The Scarlet Letter Book Summary and Critical Appreciation

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most prolific symbolists in American literature, and a study of his symbols is necessary to understanding his novels. Generally speaking, a symbol is something used to stand for something else. In literature, a symbol is most often a concrete object used to represent an idea more abstract and broader in scope and meaning — often a moral, religious, or philosophical concept or value. Symbols can range from the most obvious substitution of one thing for another, to creations as massive, complex, and perplexing as Melville's white whale in *Moby Dick.*

An *allegory* in literature is a story where characters, objects, and events have a hidden meaning and are used to present some universal lesson. Hawthorne has a perfect atmosphere for the symbols in *The Scarlet Letter* because the Puritans saw the world through allegory. For them, simple patterns, like the meteor streaking through the sky, became religious or moral interpretations of human events. Objects, such as the scaffold, were ritualistic symbols for such concepts as sin and penitence.

Whereas the Puritans translated such rituals into moral and repressive exercises, Hawthorne turns their interpretations around in *The Scarlet Letter.* The Puritan community sees Hester as a fallen woman, Dimmesdale as a saint, and would have seen the disguised Chillingworth as a victim — a husband betrayed. Instead, Hawthorne ultimately presents Hester as a woman who represents a sensitive human being with a heart and emotions; Dimmesdale as a minister who is not very saint-like in private but, instead, morally weak and unable to confess his hidden sin; and Chillingworth as a husband who is the worst possible offender of humanity and single-mindedly pursuing an evil goal.

Hawthorne's embodiment of these characters is denied by the Puritan mentality: At the end of the novel, even watching and hearing Dimmesdale's confession, many members of the Puritan community still deny what they saw. Thus, using his characters as symbols, Hawthorne discloses the grim underside of Puritanism that lurks beneath the public piety.

Some of Hawthorne's symbols change their meaning, depending on the context, and some are static. Examples of static symbols are the Reverend Mr. Wilson, who represents the Church, or Governor Bellingham, who represents the State. But many of Hawthorne's symbols change — particularly his characters — depending on their treatment by the community and their reactions to their sins. His characters, the scarlet *A*, light and darkness, color imagery, and the settings of forest and village serve symbolic purposes.

Characters

Hester is the public sinner who demonstrates the effect of punishment on sensitivity and human nature. She is seen as a fallen woman, a culprit who deserves the ignominy of her immoral choice. She struggles with her recognition of the letter's symbolism just as people struggle with their moral choices. The paradox is that the Puritans stigmatize her with the mark of sin and, in so doing, reduce her to a dull, lifeless woman whose characteristic color is gray and whose vitality and femininity are suppressed.

Over the seven years of her punishment, Hester's inner struggle changes from a victim of Puritan branding to a decisive woman in tune with human nature. When she meets Dimmesdale in the

forest in Chapter 18, Hawthorne says, "The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread."

In time, even the Puritan community sees the letter as meaning "Able" or "Angel." Her sensitivity with society's victims turns her symbolic meaning from a person whose life was originally twisted and repressed to a strong and sensitive woman with respect for the humanity of others. In her final years, "the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence, too." Since her character is strongly tied to the scarlet letter, Hester represents the public sinner who changes and learns from her own sorrow to understand the humanity of others. Often human beings who suffer great loss and life-changing experiences become survivors with an increased understanding and sympathy for the human losses of others. Hester is such a symbol.

Dimmesdale, on the other hand, is the secret sinner whose public and private faces are opposites. Even as the beadle — an obvious symbol of the righteous Colony of Massachusetts — proclaims that the settlement is a place where "iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine," the colony, along with the Reverend Mr. Wilson, is in awe of Dimmesdale's goodness and sanctity. Inside the good minister, however, is a storm raging between holiness and self-torture. He is unable to reveal his sin.

At worst, Dimmesdale is a symbol of hypocrisy and self-centred intellectualism; he knows what is right but has not the courage to make himself do the public act. When Hester tells him that the ship for Europe leaves in four days, he is delighted with the timing. He will be able to give his Election Sermon and "fulfil his public duties" before escaping. At best, his public piety is a disdainful act when he worries that his congregation will see his features in Pearl's face.

Dimmesdale's inner struggle is intense, and he struggles to do the right thing. He realizes the scaffold is the place to confess and also his shelter from his tormenter, Chillingworth. Yet, the very thing that makes Dimmesdale a symbol of the secret sinner is also what redeems him. Sin and its acknowledgement humanize Dimmesdale. When he leaves the forest and realizes the extent of the devil's grip on his soul, he passionately writes his sermon and makes his decision to confess. As a symbol, he represents the secret sinner who fights the good fight in his soul and eventually wins.

Pearl is the strongest of these allegorical images because she is nearly all symbol, little reality. Dimmesdale sees Pearl as the "freedom of a broken law"; Hester sees her as "the living hieroglyphic" of their sin, and the community sees her as the result of the devil's work. She is the scarlet letter in the flesh, a reminder of Hester's sin. As Hester tells the pious community leaders in Chapter 8, ". . . she is my happiness! — she is my torture . . . See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?"

Pearl is also the imagination of the artist, an idea so powerful that the Puritans could not even conceive of it, let alone understand it, except in terms of transgression. She is natural law unleashed, the freedom of the unrestrained wilderness, the result of repressed passion. When Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest, Pearl is reluctant to come across the brook to see them because they represent the Puritan society in which she has no happy role. Here in the forest, she is free and in harmony with nature. Her image in the brook is a common symbol of Hawthorne's. He often uses a mirror to symbolize the imagination of the artist; Pearl is a product of that

imagination. When Dimmesdale confesses his sin in the light of the sun, Pearl is free to become a human being. All along, Hester felt there was this redeemable nature in her daughter, and here she sees her faith rewarded. Pearl can now feel human grief and sorrow, as Hester can, and she becomes a sin redeemed.

Chillingworth is consistently a symbol of cold reason and intellect unencumbered by human compassion. While Dimmesdale has intellect but lacks will, Chillingworth has both. He is fiendish, evil, and intent on revenge. In his first appearance in the novel, he is compared to a snake, an obvious allusion to the Garden of Eden. Chillingworth becomes the essence of evil when he sees the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's breast in Chapter 10, where there is "no need to ask how Satan comports himself when a precious human soul is lost to heaven and won into his kingdom."

Eventually, his evil is so pervasive that Chillingworth awakens the distrust of the Puritan community and the recognition of Pearl. As time goes by and Dimmesdale becomes frailer under the constant torture of Chillingworth, the community worries that their minister is losing a battle with the devil himself. Even Pearl recognizes that Chillingworth is a creature of the Black Man and warns her mother to stay away from him. Chillingworth loses his reason to live when Dimmesdale eludes him at the scaffold in the final scenes of the novel. "All his strength and energy — all his vital and intellectual force — seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight." As a symbol, Chillingworth's job is done.

Light and Color

Light and darkness, sunshine and shadows, noon and midnight, are all manifestations of the same images. Likewise, colors — such as red, gray, and black — play a role in the symbolic nature of the background and scenery. But, similar to the characters, the context determines what role the light or colors play. *The Scarlet Letter*'s first chapter ends with an admonition to "relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow" with "some sweet moral blossom." These opposites are found throughout the novel and often set the tone and define which side of good and evil envelop the characters.

In Chapter 16, Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the forest with a "gray expanse of cloud" and a narrow path hemmed in by the black and dense forest. The feelings of the lovers, weighed down by guilt, are reflected in the darkness of nature. Every so often, sunshine flickers on the setting. But Pearl reminds her mother that the sun will not shine on the sinful Hester; it does shine, however, when Hester passionately lets down her hair. The sun is the symbol of untroubled, guilt-free happiness, or perhaps the approval of God and nature. It also seems to be, at times, the light of truth and grace.

Darkness is always associated with Chillingworth. It is also part of the description of the jail in Chapter 1, the scene of sin and punishment. The Puritans in that scene wear gray hats, and the darkness of the jail is relieved by the sunshine of the outside. When Hester comes into the sunshine from the darkness, she must squint at the light of day, and her iniquity is placed for all to see. Noon is the time of Dimmesdale's confession, and daylight is the symbol of exposure. Nighttime, however, is the symbol of concealment, and Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold at midnight, concealing his confession from the community. In the end, even the grave of

Dimmesdale and Hester is in darkness. "So sombre is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow . . ." The light, of course, is the scarlet letter, shining out of the darkness of the Puritanic gloom.

Colors play a similar role to light and darkness. One of the predominant colors is red, seen in the roses, the letter, Pearl's clothing, the "scarlet woman," Chillingworth's eyes, and the streak of the meteor. At night and always with the physician, the letter is associated with darkness and evil; in the other associations, it is a part of nature, passion, lawlessness, and imagination. The context determines the meaning. Black and gray are colors associated with the Puritans, gloom, death, sin, and the narrow path of righteousness through the forest of sin. Three chapters that contain a multitude of color images are Chapters 5, 11, and 12.

The Puritan Setting of *The Scarlet Letter*

Setting

Even Hawthorne's settings are symbolic. The Puritan village with its marketplace and scaffold is a place of rigid rules, concern with sin and punishment, and self-examination. Public humiliation and penance are symbolized by the scaffold, the only place where Dimmesdale can go to atone for his guilt and escape his tormentor's clutches. The collective community that watches, at beginning and end, is a symbol of the rigid Puritan point of view with unquestioning obedience to the law. The Church and State are ubiquitous forces to contend with in this colony, as Hester finds out to her dismay. They see Dimmesdale as a figure of public approval, Chillingworth, at least initially, as a man of learning to be revered, and Hester as the outcast. Predominant colors are black and gray, and the gloom of the community is omnipresent.

However, nearby is the forest, home of the Black Man but also a place of freedom. Here the sun shines on Pearl, and she absorbs and keeps it. The forest represents a natural world, governed by natural laws, as opposed to the artificial, Puritan community with its man-made laws. In this world, Hester can take off her cap, let down her hair, and discuss plans with Dimmesdale to be together away from the rigid laws of the Puritans. As part of this forest, the brook provides "a boundary between two worlds." Pearl refuses to cross this boundary into the Puritan world when Hester beckons to her. However, the forest is also a moral wilderness that Hester finds herself in once she is forced to wear the sign of her guilt.

A forest is also a symbolic place where witches gather, souls are signed away to the devil, and Dimmesdale can "yield himself with deliberate choice . . . to what he knew was a deadly sin." In these instances, the forest is a symbol of the world of darkness and evil. Mistress Hibbins knows on sight those who would wander "in the forest" or, in other words, secretly do Satan's work. When Dimmesdale leaves the forest with his escape plan in mind, he is tempted to sin on numerous occasions during his journey back to the village. The forest, then, is a symbol of man's temptation.

Every chapter in *The Scarlet Letter* has symbols displayed through characterization, setting, colors, and light. Perhaps the most dramatic chapters using these techniques are the chapters comprising the three scaffold scenes and the meeting in the forest between Hester and Dimmesdale. Hawthorne's ability to introduce these symbols and change them through the

context of his story is but one of the reasons *The Scarlet Letter* is considered his masterpiece and a peerless example of a romance novel.

Nathaniel Hawthorne had deep bonds with his Puritan ancestors and created a story that both highlighted their weaknesses and their strengths. His knowledge of their beliefs and his admiration for their strengths were balanced by his concerns for their rigid and oppressive rules. *The Scarlet Letter* shows his attitude toward these Puritans of Boston in his portrayal of characters, his plot, and the themes of his story.

The early Puritans who first came to America in 1620 founded a precarious colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts. While half the colonists died that first year, the other half were saved by the coming spring and the timely intervention of the Indians. These first settlers were followed ten years later by a wave of Puritans that continued in the 1630s and thereafter, until, by the 1640s, New England had over twenty-five thousand English settlers. The second group in the 1630s settled in the area of present-day Boston in a community they named Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is this colony that forms the setting of *The Scarlet Letter.*

City upon a Hill

The Puritans left the Old World because they wanted to "purify" the Church of England. Their chief complaints were that the services should be simpler and that religion should contain an intense spiritual relationship between the individual and God. In England, the clergy and the government mediated the relationship between the individual and God. Because the Puritans chose to defy these assumptions, they were persecuted in England. A group of them fled to Holland and subsequently to the New World, where they hoped to build a society, described by John Winthrop, as "a city upon a hill" — a place where the "eyes of all people are upon us." In such a place and as long as they followed His words and did their work to glorify His ways, God would bless them, and they would prosper. Hawthorne, of course, presents the irony of this concept when he describes the prison as a building already worn when the colony is only fifteen years old.

Hawthorne's viewpoint of this society seems to be disclosed in several places in the novel but never more so than in the Governor's house in Chapter 7 and during the New England holiday in Chapter 21. On Bellingham's walls are portraits of his forefathers who wear the stately and formal clothing of the Old World. Hawthorne says that "All were characterized by the sternness and severity which old portraits so invariably put on; as if they were the ghosts, rather than the pictures, of departed worthies, and were gazing with harsh and intolerant criticism at the pursuits and enjoyments of living men."

Obviously, it does not bode well to be too happy in the colony, or reprimand is sure to follow. In the recounting of the New England holiday set aside to honor a change in government, Hawthorne describes the non-Puritan parade-goers in the most joyful of terms. Their dress, their behavior, and even the happiness on their faces are very un-Puritan-like. He writes, with his pointed understatement, that "the Puritans compressed whatever mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human infirmity; thereby so far dispelling the customary cloud, that, for the space of a single holiday, they appeared scarcely more grave than most other communities at a period of general affliction."

Hawthorne's gift for ironic understatement should be balanced by the sense that he feels connected to his Puritan ancestors and admires a number of their qualities. Consider the

description he gives of them in his Custom House preface. He sees them, like the old General he describes, as people of perseverance, integrity, inner strength, and moral courage. He also shares a concern for their disdain toward his need to take on a commercial job that contributes little to the community in spiritual profit. In addition, note Hawthorne's condemnation of the tax supervisor who has no sensibility or spiritual compass.

Man and Salvation

These early Puritans followed the writings of a French Protestant reformer named John Calvin (1509-1564), whose teachings saw the world as a grim conflict between God and Satan. Calvinists were a very introspective lot who constantly searched their souls for evidence that they were God's Elect. The Elect were people chosen by God for salvation. According to Puritans, a merciful God had sent His son, Jesus Christ, to earth to die for the sins of man, but only a few would be saved. The rest, known as the "unregenerate," would be damned eternally.

The Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay Colony believed that all mankind was depraved and sinful because of Adam and Eve's fall in the Garden of Eden. Because Adam and Eve were willful and disobedient to God, they brought upon mankind the curse of depravity, sometimes called Original Sin. For this reason, *The New England Primer* (1683), which was used to teach reading in Puritan schools, began with "A: In Adam's Fall / We sinned all." Most Puritans could be sure of eternal punishment in hell; the few that were "elect" would go to heaven.

Church and State

Those who were male and members of the church could vote. In addition, ministers guided the elected officials of the colony; consequently, there was a close tie between Church and State. In *The Scarlet Letter*, those two branches of the government are represented by Mr. Roger Wilson (Church) and Governor Bellingham (State). The rules governing the Puritans came from the Bible, a source of spiritual and ethical standards. These rules were definite, and the penalties or punishments were public and severe. Hester's turn on the scaffold and her scarlet letter were similar to those who were branded or forced to wear an *M* for a murderer. The stocks were a form of public indictment — and, therefore, a deterrent — of bad behavior. Those who disagreed with the laws of the colony were banished, persecuted, and, in some cases, executed.

Obviously, these rigid Puritan standards had both good and bad outcomes. The colony would not have survived without the faith, hard work, courage, and perseverance of these early religious believers. They feared Indian attacks and had to survive lethal diseases, starvation, and the harsh New England winters. They also formed a society in which the rules were very clear. There were few gray areas in the standards of behavior expected by the Puritans and taught early to their children. These stern and introspective Puritans provided a rigid structure that was repressive to the individual but that enabled the colony to survive those early years when order and faith were needed.

On the other hand, the society built by the Puritans was stern and repressive, with little room for individualism. In this society, the "path of righteousness" was very narrow and taught through stern sermons on guilt and sin. The irony, of course, is in the difference between public knowledge and private actions. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, both "sinners" for their part in this drama, are valued and revered members of this repressive community, while Hester is an outcast because of her publicly acknowledged sin. These "iron men and their rules" provide a

backdrop for Hawthorne's story that keeps the conflict alive because public appearances and penance were dramatically important parts of the Puritan community.

In contrast, the forest — seen by the Puritans as the haunt of the Black Man or devil — was a place of little law and order. Those who chose to follow evil signed their name in the Black Man's book and chose a life of sin. Mistress Hibbins symbolizes this world in *The Scarlet Letter*. And, in fact, she says, "Many a church member saw I, walking behind the music, that has danced in the same measure with me." These Puritans may speak of branding Hester Prynne in one breath but dance to the devil's music in the forest in their next breath. The meeting between Dimmesdale and Hester takes place in the forest, away from the stern, repressive laws of society. There they can discuss a central conflict of the novel: the needs of human nature as opposed to the laws of society. This conflict is seen even in the early chapters.

Punishment

The wrath of the colony toward malefactors is brutally obvious in the first scaffold scene in Chapter 2. The "good women" of the colony discuss the community good that could be realized if they were in charge of public punishment. "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead." Another woman in the crowd who is the "most pitiless of these self-constituted judges" points to the scriptural basis of their law in the colony: "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly, there is, both in the Scripture and the statute book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!"

The Puritans had great difficulty in loving the sinner and hating the sin in Massachusetts Bay Colony. When Chillingworth asks a person in the crowd about Hester's crime, he is told that the sentence was softened from death by "their [the magistrates and ministers'] great mercy and tenderness of heart" because she is a beautiful widow and probably was "tempted to her fall." The scholar/doctor says this penalty is wise because she will be "a living sermon against sin." The only softening of community opinion is from the young woman in the crowd who says that no matter how Hester might cover the letter on her dress, she will always know inside that she is a sinner.

How do the magistrates and ministers — mighty pillars of the community — feel about Hester's sin and their statutes? In Chapter 3, Hawthorne describes Bellingham and the others sitting around Hester and says that, although they are "doubtless, good men, just and sage," it would be impossible to find men less capable of understanding the behavior of Hester Prynne. Mr. Wilson, representing the religious realm of rule, discusses the "vileness and blackness" of Hester's sin and reports that only the intervention of the minister, Dimmesdale, has persuaded him that the minister is a better judge of arguments that will cause Hester to reveal the name of the child's father. Dimmesdale's voice, which affected his congregation "like the speech of an angel," also exhorts Hester to name the father. In a speech filled with hypocrisy and desiring to force Hester to make the decision about his public confession, he challenges her to reveal his name:

"Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except to tempt him — yea, compel him, as it were — to add hypocrisy to sin? . . . Take heed how thou deniest to him — who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself — the bitter, but wholesome, a cup that is now presented to thy lips!"

While the community calls for Hester's blood, those who are equally sinful remain silent. The irony of public appearance and private knowledge are themes throughout this story. The only escape from public scrutiny is the forest. The lovers are caught up in a web of lies and deception. They can safely meet and discuss Chillingworth's identity and their plan of escape in the forest, haunt of the Black Man. Here Hester and Dimmesdale plan their escape to Europe where they can follow their hearts and forget the rigid rules of their Puritan society. But the Puritan conscience is too deeply ingrained in Dimmesdale, and though he dabbles in sin on his way back to the Puritan stronghold, he is still a Calvinist at heart. If he is to remain true to himself and honest, as Hester says he must for his conscience's sake, then he must go back to the world in which he is comfortable, even if it eventually means his public humiliation and death. He would not feel at home in the forest where the laws of nature surpass the bars that imprison individuals in Boston.

In the end, Hester escapes the iron rules of Massachusetts Bay Colony, later to return of her own volition. She assures other sinners that "at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." This is Hawthorne's way of saying that this stern and joyless society will eventually move more toward the laws of nature as a basis for public and private behavior. By the end of the novel, his sympathies lie with Hester as a prophetess of a better time and place where personal relationships can be based on more compassionate beliefs.

In choosing Puritan New England as his backdrop, Hawthorne has provided a rich texture for his drama of human suffering. His ending, written in the nineteenth century, seems a hopeful sign that future generations will move toward a less gloomy, less repressive society where human compassion and tolerance will balance the community laws.