic of Dr. Heidegger's acceptance—and even appreciation—of the passage of time and its effects. And this appreciation makes him seem actually wise — and as if there might actually be wisdom in growing old after all.

Sitting around the table, the four friends now watch each other grow old again quite rapidly, the wrinkles forming once again over their faces. They ask dolefully whether it's true, and Dr. Heidegger confirms that they are, in fact, old again. The **water** that made them young had an effect "more transient than that of wine."

Not only does the water's effect wear off after mere minutes, but the process of aging again is far more rapid than the process of growing young had been—suggesting that youth is fleeting. Once again, the story compares the folly of youth is compared to the folly of drunkenness, as if to say that old age is, by extension, akin to sobriety.

Widow Wycherly exclaims that if she can't be beautiful, she would rather be dead. Dr. Heidegger remarks that he doesn't mind that the water was spilled on the ground, since from watching them he now knows that even if the Fountain of Youth gushed at his doorstep, he wouldn't drink from it.

The widow's comment indicates that she does not share Heidegger's peaceful acceptance of aging in the slightest. Reminded of her former beauty, she holds it up as more important than life itself. Her comment also recalls the narrator's quip at the beginning of the story that the four friends were most unlucky in having lived so long. While the experiment has made the widow miserable, though, it seems to have given Dr. Heidegger what he needs. While he doesn't state why he has decided against drinking from the Fountain of Youth, it seems that he wondered about returning to his former youth, but has from watching his "experiment" determined that youth is less valuable than the calm wisdom he has achieved in old age.

The four friends feel differently than Dr. Heidegger. They resolve promptly to journey to Florida, where they plan to drink morning, noon, and night from the Fountain of Youth.

But the four friends learn the opposite lesson from Dr. Heidegger. Rather than learning from their ridiculous behavior, the friends agree to seek out yet more water from the Fountain of Youth. The decision to seek the Fountain of Youth for themselves is akin to a commitment to live in a state of intoxication and illusion rather than come to terms with a sober—and ultimately unavoidable—reality. It is an effort to avoid and hide from death, rather than accept it. It's an effort to slip the bonds of morality in favor of youthful indiscretion. While the story clearly indicts the four friends for this decision, it also quietly raises a broader moral point. Heidegger, remember, was at multiple points compared to Father Time, and when looked at in this way the four friends become stand-ins for all of humanity—the merchant, the army colonel, the politician, the beautiful woman (it is a sort of sexist way of describing humanity from a modern point of view). If the four friends stand in for humanity, then the story seems to indicate that most of —if not all of—humanity fails to learn Heidegger's lesson. The wisdom of old age does *exist, then, but humans almost always throw it away.*

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