



## Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*

(1850)

- [Robert Daly \(SUNY, Buffalo\)](#)

Domain: Political Science. Genre: Allegory, Essays/ Lectures (any), Historical, Non-fictional prose, Novel.  
Country: United States.

*The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, published in Boston by Ticknor and Fields in 1850, has come to be considered among the most important works in American literature, and indeed among the most important novels written in English. Widely read in the nineteenth century and appreciated for its portrait of Puritanism, twentieth-century critics have recognised its complex allegorical and symbolic patterns as offering a penetrating reflection on dilemmas which are fundamental to American experience and identity, most notably the idea that the migration of the Pilgrim Fathers held out the possibility of earthly regeneration. Whilst the novel is often read as an isolated expression of such concerns, when read in relation to Hawthorne's short stories at this time – notably "The New Adam and Eve" (1843) and "Earth's Holocaust" (1844) – it can then be seen as very much part of a wider meditation which animated the Democratic political circles in which Hawthorne moved.

*The Scarlet Letter* in itself being considered a little short for a novel, Hawthorne prefaced it with an introductory essay entitled "The Custom-House" which at first sight seems to be a realistic prose sketch adapted from his own experience in the Salem Custom-House where Hawthorne held a comfortable and undemanding job until evicted in June 1849 by the local Whig Ward Committee who used the spoils system to shoe in their own candidate following the inauguration of President Zachary Taylor.

On second reading – and Hawthorne loved double readings, hence the title of his story collection *Twice-Told Tales* – the title "The Custom-House" begins to offer an allegorical and symbolic sketch of what Hawthorne sees as general types of mentality in contemporary America. The author introduces himself to "the public" as one who hopes to "stand in some true relation with his audience" yet "still keep the inmost Me behind its veil". He has "a sort of home-feeling with the past" that is "not love, but instinct". Working in the custom-house, overseeing trade and exchange, he stands between "the permanent Inspector", who has achieved only the "perfection of his animal nature" and uses his mind only "to recollect the good dinners" of his life, and "the dreamy brethren of Brook Farm" – transcendentalists like Emerson, Channing, Thoreau, Hillard, and Alcott, who value only the mind even as the Inspector values only the body. Yet the author feels "it to be the best definition of happiness to live throughout the whole range of his faculties and sensibilities!" He seeks to connect mind and body, self and other, present and past, fact and imagination: and advises the reader that:

It contributes greatly towards a man's moral and intellectual health, to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate.

Those who refuse to go outside themselves throw “away all the golden grain of practical wisdom” instead of “harvesting” it. For that reason, he seeks “a new change of custom” by connecting past and present, since “the past was not dead” but lived on in its effects upon the living, and since both fact and imagination take him out of himself and develop his faculties:

Thus, therefore, 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 imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.

In some “heaped-up rubbish” he finds the traces of those ghosts, both old parchments relating to the history of Massachusetts Bay and “a certain affair of fine red cloth”, with “traces about it of gold embroidery”. Though “reduced” by time “to little more than a rag”, it turns out to be “the capital letter A” twisted around “a small roll of dingy paper” written by a “Mr. Surveyor Pue” and relating “the life and conversation of one Hester Prynne”, who had “gained from many people he reverence due to an angel, but, I should imagine, was looked upon by others as an intruder and a nuisance”. Putting the A to his own chest, he fancies that it still burns and that the experience of its heat and language of the manuscripts must be connected. This rather gothic moment portends that notwithstanding the carefully balanced sentences of the “Custom-House”, and the attempt to balance sets of oppositions, Hawthorne’s “neutral territory” is hard to sustain, and inherently unstable: having found his historical remnant, his “fact”, he finds food for his historical imagination, and the result, as we shall see, burns the heart.

Our author’s occupation of his “neutral territory” is brought to a sudden end when he is fired from the custom-house, and he feels decapitated, “like Irving’s Headless Horseman”, bereft of mind and memory and so cut off from “the receipt of custom” and the “men of traffic” who made those connections possible. He is amazed “how little time it has required to disconnect me from them all, not merely in act, but recollection!” One way to reconnect with others is to offer his readers the “Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor”, his retelling of Surveyor Pue’s retelling of the story of Hester Prynne.

That story begins in June of 1642, at the “threshold” of a prison, “the black flower of civilized society”, next to which grows “a wild rose bush”, perhaps “sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson”, leader of the Antinomians (those who argue anti-nomos, against the law) who in the 1630s had defied Puritan legalism in favour of the human experience of religion. Faced with the contrast between the “black flower” and the rose bush, the narrator can “hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader”.

In the “market-place” of Puritan exchange and value, all who in any way stand against the saints are labelled and punished. The “culprit” may be “a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child,” or “an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist”, or a “vagrant Indian” or “a witch” – any and all will be conflated into one category, whether they are flogged, hanged, or merely expelled. Among these malefactors is Hester Prynne, a woman taken in adultery with her husband absent two years. When Master Brackett, as the jailor is aptly named, attempts to take her arm and draw her out before the crowd, “she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free-will”. She holds in her arms a baby some three months old, who has known only the darkness of the cell and ducks her head in the bright sunlight. Hester wears on her chest the red letter A, the representation and punishment of her sin, which she has stitched about with gold thread so skilfully that it represents both her shame and her skill as a seamstress. Five women watching argue that the mother should be whipped, branded, or hanged, but the narrator notes a second view, that her beauty “made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped”, and he imagines a third:

Had there been a Papist amid 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 [ . . . ].

There is, here, a sly political nudge, since the Puritans prided themselves on their moral elevation above not only the Catholics but even the partially reformed Church of England. No Catholic is, however, there to appreciate this image of the Blessed Mother. Hester turns for comfort to memories of her mother and father and her husband, “a man well stricken in years”.

Suddenly he appears, looking like Richard III, with one shoulder higher than the other, and “like a snake”. The Reverend Mr. Arthur Dimmesdale asks Hester to name the father of the child, and she refuses. Her husband, who chooses now to go by the name of Roger Chillingworth, has been kept away from the colony by the difficulties of sea passage, but has now returned at the very moment of her public humiliation. He vows, “with a smile of dark and self-relying intelligence”, to discover her secret, yet he swears her to secrecy, and to keep the secret of his identity as she has kept that of her lover. Despite her fears that he will avenge himself on Pearl, her baby, Chillingworth gives the child a medicine that helps her. Toward Pearl he is kind, toward Hester helpful if ironic, and toward Dimmesdale, whom he comes to suspect is the father of Pearl, wilfully diabolical, moving in with him, prying into his mind and soul, deliberately inflaming the morbid guilt-ridden soul he purports to treat.

With time, Hester’s “handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion”. Though they will not let her make wedding dresses, she sews for rich and poor alike, for ministers, soldiers, even the Governor himself. She makes baby caps and shrouds. She gives to charity. Despite these good deeds, which the Puritans called sanctification, she was still considered to lack justification, or God’s election for heaven, so even though she continues to attend church, it is “often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse”. Yet her sin is also an education, giving her a “sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts”.

The clearest evidence of her sin, little Pearl, grows to be a beautiful little girl, attired by her mother in scarlet clothing. Lacking a paternal presence, she acknowledges no law, reminds the Puritan ministers of the rose windows in Catholic cathedrals, announces that “I have no Heavenly Father” and believes that she has “been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door”. (Via the reference to the rose mentioned in the Custom-House, Hawthorne thus relates Pearl to the essence of the book in which she is portrayed.) She has an “elvish” wildness to complement her “rich and luxuriant beauty”. In 1645, aged three, she is taken to the Governor’s hall where the authorities consider taking her from her mother to be brought up with more conventional family governance, but they decide to leave her where Providence has placed her, and Hester, buoyed by this good fortune, turns down Mistress Hibbins’s invitation to a witches’ Sabbath: “Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan’s snare”.

No one, however, saves Dimmesdale. Chillingworth digs “into the poor clergyman’s heart, like a miner searching for gold”, catches him sleeping, opens his shirt to look at his chest, and turns away in triumph. Dimmesdale flogs himself, mutters shocking things to his parishioners, and mounts the scaffold at night waiting to be discovered and to confess, but he will not promise Pearl “to take my hand, and mother’s hand, to-morrow noontide”. Whatever his status under Puritan legalism, in Pearl’s view he has failed them, and she declares: “Thou wast not bold! – thou wast not true!”

In 1649, when Pearl is seven, Governor Winthrop dies and a comet appears, a “great red letter in the sky, – the letter A, – which we interpret to stand for Angel”. Some of her neighbours take “another view of Hester” and conclude that her A now stands for “Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength”. Indeed, the brand of shame now has “the effect of a cross on a nun’s bosom” and had “she fallen among thieves”, as the man did in the parable of the good Samaritan, “it would have kept her safe”. Though some of her neighbours think better of her, she remains antinomian: “The world’s law was no law to her mind”, and in her thinking she assumes “a freedom of speculation” so great that, were it not for her concern for Pearl, “she might have come

down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the founder of a religious sect.” It is clear that the “scarlet letter had not done its office”, had not reduced her to a text with one meaning.

Yet Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale have reduced themselves from human beings to categories. Chillingworth has become “a striking evidence of man’s faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only [. . .] undertake a devil’s office”. When Hester pities him “for the hatred that has transformed a wise and just man to a fiend” and urges him to “be once more human”, he cries “Peace” to silence her and answers that it was all “a dark necessity”. And Dimmesdale, with a neonomian dependence upon the law, finds “nothing but despair”. Hester again argues for free will and regeneration, reminds him that his congregation needs him and that “surely thou workest good among them!” She reminds him of a higher law: “What we did had a consecration of its own”. But Dimmesdale, like Chillingworth, will not consider her argument and says simply, “Hush, Hester”. She argues against parochialism: “Is the world then so narrow? [. . .] Does the universe lie within the compass of yonder town [. . .] ?” She answers, “Not so! The future is yet full of trial and success”. She wants him to “[b]egin all anew”, to “Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die!” Hester has “a mind of native courage and activity”, but Chillingworth and Dimmesdale believe that all is determined now and that any attempt at agency would be in vain.

Chillingworth continues in his vengeance, and Dimmesdale continues in his hypocrisy, acting the good minister while believing himself a doomed sinner. He writes one election sermon, throws it into the fire, and writes another. Yet all around them society is wider than their views. Pearl is “the living hieroglyphic”, a mysterious text that alludes to another great culture and reveals a complexity that they ignore. The “men of civil eminence” exhibit a “tried integrity”, a “solid wisdom and sad-coloured experience” that give them the “fortitude and self-reliance” to stand “up for the welfare of the state like a line of cliffs against a tempestuous tide”.

Worn down, Dimmesdale struggles up onto the scaffold, stands there with Hester and Pearl, and opens his shirt to crowd. Chillingworth kneels beside him with his own face blank and lifeless. Hester hopes for a reunion in the next life, but again he silences her. Dimmesdale dies on the scaffold, Chillingworth, now an “unhumanized mortal”, dies not long thereafter. Yet the story goes on. The “revelation” of Dimmesdale’s chest remains ambiguous. Since “there was more than one account of what had been witnessed on the scaffold”, the reader “may choose among these theories”.

What is clear is that Pearl and Hester go on in ways none could have predicted. Chillingworth leaves “a very considerable amount of property, both here and in England, to little Pearl”, with the result that she becomes “the richest heiress of her day” and “might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all”, had she chosen to stay in New England. She does not. She goes abroad and sends her mother letters with “armorial seals [. . .] unknown to English heraldry”, along with “articles of comfort and luxury” that bespeak both her wealth and her continuing love for her mother. Hester is seen “embroidering a baby-garment” with “a lavish richness of golden fancy” that recalls her stitching around the scarlet letter. So her line goes on in a world wider than old and new England.

Hester leaves for a time but then comes back to Boston where her “real life” was and is. She offers comfort and counsel to those “wronged” in love and to those “with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought”. She continues to act, as she did when leaving prison, “as if by her own free will”. She continues to look to a future that will “establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness”.

When she dies, she is buried near Dimmesdale with “one tombstone” serving “for both”. On it is “the semblance of an engraved escutcheon,” a “device, a herald’s wording of which” would be: “ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES”, or on a black shield the scarlet letter A. The “curious investigator”, willing “to perplex himself with the purport” of this device, will probably notice that it alludes to ending of the

English Puritan Andrew Marvell's poem, "The Unfortunate Lover", who "in story only rules / On a field sable, a lover gules". The lover stands on a black field, covered in blood red, ennobled by suffering, like Hester Prynne, and like him, she continues to rule in story.

*The Scarlet Letter* continues to fascinate readers around the world. Indeed its power seems to grow with the years, like Hester's own scarlet letter. New Critics read the letter itself as a symbol for America, Ann Hutchinson, Arthur, and antinomian. Deconstructionists read it as a signifier with no limit to its burgeoning meanings. New historicists explore its interactions with other works from the mid-nineteenth century. And with the recent turn to ethics, critics have begun to explore what it means to be "bold" and "true", not only in Puritan Boston and Victorian America, but here and now. Some read the book as a contest between love and guilt for the soul of America, a sign that the conflict of love and law, along with the Puritan habit of labelling their neighbours and turning people into texts, may not yet have entirely abated. Hawthorne's brilliance is to provide us with a mirror in which we must consider our own readings and the values which guide them.

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