

The Scarlet Letter Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Sin, Knowledge, and the Human Condition

Sin and knowledge are linked in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Bible begins with the story of Adam and Eve, who were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As a result of their knowledge, Adam and Eve are made aware of their humanness, that which separates them from the divine and from other creatures. Once expelled from the Garden of Eden, they are forced to toil and to procreate—two “labors” that seem to define the human condition. The experience of Hester and Dimmesdale recalls the story of Adam and Eve because, in both cases, sin results in expulsion and suffering. But it also results in knowledge—specifically, in the knowledge of what it means to be human. For Hester, the scarlet letter functions as “her passport into regions where other women dared not tread,” leading her to “speculate” about her society and herself more “boldly” than anyone else in New England. As for Dimmesdale, the “burden” of his sin gives him “sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind, so that his heart vibrate[s] in unison with theirs.” His eloquent and powerful sermons derive from this sense of empathy. Hester and Dimmesdale contemplate their own sinfulness on a daily basis and try to reconcile it with their lived experiences. The Puritan elders, on the other hand, insist on seeing earthly experience as merely an obstacle on the path to heaven. Thus, they view sin as a threat to the community that should be punished and suppressed. Their answer to Hester’s sin is to ostracize her. Yet, Puritan society is stagnant, while Hester and Dimmesdale’s experience shows that a state of sinfulness can lead to personal growth, sympathy, and understanding of others. Paradoxically, these qualities are shown to be incompatible with a state of purity.

The Nature of Evil

The characters in the novel frequently debate the identity of the “Black Man,” the embodiment of evil. Over the course of the novel, the “Black Man” is associated with Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Mistress Hibbins, and little Pearl is thought by some to be the Devil’s child. The characters also try to root out the causes of evil: did Chillingworth’s selfishness in marrying Hester force her to the “evil” she committed in Dimmesdale’s arms? Is Hester and Dimmesdale’s deed responsible for Chillingworth’s transformation into a malevolent being? This confusion over the nature and causes of evil reveals the problems with the Puritan conception of sin. The book argues that true evil arises from the close relationship between hate and love. As the narrator points out in the novel’s concluding chapter, both emotions depend upon “a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent . . . upon another.” Evil is not found in Hester and Dimmesdale’s lovemaking, nor even in the cruel ignorance of the Puritan fathers. Evil, in its most poisonous form, is found in the carefully plotted and precisely aimed revenge of Chillingworth, whose love has been perverted. Perhaps Pearl is not entirely wrong when she thinks Dimmesdale is the “Black Man,” because her father, too, has perverted his love. Dimmesdale, who should love Pearl, will not even publicly acknowledge her. His cruel denial of love to his own child may be seen as further perpetrating evil.

Identity and Society

After Hester is publicly shamed and forced by the people of Boston to wear a badge of humiliation, her unwillingness to leave the town may seem puzzling. She is not physically imprisoned, and leaving the Massachusetts Bay Colony would allow her to remove the scarlet letter and resume a normal life. Surprisingly, Hester reacts with dismay when Chillingworth tells her that the town fathers are considering letting her remove the letter. Hester's behavior is premised on her desire to determine her own identity rather than to allow others to determine it for her. To her, running away or removing the letter would be an acknowledgement of society's power over her: she would be admitting that the letter is a mark of shame and something from which she desires to escape. Instead, Hester stays, refiguring the scarlet letter as a symbol of her own experiences and character. Her past sin is a part of who she is; to pretend that it never happened would mean denying a part of herself. Thus, Hester very determinedly integrates her sin into her life.

Dimmesdale also struggles against a socially determined identity. As the community's minister, he is more a symbol than a human being. Except for Chillingworth, those around the minister willfully ignore his obvious anguish, misinterpreting it as holiness. Unfortunately, Dimmesdale never fully recognizes the truth of what Hester has learned: that individuality and strength are gained by quiet self-assertion and by a reconfiguration, not a rejection, of one's assigned identity.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Civilization Versus the Wilderness

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the town and the surrounding forest represent opposing behavioral systems. The town represents civilization, a rule-bound space where everything one does is on display and where transgressions are quickly punished. The forest, on the other hand, is a space of natural rather than human authority. In the forest, society's rules do not apply, and alternate identities can be assumed. While this allows for misbehavior—Mistress Hibbins's midnight rides, for example—it also permits greater honesty and an escape from the repression of Boston. When Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the woods, for a few moments, they become happy young lovers once again. Hester's cottage, which, significantly, is located on the outskirts of town and at the edge of the forest, embodies both orders. It is her place of exile, which ties it to the authoritarian town, but because it lies apart from the settlement, it is a place where she can create for herself a life of relative peace.

Night Versus Day

By emphasizing the alternation between sunlight and darkness, the novel organizes the plot's events into two categories: those which are socially acceptable, and those which must take place covertly.

Daylight exposes an individual's activities and makes him or her vulnerable to punishment. Night, on the other hand, conceals and enables activities that would not be possible or tolerated during the day—for instance, Dimmesdale's encounter with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold. These notions of visibility versus concealment are linked to two of the book's larger themes—the themes of inner versus socially assigned identity and of outer appearances versus internal states. Night is the time when inner natures can manifest themselves. During the day, interiority is once again hidden from public view, and secrets remain secrets.

Evocative Names

The names in this novel often seem to beg to be interpreted allegorically. Chillingworth is cold and inhuman and thus brings a “chill” to Hester's and Dimmesdale's lives. “Prynne” rhymes with “sin,” while “Dimmesdale” suggests “dimness”—weakness, indeterminacy, lack of insight, and lack of will, all of which characterize the young minister. The name “Pearl” evokes a biblical allegorical device—the “pearl of great price” that is salvation. This system of naming lends a profundity to the story, linking it to other allegorical works of literature such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* and to portions of the Bible. It also aligns the novel with popular forms of narrative such as fairy tales.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Scarlet Letter

The scarlet letter is meant to be a symbol of shame, but instead, it becomes a powerful symbol of identity to Hester. The letter's meaning shifts as time passes. Originally intended to mark Hester as an adulterer, the “A” eventually comes to stand for “Able.” Finally, it becomes indeterminate: the Native Americans who come to watch the Election Day pageant think it marks her as a person of importance and status. Like Pearl, the letter functions as a physical reminder of Hester's affair with Dimmesdale. But, compared with a human child, the letter seems insignificant, and thus helps to point out the ultimate meaninglessness of the community's system of judgment and punishment. The child has been sent from God, or at least from nature, but the letter is merely a human contrivance. Additionally, the instability of the letter's apparent meaning calls into question society's ability to use symbols for ideological reinforcement. More often than not, a symbol becomes a focal point for critical analysis and debate.

Besides the characters, the most obvious symbol is the scarlet letter itself, which has various meanings depending on its context. It is a sign of adultery, penance, and penitence. It brings about Hester's suffering and loneliness and also provides her with rejuvenation. In the book, it first appears as an actual material object in The Custom House preface. Then it becomes an elaborately gold-embroidered A over Hester's heart and is magnified in the armour breast-plate at Governor Bellingham's mansion.

Here Hester is hidden by the gigantic, magnified symbol just as her life and feelings are hidden behind the sign of her sin.

Still, later, the letter is an immense red A in the sky, a green A of eel-grass arranged by Pearl, the A on Hester's dress decorated by Pearl with prickly burrs, an A on Dimmesdale's chest seen by some spectators at the Election Day procession, and, finally, represented by the epitaph "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules" (gules being the heraldic term for "red") on the tombstone Hester and Dimmesdale share.

In all these examples, the meaning of the symbol depends on the context and sometimes the interpreter. For example, in the second scaffold scene, the community sees the scarlet A in the sky as a sign that the dying Governor Winthrop has become an angel; Dimmesdale, however, sees it as a sign of his own secret sin. The community initially sees the letter on Hester's bosom as a mark of just punishment and a symbol to deter others from sin. Hester is a Fallen Woman with a symbol of her guilt. Later, when she becomes a frequent visitor in homes of pain and sorrow, the A is seen to represent "Able" or "Angel." It has rejuvenated Hester and changed her meaning in the eyes of the community.

The Meteor

As Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl in Chapter 12, a meteor traces out an "A" in the night sky. To Dimmesdale, the meteor implies that he should wear a mark of shame just as Hester does. The meteor is interpreted differently by the rest of the community, which thinks that it stands for "Angel" and marks Governor Winthrop's entry into heaven. But "Angel" is an awkward reading of the symbol. The Puritans commonly looked to symbols to confirm divine sentiments. In this narrative, however, symbols are taken to mean what the beholder wants them to mean. The incident with the meteor obviously highlights and exemplifies two different uses of symbols: Puritan and literary.

Pearl

Although Pearl is a complex character, her primary function within the novel is as a symbol. Pearl is a sort of living version of her mother's scarlet letter. She is the physical consequence of sexual sin and the indicator of a transgression. Yet, even as a reminder of Hester's "sin," Pearl is more than a mere punishment to her mother: she is also a blessing. She represents not only "sin" but also the vital spirit and passion that engendered that sin. Thus, Pearl's existence gives her mother reason to live, bolstering her spirits when she is tempted to give up. It is only after Dimmesdale is revealed to be Pearl's father that Pearl can become fully "human." Until then, she functions in a symbolic capacity as the reminder of an unsolved mystery.

The Scarlet Letter as a Gothic Romance

Hawthorne is chiefly remembered as the creative genius who sought to define the romance. He contributed four major romances to the world's literature: The House of the Seven Gables, The

Blithedale Romance, The Marble Faun, and The Scarlet Letter. In each of these, he sought, in the prefaces, to define what romance meant to him. In the Custom House preface of The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne discusses part of his concept or definition of the romance novel. He explains that life seen through moonlight is the subject of the novel. If the writer is sitting in a room in the moonlight and looks around at the familiar items on the floor — a wicker carriage or a hobby horse, for example — he can discern a quality of "strangeness and remoteness" in these familiar objects. And so he has found a territory in which the familiar becomes enchanted and "the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbues itself with the nature of the other." Hawthorne believes that ". . . at such an hour, and with this scene before him, if a man, sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances."

Finally, The Scarlet Letter is a psychological romance. Hawthorne proposes to study the effects of sin on the lives of his characters. Far ahead of his time, he delves into human alienation and what it does to the soul. Doubt and self-torture provide psychological shadows in the character of Dimmesdale. Rebellion and defiance in the face of repressive laws can be seen in his heroine, Hester Prynne. She may be forced to wear the scarlet letter, but she mocks that sentence with her elaborate embroidery. The Puritan concern with man's depravity and its effect on individual characters is intertwined throughout the plot. What happens when a person has an excess of passion or intellect? When a balance of the two is not achieved in an individual, what is the end result? Within the framework of the romance, Hawthorne lays out his evidence of the psychological conflicts within and around his characters.

The Real and the Imaginary

What this means for the modern reader of The Scarlet Letter is that, even though Hawthorne's story has a historical setting — Boston in the 1640s — the story includes elements that are not realistic. While the Puritan society was real and can be researched, the tale also contains elements of that society that are coloured by marvellous imagination in his novel.

Does this mean that there will be no limits to what Hawthorne can manufacture in his fancy? No, there are restraints. Hawthorne attempted to explain those conventions in his preface to The House of the Seven Gables, his next novel:

"When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probably and ordinary course of man's experience. The former — while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart — has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he thinks fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherically medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavour, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public."

Thus, the romance can have the imaginary, the supernatural, and the unbelievable, but it must also have events that do not swerve from what the human heart knows to be true. The setting of Boston in the 1640s is a perfect choice for this type of writing. Seventeenth-century Bostonians believed in devils, witches, and a vengeful and angry God. So not only is Hawthorne truthful to present his setting in that light, but he also leaves ample room for the imagined and the extraordinary.

Romances can concern real settings but are not limited to the probable. The fantastic can be added, and, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne adds the scarlet A in the sky at midnight, the same letter allegedly carved into Dimmesdale's breast, the sunlight that follows Pearl but not her mother, and Chillingworth descending into hell. But there must be a balance; the probable must outweigh the strange and improbable, which leads to another tenet of Hawthorne's romance definition.

Unity and Structure

Certain artistic laws must be faithfully executed so that the reader can follow the trial. There must be unity and structure, literary devices, and a subject kept ever in the reader's sight. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scaffold scenes provide the unity and structure, and the literary devices include symbols, colours of light and darkness, irony, and the consistent subject of guilt to provide artistic wholeness. While Hawthorne can go beyond the probable and use the marvellous, he must also do so without chaos; hence, he must provide artistic balance.

Gothic Elements

These definitions of Hawthorne's romance are also joined by another tradition: Gothic elements. Gothic novels often featured supernatural events, gloomy atmospheres, castles, and the mysterious. While eighteenth-century writers did not like these subjects, the Romantic authors of the nineteenth century and their successors did. Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, and Stephen King all have elements of the Gothic in their stories.

Traditionally, there are a number of these Gothic elements. One used by romantic authors is a manuscript that is purported to be the origin of the story. In *The Custom House* preface, Hawthorne finds such a manuscript left by Surveyor Pue and a scarlet letter that is a magical artefact intertwining the real and the imaginary.

Besides magic, often Gothic stories have castles; in *The Scarlet Letter*, Governor Bellingham's home serves this purpose. It is covered with cabalistic figures and diagrams and has turrets like a castle. Inside is a set of armour, also a familiar element of the Gothic. In this armour which acts as a mirror, Pearl sees the distorted scarlet letter.

A crime, often illicit love, is usually the subject of a Gothic novel. Hester's affair is a crime committed in the Puritan community. Gothic novels sometimes have a villain who is identified as an evil person by some deformity. Chillingworth has such a deformed shoulder. And, finally, nature is often used to

set the atmosphere of the story and provide some of the symbols. Nature abounds in *The Scarlet Letter*, and darkness, shadows and moonlight are all part of the Gothic ambience. The overall atmosphere of the novel is dark and gloomy, a proper milieu for the Gothic tradition.

In writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne was striking out in a new direction, the psychological romance, while using some of the elements of a far older tradition, the Gothic novel. Modern readers should not be surprised to find horrifying revelations, sinister red light coming from a character's eyes, a precocious child who is a living symbol rather than a human being, and the dark recesses of the human heart and conscience. These elements have kept readers enthralled for generations.

[The Structure of The Scarlet Letter](#)

The First Scaffold Scene

While many critics have imposed various structures on this novel, the scaffold scenes are by far the most popular means of pointing out the perfect balance of Hawthorne's masterpiece. These scenes unite the plot, themes, and symbols in a perfect balance.

The first scaffold scene, which occurs in Chapters 1-3, focuses on Hester and the scarlet letter. She stands on the scaffold with quiet defiance, holding her baby in her arms. Meanwhile, a crowd of townspeople has gathered to watch her humiliation and hear a sermon. Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, has just returned and is on the outskirts of the crowd. Her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale, shares her platform but not her public humiliation.

The principal characters are all here. The townspeople are present to pass judgement, just as they will be in the final scaffold scene. Hester stands alone with Pearl in her arms, a mere infant and sign of her sin. Dimmesdale, with other officials who represent the church-state, shares the platform. His ambivalence about maintaining his silence can be seen in his demand that Hester tell the name of the child's father. In the crowd is also Roger Chillingworth whose voice is added to those of the crowd when demanding that Hester reveal her partner in sin. In this scene, we have Hester's public repentance, Dimmesdale's reluctance to admit his own guilt, and the beginning of Chillingworth's fiendish plot to find and punish the father. The focus on the adultery and the letter is strengthened by the topic of sin in Mr. Wilson's sermon.

The Second Scaffold Scene

The second scaffold scene again provides a view of all the principal characters, a dramatic vision of the scarlet A, and one of the most memorable tableaux in American literature. In the covering of darkness, Dimmesdale has made his way to the scaffold to perform a silent vigil of his own. So far we have seen Dimmesdale's conscious attempt to deal with his guilt, but now we go deep into his subconscious. In his spiritual torture, he cries out with a shriek of agony that is heard by Hester and Pearl as they journey to their home from the bed of the dying Governor Winthrop. This cry is also heard by Mr. Wilson.

Hester and Pearl join Dimmesdale on the scaffold, the place where seven long years earlier "Hester Prynne had lived through her first hours of public ignominy." Although the crowd is gone, Pearl asks the minister if he will join her and Hester there at noontide. He replies that their meeting will be instead at the great judgement day rather than here in the daylight. As though to taunt him, a great meteor burns through the dark sky, illuminating the scaffold, the street, and the houses. Hawthorne describes the scene as "an electric chain," the minister and his lover holding hands with their child between them. Also illuminated in the darkness is the fiendish face of Roger Chillingworth. This time, although the townspeople are not present, they talk about the scarlet A in the sky throughout the next day.

The chapter abounds in symbols: the scaffold itself; Dimmesdale's standing on it; the three potential observers representing Church, State, and the World of Evil; the "electric chain" of Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale; Pearl's appeal to Dimmesdale to stand with them; the revealing light from the heavens; and the variation on the letter A.

The Third Scaffold Scene

The final scaffold scene occurs after the procession on Election Day. In this powerful scene, Dimmesdale regains his soul, Pearl gains her humanity, Chillingworth loses his victim, and Hester loses her dreams.

Here again, the main characters come together, and this time Dimmesdale reveals his "scarlet letter." His Election Day sermon should have brought him his greatest triumph, but instead, that honour is saved for his confession of sin and his final act of penance in standing on the scaffold with his lover and child. He escapes the diabolical clutches of Chillingworth who, without his victim, shrivels and dies. But he also triumphs over the evil that has overwhelmed him as he publicly confesses his part in Pearl's birth. He has learned that happiness must be willed not by himself, but by God. In this final scaffold scene, all the symbols and characters are once again present: the Church and State, the world of evil, the scarlet letter, the punishing scaffold, and a symbolic kiss. And, of course, death is present also.