

The Uses of Imagery and Symbolism
In The Scarlett Letter

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John Howard Tetlow
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Saint Meinrad College
St. Meinrad, Indiana



The "Custom House," preface to The Scarlet Letter (1850), recounts the story of Hawthorne's sojourn as a customs official, his feelings of unfulfillment there, and his subsequent discovery of the scarlet letter. Included with the scarlet letter is a parchment from a certain Surveyor Pue giving a background to this curious piece of stitchery. The parchment gives a general history of a woman named Hester Prynne who had been made to wear the letter "A" on her gown for the crime of adultery.

In this essay Hawthorne fictionalizes himself as a part of his story. He uses his own person to make the story more vivid for his readers. On finding the scarlet letter Hawthorne picks it up and places it against his chest. "It seems to me then, that I experienced a feeling not altogether physical, yet almost so, of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but of red hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor."¹ The heat he experiences is not unlike the heat Dimmesdale experiences. Hawthorne's feeling the heat on his chest is but a forshadowing of the burning chest of Arthur Dimmesdale. The parchment written by Surveyor Pue about Hester Prynne seems to be a personification of Hawthorne's flight away from his socially acceptable job back to his imagination. "With his ghostly voice he has exhorted me, on the sacred consideration of my filial duty and reverence

towards him, who might reasonably regard himself as my official ancestor, to bring his moldy and moth eaten lubrications before the public."² There are symbols of light and dark in the "Custom House" just as there are in The Scarlet Letter. In one passage Hawthorne relates his experiences at the Custom House in this way: "During the whole of my Custom House experience, moonlight and sunshine, and the glow of firelight, were just alike in my regard; and neither of them were with more avail than the twinkle of a tallow-candle." Hawthorne is expressing his dissatisfaction when he speaks of light being gone from his day; this same image is used in The Scarlet Letter to depict the loss of happiness in Hester's and Dimmesdale's lives.³

Hawthorne is finally dismissed from the Custom House. His dismissal seems like a rejection from society by society, but ultimately turns out to be the best thing that could have happened to him, in that it precipitated the rejoining of his creative imagination.

The Scarlet Letter is one of Hawthorne's greatest works. It is a story of lives submerged in sorrow and degradation. There are four main characters; Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl, and Roger Chillingsworth. In the beginning of the story, Hester Prynne is perched upon a scaffold while all eyes peer at her. She is guilty of the crime of adultery and she is made to wear a big "A" on her gown; this is the Scarlet Letter. As the story unfolds, it is shown that Hester has had an illicit affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, the young minister of the town. Hester and Arthur decide to keep it a secret, so when Hester's child is born, she has no father. Roger Chillingsworth enters the picture now. He is Hester's husband who has been gone for two years. The town knows nothing of Hester's involvement with Roger Chillingsworth who now also lives in the town.⁴

The novel covers seven years in the life of these characters. This paper will be concerned with the use of symbolism in the story. Hawthorne uses abundant images of light and dark in The Scarlet Letter.

In the first chapter of The Scarlet Letter, the prison is referred to as a "Black Flower of Civilized Society." The blackness of this prison refers to the sorrows and imperfections of man, a black hole of Calcutta so to speak. The only light which is displayed in or about this prison is a single rosebush. The single rosebush naturally is a representation of one small sign of a retrievable light of beauty.⁵

Hester Prynne, the main character in the story, is in body this "retrievable light of beauty." The book refers to Hester Prynne as one of the flowers of the rosebush. "Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than to pluck one of its flowers, and present it to the reader."⁶

Hester is indeed a beautiful woman who is in jail due to an act of adultery. Hester is not shunned by the sun, instead, is glorified by it as it shines down on her dark hair which repels it. Hester is a very proud and defiant woman who has been told she must wear a letter "A" on her bosom symbolizing her act of adultery. Her pride is shown forth by her flamboyant stitchery of this letter in red and gold. Hester, though looked at by the Puritans as being a sinner, can also be compared to the Virgin. "Had there been a Papist among the crowd of puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the Image of Divine maternity."⁷

Hester is a victim of her time. She is living in a day of Puritanism where everything is black or white, light or dark. In their eyes Hester is to be judged as a disciple of the devil; for to the Puritans, if a person deviated from those things that were strictly set up as good by the Puritans they were dreaded sinners. This was a time when people who were

eccentric or deviated from the mean could be called witches. Many a poor person was put to death over misunderstood practices or wrongdoings blown out of proportion. Hester is judged harshly. Though not imprisoned for any great length of time, she is made to wear the letter on her gown. The letter is, as Hester meant it to be, an ever gleaming bright artistic stitchery, but even though it is light in appearance, it is laid before gloom and misery. Though only a letter on her gown, it will always be a constant thorn in her side or, more importantly, in her heart.⁸

While Hester is being returned to the prison from the scaffold there is mention of her scarlet letter throwing a lurid gleam in the darkness. The people tended to think of the scarlet letter, not as a mere piece of red cloth dyed in a pot, but all aglow with unearthly red fire. It was said that wherever Hester walked, it seared her bosom deeply.⁹ "The very way in which the "A" on Hester's gown was looked at points out the strict puritan demonology that existed at this time. It is an idea that reaches from the darkest regions of the mind to the brightness of the world. Hester is a victim also of superstition. She is a victim of a phenomenon that is manmade existing abstractly in the mind and not concretely in nature."¹⁰

The "A" on Hester's bosom is symbolic in several ways. The letter not only points out Hester's sin to her, but should also remind other people that they too are guilty of sin. The letter itself is a symbol of original sin. What is shown here

is that no man is untouched or left unanswerable to this sin. All people are subject to committing this sin in one way or another. Hester is really the lucky one in this respect that she pays all her life for her sins, making the best possible retribution. True, Hester serves her life in moral degradation but her accusers ironically never realize they should be paying also. The situation is clear, because of their nature human beings must fall, some serve God, others do not.¹¹ Ironically, Hester is the one who although considered morally decadent, triumphs at the end being morally cleansed and spiritually uplifted.

Hester's life was not to be totally unhappy for she had borne a child who became her light amidst the dark. At the same time, in a tragic twist of fate, she is the image of the scarlet letter. Pearl is the scarlet letter personified, Hester Prynne's constant reminder of a passionate love. There was a fire within Pearl, a aura, a wildness that showed itself to Hester as the offshoot of a compassionate moment. The very name that Hester gives her child is symbolic of being of great worth. Hester paid dearly for her daughter Pearl. Hester is guilty of committing the same sin against Pearl that society commits against her. Hester thinks of Pearl as a gift from God, destined for good things, but at the same time cannot help seeing Pearl as the evil result of her sin. The fact is that because of Hester's condemnation of her deed, Pearl is fated to

incarnate her mother's wild resistance to the world.¹²

Hester loves Pearl as her child and is a good mother but she hates the deed which brought her about. Time goes on and it is thought by some of the town elders that Pearl would be brought up a lot better if she were raised away from her natural mother. Hester shows her true love for her child while at the Governor's mansion she loses her temper and gives a discourse on her right to keep Pearl.

"God gave me this child! Cried she. He gave her requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness--she is my torture, none the less! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed a million fold the power of retribution for my sin."¹³ Hester's little reminder is what makes Hester's life worthwhile. She has nothing else for she has given all in retribution of her sin. The removal of Pearl from Hester's side would have been too much. The Reverend Dimmesdale, who will be discussed later, talks to the governor for Hester, and she is allowed to keep her child. As Hester is leaving triumphant in her cause, she is offered an invitation to attend a witch party in the woods which she promptly turns down. Hester makes it clear though, that if Pearl would have been taken away, the circumstances would have been different. "I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in blood."¹⁴

Hester is saved from devilish occurrences by her small daughter. So this symbol of the scarlet letter causes Pearl's mother to do that which is good, to make retribution for her sin. Pearl is the light which comes from the darkness enabling Hester to take that which is dark and find the light in it.

Hester continues throughout her life to wear the scarlet letter on her gown. Hester never loses sight of what the letter "A" means to her but as time goes by, the letter gains another meaning. Her life becomes one of usefulness to the community. She becomes a symbol of giving of what she had; to those who needed it:

She was self ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her call. Such helpfulness was found in her-so much power to do, and power to sympathize-that many people refused to interpret the scarlet "A" by its original signification. They said that it meant able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength.¹⁵

Hester, through constant payment for her sin and constant humiliation, becomes a symbol of good in the community. The stigma of the scarlet letter is still there, but through her retribution her sin is forgiven, and a certain deep respect is afforded her by the community. She never lives a lie but is open and honest about her act and thusly, becomes a woman above the rest. She is forgiven by the community for her frailty, because of her many good deeds. This is not to say that her heart is not heavy with gloom, not for herself but for her

lover, Arthur Dimmesdale, who through weakness pays for his sin more drastically.

Arthur Dimmesdale is the well respected minister of the town, Hester's lover and Pearl's father. Dimmesdale is considered the purest of all men while living his passionate lie. His torture is worse than Hester's because he is faced to live a perpetual lie in public, and he is one of those men who loves the truth and hates the lie. The irony of the situation is that the more he tortures himself for his lie, the more his body is torn apart by the decay of his soul, the more he is hailed by his parishioners. His constant despair breeds more love by his followers. He is thought to be a living saint while he considers himself sin personified. On many occasions, in the light of his sermons, he confesses the truth but because of his words, transforms them into falsehood.¹⁶

"I who have laid the hand of baptism upon your children, I, who have breathed the prayer over your dying friends, to whom the amen sounded faintly from a world which they had acquitted, I, your pastor, whom you revere and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!"¹⁷

Dimmesdale's life is that of torture because he must keep within him a lie that scorches his breast and destroys his very self. Paradoxically that which is considered evil within this man becomes responsible for the total good that comes from Dimmesdale's sermons. He is considered to be spirit incarnate on earth, while at the same time he is living a lie his parishioners would condemn him for.

Dimmesdale's conscience never allows him a moment's peace. He is constantly plagued by his sin and the result of that sin, namely Hester's humiliation and his little offspring, Pearl, whom he is never allowed to know. His guilt leads him to the very place where his passionate soulmate had withstood her first hours of humility. Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold in the very darkness that envelopes his soul, hoping that even though nobody is there to witness it, he might also be able to make a small retribution. This is also a lie though, for nobody watches and he realizes this, so his heart is only made heavier. Dimmesdale longs to make retribution. As fate would have it, Hester walks by the scaffold with Pearl, and seeing Dimmesdale on the scaffold joins him. This is how it was meant to be and the heavens give their approval:

And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart, and Hester Prynne, with the embodied letter glimmering on her bosom, and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between these two. They stood on the noon of that strange and solemn splendor, as if it were the light that is to recall all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another.¹⁸

As the two stand there, the light shines down upon them — remnescent of the time Hester stood there alone. As if the light were saying: this is where you will find your answer, this is how it should be. The three of them belong together and the light of the heavens is pointing toward their vindication. The truth must one day be known and until that day of actualization the darkness will prevail.

Dimmesdale could have rid himself of the guilt he lived

with right there, but because of his weakness, he chose not to. His lie had become part of his life, he felt he had the power to change his life and repent in public but at this time it was impossible to do so. The fact is that the act for which Dimmesdale so persecuted himself had produced a beautiful child. Dimmesdale, because of the morals of the day, ruined his life all owing to his guilty imagination.

Neither Dimmesdale nor Hester were the gravest of sinners, for their act had been an act of unpremeditated passion. The gravest sinner of all was Roger Chillingsworth. He was Hester's husband who had been gone quite a while and managed to make himself present the day Hester was on the scaffold. Recognizing Hester, Chillingsworth follows her into the jail back to her cell. Roger Chillingsworth with revenge on his mind then decides to question her:

Thou wilt not reveal his name? Not the less he is mine, resumed he, with a look of confidence, as if destiny were at one with him. He bears no letter of infamy wrought into his garment, as thou dost, but I shall read it in his heart.¹⁹

Chillingsworth goes on to live in the town and by strange or supernatural coincidence becomes a housemate to Dimmesdale. The people who know Dimmesdale hope that this union will help Dimmesdale's health which has been failing. From the time that Chillingsworth becomes Arthur Dimmesdale's live in doctor, the patient continues to decline. Chillingsworth himself can be pictured as none other than the devil's emmisary. Chillingsworth is compared throughout the story with that which is black. dark. or gloomy; light in the story is never used in

comparison with Roger Chillingsworth. Revenge is one of the worst sins, more so than Hester's or Dimmesdale's sin. I stated before that light is in one case, in comparison with the furnace: "Sometimes, a light glimmered out of the physician's eyes, burning blue and ominous, like the reflections of a furnace."²⁰

This illusion can compare Chillingsworth with none other than the devil himself. Chillingsworth is always at Dimmesdale's side and finally becomes very effective at removing from him every bit of peace of mind he has: "In a word, old Roger Chillingsworth was a striking example of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office. This unhappy person had effected such a transformation by devoting himself, for seven years, to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture and deriving his enjoyment thence, and adding fuel to those fiery tortures which he analyzed and gloated over."²¹

Roger Chillingsworth destroys not only any happiness Dimmesdale can expect, but also ruins his own life by doing this. Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale have both repented for their sins, but Chillingsworth has slipped further and further into the hot hands of hell, he is irretrievable. The sun seemed to ignore Roger Chillingsworth, for he always seemed to be enraptured in an ominous shadow. Nature was not the least impressed with Chillingsworth: "Would not the earth, quickened to an evil purpose by the sympathy of his eye, greet him with poisonous shrubs, of species hitherto unknown, that

would start up under his fingers."²²

Roger Chillingsworth's whole essence is revenge and therefore in revolt against nature. Not so with Dimmesdale and Hester, because man should never have to pay such a price for a mistake. Nature is aware of their deep retribution, for on the very day of their meeting in the forest and their making of plans to leave and make a new life together, the sun shines upon them: "As if the gloom of the earth and sky had been but the effluence of these two mortal hearts, it vanished with their sorrow. All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, faith burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and glowing adorn the gray trunks of fallen trees."²³

Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale are judged kindly by nature. Their child is one who is frequently spoken of as being a child of nature, a child who blooms with effervescence and is as wild as nature herself. Pearl is nature's adopted daughter.

The people of the day, the Puritans, are not a free sort at all. This overrighteousness is exhibited no better than by the incident in the story of election day. This day is supposed to be one of festivity, but it seems to be more like a day of mourning. The only real light on the election day is Pearl running around from place to place like a wisp of air.

Finally at the end of the story we have a very weak Arthur Dimmesdale walk upon the scaffold and summon Hester and Pearl to his side. In this final moment, Roger Chillingsworth

calls upon Dimmesdale to stop:

At this instant, old Roger Chillingsworth thrust himself through the crowd, or perhaps, so dark, disturbed, and evil has his look, he rose up out of some nether region-to snatch back his victim from what he sought to do.²⁴

Chillingsworth tries his final deception but it does not work. The minister is free of his clutches. Dimmesdale becomes a part of nature again. He is free. Just as the sun is beating down on Hester when she first stands upon the scaffold, so it is finally beating down on Dimmesdale.

The very elevation of the scaffold shows that Dimmesdale and Hester have through their sorrow and retribution elevated themselves above the crowd, becoming more spiritual than the onlookers.

Footnotes

¹Nina Baym, The Shape of Hawthorne's Career(Ithaca, New York Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 146.

²Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Columbus; Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 33.

³Baym, p. 146-149.

⁴Richard Harter Fogle, Hawthorne's Imagery(University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), p. 22-23

⁵Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter(New York: Arcadia House, 1950), p. 3.

⁶Ibid., p. 10.

⁷Richard Harter Fogle, Hawthorne's Fiction, the Light and the Dark (University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 133-134

⁸Ibid., p. 143-144.

⁹Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 133.

¹¹John E. Becker, Hawthorne's Historical Allegory (Port Washington, N.Y. : Kennikat Press, 1971), p. 139-143

¹²Hawthorne, p. 74.

¹³Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁵Fogle, p. 141.

¹⁶Hawthorne, p. 122

¹⁷Ibid., p. 123

¹⁸Ibid. , p. 10.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 92.

²⁰Ibid., p. 140.

²¹Ibid., p. 146.

²²Ibid., p. 178.

²³Ibid. .. p. 231.

²⁴Hawthorne, (1971) p.252.

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