

The Scarlet Letter—One Hundred Years After

EXPLORING Novels, 2003

[Hart explores *The Scarlet Letter* as a means for Hawthorne to deal with his own past, to justify his need for art and creativity, and to resolve his own relationship as an isolated individual with the outside world.]

As a way of re-examining *The Scarlet Letter*, we might read it as symbolic action and say that it was doing something for Hawthorne that it was doing for no one else. To relate the pattern of Hawthorne's life to the attitudes and actions of the characters in the novel is to discover that they represent different sides of his own personality. Through them he explores the necessity of Art as a way of expiating his feeling of guilt towards his Past, as well as the relationship of the isolated individual to the outside world.

Certainly Hawthorne's feeling of solitude produced a conflict in his mind, a mental state akin to guilt, that was ... to become a central problem in the stories and novels. Deeply rooted in his Past, Hawthorne's feeling was dualistic in nature. When he went to Raymond, Maine, with his mother, he remembered that here in this "fine wild solitary place" he spent some of the happiest moments of his life, but that here also he acquired the "cursed habits of solitude." Habituated by the early life with his mother, and by a three years' confinement while convalescing from a foot injury and a temporary lameness, Hawthorne was hardly trained to deal with a world of computations and accounts when he went to work in his uncle's stagecoach business in Salem. He wrote his mother: "No man can be a Poet and a bookkeeper at the same time."

The twelve solitary years that Hawthorne spent in Salem must be considered only as a temporary withdrawal for a purpose: he wanted to become a writer, and as a writer, he wanted fame and the acceptance of his stories by the public. If Hawthorne suffered a feeling of guilt from his Past and his solitude, he saw both as a necessary evil to artistic success. As we shall see in *The Scarlet Letter*, it was not isolation itself that produced guilt; rather, it was the feeling of frustration at having chosen Art as a way of life, at being a person of imagination and sensibility. It was the awareness of a world that seemed to emphasize material values rather than human values. Hawthorne's problem was complex and highly personal: how could he convert the particular ingredients of his experience into a successful work of Art that would expiate his feeling of guilt toward the Past, and, at the same time, establish himself as a successful writer?...

The key to understanding the symbolic action of *The Scarlet Letter* lies with the use of the "shadow" metaphor.... We note that the "shadows" have a magnetic power. They induce solitude and an unreal attitude and thus prevent communication with an audience. But "shadows" have also given partial understanding of oneself and have really led to the touch that creates with compassion and understanding.... Hawthorne might have been thinking in both artistic and sexual terms; however, it is his exploration of the former as a way of expiating the Past that shall chiefly concern us here. *The Scarlet Letter*, seen in terms of the function of Art, appears to be the pivotal writing of Hawthorne's career.

Returning to the Past, some two hundred years previous, for the scene of action, Hawthorne introduces the use of a particular set of symbols. We see Hester Prynne, the heroine, for the first time as she emerges from the prison, "the black flower of civilization," from the "shadows," "the grey twilight of the dungeon." Just as the prison confines the drab-garbed Hester, relieved only by the scarlet "A," "so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy," so does the prison overshadow the rosebush, which serves "to symbolize some sweet moral blossom or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow."...

What blooms about Hester as she emerges from the prison is the scarlet letter. It has "the effect of a spell"; it takes "her out of the ordinary relations with humanity" and encloses "her in a sphere by herself." The Puritan society sees the letter in a different light; it represents a symbol of guilt, the individual's violation of the moral code. Probably because she is partly Puritan also, Hester feels guilty too; therefore, she cannot deal with the "leaden inflicting glances" of the onlookers....

Like the rosebush at the prison door, the sin is the root which Hester has "struck into the soil," but, like the rosebush, the sin, although binding her to an isolated fate forever, is a new birth, which helps to assimilate the wild joy of her nature with her new home.

Hester's Past functions for her as Hawthorne's did for him. If he had found solitude to be a cursed habit, he had, at the same time, found it necessary for the practice of his craft, which, in turn, provided an outlet for his imagination.... We might think of the experience which Hawthorne's Past had given him as a commodity for sale, and of his imagination and writing ability as a mode of peddling that commodity. If the writer Hawthorne had isolated himself with an unmarketable product, he had found in it the same kind of therapeutic value that, as we shall soon see, Hester had found in the scarlet letter.

What distinguishes Hester from her Puritan neighbors, and what saves her from her fate, is her creative ability. Living under a "mystic shadow of suspicion," she turns to her art of needlework, of which the scarlet "A" is a "specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill." With the Puritans this addition to the fabric of "spiritual adornment of human ingenuity" was reserved for the "official state of men assuming the reins of power." From the standpoint of function, power is exactly what the embroidery gives Hester—power and a feeling of joy. Hawthorne indicates that the Puritans saw any expression of joy as a cardinal sin. The needlework may express, as well as soothe, Hester's passions, but such an act is, to her own Puritan nature as to the Puritans themselves, like piling sin on sin. If her "art" relieves her guilt endured in solitude, what will save her publicly from the greater sin of having expressed through Art the very emotions that got her into trouble? Although she always exhibits her guilt by wearing the letter, she continues to endure the burden of having tried to "relieve" that guilt through Art and through little Pearl, who is the living embodiment of all the scarlet letter stands for. Hester's mode of life still implies the idea of penance, the idea that there is a price to pay.

In terms of characters that price is Pearl. Part of the function of her character, which is developed later in the story as expressing part of Hawthorne's attitude, lies in her relationship to the Past. Pearl "had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door." As "the outgrowth of her mother's brain," she lacks "reference to the world into which she was born." In her gorgeously embroidered robes, she possesses all the power, joy, passion, and

imaginative qualities associated with the scarlet "A." She has an "ever-creative spirit." She is lawless. She moves in a "circle of radiance." She dances in the sunshine, never in the shadows.

From the metaphors used to describe Pearl, we see that through her Hawthorne defines an attitude which accepts the creative spirit as a necessary part of man's life. Cut off from the roots of the Past, Pearl can judge action (precious child that she is) not according to previous moral standards, but according to the amount of truth demonstrated to her. She acts always as her skeptical and innocent nature dictates. But, having inherited the "enmity and passion of Hester's heart," the born outcast appears to the little Puritans as an unearthly child in league with witchcraft. Obviously, the society in which she lives has no capacity for understanding her.

Hawthorne seems to have drawn the attitudes expressed by these two characters from his own experience. As Hester is able to save herself in part through her creative abilities so Hawthorne can use his writing to redeem his hatred for the Past. He can throw off the guilt felt towards his Puritan ancestors, towards his isolation from society, even, perhaps, towards his own mother. If we substitute Art for the scarlet letter, we can see that Hawthorne was using it, like Hester, to open "an intercourse with the world." Pearl, then, might symbolize what Hawthorne as artist would wish to become, what art itself must do to save an individual from shadowy solitude, so that he can move towards the attitude of the "creative spirit." Pearl's character throughout the story is developed from the attitude that she has nothing to conceal.

If lack of concealment motivates Pearl's actions, the reverse is true of those of Roger Chillingworth. Coming to Boston under a pseudonym, he obviously has something to hide, something that a renaming might either destroy or, at least, conceal. It is his Past, and that Past has to do with Hester. Running into her on the scaffold, he must have been as disconcerted as she. If he can forgive her present ignominious position, he cannot forgive her partner, who has betrayed her as he himself once did. Misshapen at birth, he has tried to delude himself "with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy!" He had married Hester because his heart was "lonely and chill." He had betrayed her youth "into a false unnatural relation" with decay. His guilt, greater even than Hester's, is that of a diseased mind which puts its complete hope in intellect, not passion, and which leads to decay, not growth and understanding.

Chillingworth expresses Hawthorne's attitude toward people who rely solely on intellect. As a man who values "intelligence and learning" above all, Chillingworth is like those men who have "materialized their faculties" and have "lost the spiritual view of existence amid the intricacies of that wondrous mechanism," the human frame. Such men are not devoid of emotion; rather, their emotion is turned to destructive purposes. As with the Puritans, whose repressed feelings have festered into a passion that pries into other people's hearts ... so Chillingworth's emotions are manifested as hatred....

The object of Chillingworth's search is, of course, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester's lover. A Puritan minister, he is scholarly, well read, eloquent in his religious fervor. His presence at Hester's "crucifixion" in the village square arouses no suspicion from the admiring Puritans, for Dimmesdale is really one of them. But there is something extraordinary about him.... Like Hester and Chillingworth, he is a creature of solitude, but in terms of his individual self, his withdrawal has a positive effect.... Dimmesdale represents Hawthorne's own feelings toward solitude.

Hawthorne is not, however, in complete sympathy with Dimmesdale: although the minister's act of withdrawal is sanctioned because it preserves his dewy purity of thought, what is it that has made him withdraw in the first place? As we know, he has, like Hester, violated the moral code of the Puritans. He has concealed his hypocrisy by his angelic speech and clerical garb. Hawthorne's criticism of his action is apparent: the minister has tried to atone for his physical passion by withdrawing from the world to a spiritual haven. Although he has, unlike Chillingworth, managed to keep his thought pure and fresh, rather than false and sterile, he must now deal with his hypocrisy. In the shadows of solitude, he has been quite safe with his own feeling of guilt. What Dimmesdale does not know is that a probing intellect is about to uncover his secret.

As the story unfolds, Chillingworth's function as a man of intellect is to seek revenge without exposing himself. His relationship to the minister is that of doctor to patient. Dimmesdale apparently has no cause for worry. Like that of any physician, Chillingworth's rôle is to cure the members of a sick society. The doctor is no fool. He knows the symptoms of a guilty man when he sees them. Dimmesdale studies too much; he fasts; he is concerned with duty; he is confined within the "iron framework" of his faith; his face is flushed; he puts his hand over his heart, as if to hide something. Chillingworth perceives that the minister is a man of "thought and imagination, a person of sensibility." To effect a cure, the old-herb gatherer picks some "dark flabby leaves," which, he explains, once grew from some hideous secret of the heart.

Actually that hideous secret of the heart, which the minister tries to hide, is his sexual passion, of which the flush, like the scarlet letter, is an outward manifestation....

As Hester's embroidered "A" has magnetized the Puritan society with its magic, so the flush has given the minister a terrible, persuasive power. "The virgins of his church [grow] pale around him." They are partners in religious passion, and their public veneration tortures the young minister, although he has always desired the fame that veneration would bring. Actually, the virgins have made him aware of his passionate nature, and since he continues to conceal it, he is tortured by the realization that he has become a "pollution and a lie." As Hawthorne implies through his portrayal of the minister's relation to his congregation, society worships hypocrisy, not truth. But if Hawthorne accuses society of hypocrisy, his main accusation is against the individual in that society: "... above all things else, [the minister] loathed his miserable self!" Puritan that he was, he must do penance for his terrible guilt.

Like Hester on the scaffold, the minister turns to his Past for consolation: during his vigils, he sees visions, diabolical shapes, his father, his mother, and finally Hester and Pearl, who points an accusing finger at his breast. These visions become "the truest and most substantial thing which the poor minister now dealt with." "The only truth that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect." Torn between "the agony of heaven-defying guilt and vain repentance," the minister walks to the town square and ascends the steps of the scaffold. "In the dark gray of midnight,... there was no peril of discovery." It is here that he invites little Pearl and Hester to join him. As they clasp hands, the minister feels a "tumultuous rush of new life,... pouring like a torrent into his heart." In a kind of ritual, the joining of the three outcasts has given a rebirth to the minister, but since the act is accomplished in the shadowy solitude, the effect is only temporary. As dawn approaches, the lawless chain is broken. Roger Chillingworth sees them and, by his insidious intellect, understands that his plan of revenge

may be thwarted....

[It] is this hatred in Chillingworth that arouses a similar feeling in Hester and causes her to act. She resolves to warn the minister of the old physician's purpose of exposing and thus destroying him.

To understand Hester's resolution is to understand her present relationship with society. Although the Puritans have continued to accept her noble deeds because she suffers the ignominious letter, she herself has changed. During the years, her "life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought." As a result, she has ceased to battle with the public, has submitted to it uncomplainingly....

It is important to remember that Pearl is the living symbol of both sin and art. In terms of Hawthorne's self-scrutiny, she seems to embody the ambivalence of the double attitude: to her mother's solitude she has brought both joy and sorrow: In reality—as Hester has moved towards "thought"—Pearl's ever-creative spirit has become a greater burden to her mother as, we might suggest, Hawthorne's practice of his craft had become a greater burden to him. What Hawthorne seems to imply is that his solitary years were a kind of necessary evil, but that his being a man of sensitivity, passion, and creativeness was an even greater evil. It was not living in solitude that was a sin; rather it was his creative nature that demanded and needed to be revealed that put him at odds with society. Yet by the practice of a profession that society ignored, if not scorned, Hawthorne sought to achieve fame and position, to be thus recognized and accepted by that society.

With Pearl, then, lies the solution to the problem of sin, with all its connotations of pride, revenge, and hypocrisy. She is the only character that is morally and intellectually healthy. She is completely guiltless of the Past, because she has no Past. She operates by her own law and is, therefore, lawless from the standpoint of the Puritans. She is the only free agent because she need not conceal her true feelings from anyone. Metaphorically, she moves in truth and sunshine, rather than in guilt and sorrow.

When Pearl accompanies her mother to the forest—symbol of moral wilderness—to warn the minister of Chillingworth's plan of revenge, she flits like a bird in the bright sunshine. She sees that the sun does not love her mother. "I am but a child. It will not flee from me, for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!" As she dances, the sun becomes part of her "vivacity of spirit." Her actions are easily converted into the attitude towards society which Hawthorne felt.... To understand Pearl is to realize that the individual must achieve detachment so that the heart and mind can achieve understanding. As a symbol of creativeness, Pearl is both sin and sanctity, for as the artist is damned to and by isolation, so isolation preserves the fertility of the imagination, the balance between heart and mind....

Pearl represents, then, the attitude towards which Hawthorne was moving when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. It is not until the final scene of the story, when the minister acknowledges his guilt in the village square, that Pearl runs and kisses him. Her tears, Hawthorne writes, "were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it." Freedom consists not only in showing freely to the world; it also consists in realizing that love and hate are perhaps the same, and that "each renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another."

In a romance that constitutes his most complete working out of a complex response to a very personal dilemma; Hawthorne has drawn his characters as different sides of his own personality. The metaphorical style "conceals"—as if it were a reflection of his disguise—the antagonism between intellect and passion, between the material and immaterial, the struggle between habit patterns of his life, one impelled towards concealing, the other towards revealing a double attitude towards the Past. Because he wanted to "throw off" this hatred for his Past, he had resolved to become a writer. As a keen observer of his own mind and heart, he had, prompted by his own experience, reached certain attitudes: he saw that to avenge his feelings by use of intellect was to decay as a Roger Chillingworth; to disguise those feelings through religion was to live the life of a hypocrite as a Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale; to reveal those feelings by relying wholly on himself as artist was to live always in solitude as a Hester Prynne. If he felt that his chosen profession were sinful when seen from the eyes of society, he also felt that it was purifying if seen from the eyes of the individual. If the practice of Art had driven him into solitude, his reaction to solitude had forced him into an acceptance of his world. He saw that Art was useless unless it was accepted by society. Like Pearl, only by showing freely both mind and heart to the world could he gain a release from the Past, success, fame. But more important, he could feel at home in his world; he could call his Custom House friends brethren.

Source Citation

Hart, John E. "The Scarlet Letter—One Hundred Years After." *EXPLORING Novels*. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Student Resources in Context*. Web. 7 Mar. 2016.

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