

AN INSIGHT INTO THE INWARD SPHERE IN HAWTHORNE'S SCARLET LETTER

INTRODUCTION

The human heart was Hawthorne's highest and most constant theme, "The heart, the heart, there was the little yet boundless sphere wherein existed the original wrong of which the crime and misery of this outward world were merely types. Purify that inward sphere, and the many shapes of evil that haunt the outward, and which now seem almost our only realities, will turn to shadowy phantoms and vanish of their own accord; but if we go no deeper than the intellect, and strive, with merely that feeble instrument, to discern and rectify what is wrong, our whole accomplishment will be a dream." ("Earth Holocaust", in *Moses from an Old Manse*, p. 189).

This "inward sphere", the human heart, was Hawthorne's field of study and portrayal. He saw and described its innocence, its purity, its loveliness, its noble hopes, its truest triumphs, its temptations, its sinful tendency, its desperate struggles, its downward motions, its malignity, its "total depravity", at least in appearance, its final petrification and self-destruction- the only destruction of which, in the divine plan, it is capable. Hawthorne goes to the depth of the soul in his search for the basic principles of human action.

The Scarlet Letter was the first of Hawthorne's romances in point of time, -1850- and on the whole it remains his best in absolute merit. *The Scarlet Letter* is a study of character in which the feelings of the heart are analyzed minutely, carefully elaborated, and with striking poetic and dramatic power.

The book delineates the blight of a great sin upon a weak man, Arthur Dimmesdale; a supposed "fallen woman", Hester Prynne; a fiend, whose cold blood oozed from a heart of ice; a pure little child and the puritan community in which they lived. The weakling was a minister of the Gospel, and his paramour was the wedded wife of the avenger of a home into which affection came only as the destroyer.

In the analysis of many classic books today, the texts are searched for biased and discriminatory themes and phrases. Regardless of an author's social vision, his statement will be confined by the accepted views of his time. Hence the question to be answered is whether or not Hawthorne's views of women in his book *The Scarlet Letter* fit in with, or break with the widely accepted views of the time. But in order to evaluate the answer to that question it is necessary to initiate this study by considering three levels of interaction in the book.

- 1) Hawthorne's own personal experience.
- 2) Hawthorne's views of women and the attitudes of the time when the book was published.
- 3) The standard attitudes of the Puritan Community in this story.

1. AN INSIGHT INTO HAWTHORNE'S OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Hawthorne had the distinction of being born on Independence Day in 1804 in Salem of a family which could boast colourful ancestors. William Hathorne -the *w* was added by Hawthorne himself, apparently to make the spelling conform to the pronunciation of the name- was that "steeple-crowned progenitor" who had come to Massachusetts with Governor Winthrop in 1630 and had played a prominent role in the early colony. His son, John Hathorne, became a lawyer and a judge of the special court which heard the evidence and passed sentences of death on nineteen witches in the famous trials held in Salem in 1692. Thereafter, the family had declined from positions of importance. Hawthorne's mother, Elisabeth Hathorne, like the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* had become pregnant out of wedlock, and like Hester Prynne was ostracized by society: "... like Hester, his mother was husbandless, a single parent, raising her offspring alone, on the fringes of Society" (Desalvo, p. 58). Hawthorne's father lingered in the boy's memory as the sea captain who had died of yellow fever in Surinam when he was four years old, leaving a widow with three children to rear and educate. Hawthorne's mother provided him with everything he needed to bring him up as a happy child, though it was a hard task for her. After his father's death he and his family remained economically dependent upon his uncle Robert Manning until he published his first novel: *Fanshawe* -in 1828- (anonymously and at his own expense).

Hawthorne attended the Salem schools and then, from 1821 to 1825, Bowdoin College, in the far-off woods of New Brunswick, Maine. There, Longfellow was to be the distinguished professor of modern languages and the equally distinguished poet; Franklin Pierce rose to be President of the United States; an everlasting friendship would develop among them. When he graduated he was in the middle of his class -his only marks were in the courses of rhetoric and composition. In every other respect he showed little promise. He had only one thing he really wanted to do and he did it: he returned to his mother's home on Charter Street, Salem, and became a writer.

To become a writer was not an easy task in 1825 but the youthful writer did the best he could, constant practice to perfect his craft and style, and gain a maturity of mind. Hawthorne's years of practice and experimentation were spent on a novel, *Fanshawe* (1828), which presented some of his undergraduate life behind a rather opaque disguise, and on a great number of short stories, some were printed and many were undoubtedly destroyed. The period in Hawthorne's life between twenty one and thirty-three was the crucial time: Hawthorne found his special voice and style and fashioned the particular lines and colours of his arts.

These "twelve years", as he afterward called them, have attracted a great deal of critical attention -those years from his graduation in 1825 until his "emergence" in 1837. Hawthorne

himself helped to create the legend of his solitary existence, his withdrawal from the world, his lonely night walks along the deserted streets of Salem or down to the dark shoreline. In some of his notebook entries he called up those months of self denial and dedication to a useless literary indulgence for which the outside world had scant use or reward.

Throughout those twelve years Hawthorne lived a quite active life; he visited his friends; he took extensive summer tours to the New England mountains and as far as Niagara Falls; he watched with fascination long and sensational murder trials; he frequented the local taverns, and in general, his behaviour was the normal one for a young man of his time.

Yet there is enough truth in the legend of the "twelve dark years" to give it literary significance. That a youngman is travelling or visiting taverns and watching murder trials does not obviate the possibility that he is thinking and living quite differently within himself. What is important is that he entered in a world -not the world of actuality in which he lived and moved- but that other world of his imagination, of his deepest sensibility, of what Hawthorne called "the interior of a heart". Hawthorne early discovered what was his world of the imagination; it was that region within the human heart and consciousness where sin and guilt dwelled, where dark secrets are hidden from the peering eyes of men, where the deep festering of remorse and conscience work to destroy, and where the eternal questions of men never quite find the answers which comfort and satisfy:

The heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed ... So, to their own unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures, looking pure as new-fallen snow; while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves. (Hawthorne, p. 152-153).

Whether or not "twelve dark years" were needed to form this "world of imagination", Hawthorne had lived, and was thereafter to live, with a dimension of blackness lodged in his work, for he was especially gifted with the insight to perceive, and the craft to disclose, the drama of human suffering which forever exists as a rule of existence.

The year 1837 marked an eventful period in Hawthorne's life. He returned to writing short fiction, and in historical and allegorical tales he began to explore the impact of harsh Puritanism on the guilty conscience of New England. Many of these stories were published by his old friend Samuel Goodrich in *The Token*, an annual gift-book. In that same year, unknown to Hawthorne, his friend Horatio Bridge issued them in *Twice Told Tales* (expanded 1842). It attracted some good reviews, one of them written by Longfellow in the *American Review*.

In 1838 he met and became engaged to Sophia Peabody of Salem, herself an active participant of the Transcendentalist movement. When Margaret Fuller heard of Sophia's engagement to Hawthorne, she responded: "I think there will be a great happiness; for it ever I saw a man who combined delicate tenderness to understand the heart of a woman, it is Mr. Hawthorne." (Wagenknecht, p. 18).

This year he accepted a post as surveyor of the Boston Custom House. He remained in this dull position for two years and quit in January 1841 and invested \$1000 in the communal experiment at *Brook Farm*. Unfortunately for Hawthorne, the work on the farm was monotonous and unrewarding; he was disappointed by communal life and left Brook Farm in November 1841, wiser than he had been; later he would recast the adventure in his novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852).

Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody in Boston on 9 July 1842. They moved into the Old Manse in Concord, already made famous by Emerson's residence and the writing of *Nature* (1836). For a time the sales of stories supported them and their children. Evidently Hawthorne could not earn a living from his writings. Accordingly, out of need rather than desire, he accepted a political appointment from the Massachusetts Democrats and became surveyor in the Salem Custom House. For three years he was financially secure, -his salary was \$1.200 a year-. Then, in one of those political upheavals, the Whigs triumphed; the Democrats had to go and Hawthorne lost his post as a surveyor.

Although Hawthorne tried to get back his job, he had a wife and two children to support, he knew that his only hope was his writing. Between the Summer of 1849 and the opening of 1850 he produced his masterwork, *The Scarlet Letter*. The introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, The Custom House, provides background information for the novel, but it also contains his hostility for his political enemies who had been responsible for his dismissal.

Hawthorne began to compose *The Scarlet Letter* in September, 1849, after his mother had died. The author wrote this: "... in response to his mother's death, and as a kind of elegy to her" (L. Desalvo, p. 58), Hawthorne witnessing the struggle of his mother to achieve a sense of independence in her male dominated world, might possibly have wanted to illustrate a "heroine" who commanded an aura of strength, regardless of her place in society. The influence of women on Hawthorne's life, especially, his mother, sisters and wife, certainly did not go unnoticed by Hawthorne himself. He "recognized his tendency to idealize women and girls" (Wagenknecht, p. 132).

2. HAWTHORNE'S VIEWS OF WOMEN AND THE ATTITUDES OF THE TIME WHEN THE BOOK WAS PUBLISHED

Despite the fact that Hawthorne was a true admirer of women, it goes without saying that he was not a feminist or upheld feminist beliefs such as social equality. Hawthorne was convinced that "women needed to be protected by men and guarded not only against danger but also against corruption." (Wagenknecht, p. 145). Twenty years before he produced *The Scarlet Letter*, he wrote in the Salem Gazette (1830) a biographical essay on the first considered great American feminist, Anne Hutchinson¹ in which he lashes out against her judging her behaviour as a serious threat to society:

¹ Reproduced in *Hawthorne's Works*, Fireside Edition, 1876, p. 177, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Co. Boston.

We will not look for a living resemblance of Mrs. Hutchinson though the search might not be altogether fruitless. But there are portentous indications, changes gradually taking place in the habits and feelings of the gentle sex, which seem to threaten our posterity with many of those public-women, whereof one was a burden too grievous for our fathers. The press, however, is now the medium through which feminine ambition chiefly manifests itself ... (Hawthorne's Works, p. 177).

It seems that Hawthorne's statements about Hutchinson as well as other women writers conform to conventional views of his days concerning the roles and nature of the sexes:

Woman's intellect should never give the tone to that of man; and even her morality is not exactly the material for masculine virtue. A false liberality which mistakes the strong division -lines of Nature for arbitrary distinctions, and a courtesy, which might polish criticism, but should never soften it, have done their best to add a girlish feebleness to the tottering infancy of our literature. The evil is likely to be a growing one. (Ibid. p. 178).

No less harsh than his comments on Hutchinson were Hawthorne's criticisms of Margaret Fuller, editor of *The Dial*¹ -the most important of transcendental journals- and author of *Women in the nineteenth Century* Hawthorne wrote unfeelingly:

There appears to have been a total collapse in poor Margaret, morally and intellectually; and tragic as her death was, Providence was, after all, kind in putting her and her clownish husband and their child aboard that fated ship. (Desalvo, p. 7-8).

Indeed, Hawthorne's views follows the conventional views of his day regarding women's role and nature of the sexes in society.

Differences between the sexes were total an innate. Women were inherently more religious, modest, passive, submissive and domestic than men, and were happier doing tasks, learning lessons and playing games that harmonized with their nature. (Desalvo, p. 8).

According to Hawthorne, any deviation, then, from the domestic, submissive purity that women should represent, would result in the collapse of the natural order of society. Women like Hutchinson and Fuller "deserved everything they got: a short unhappy life, dementia, death and a total lack of respect from men or virtuous women." (Desalvo, p. 16).

Yet in 1848, the year of the famous convention at Seneca Falls that is proclaimed by many as the initiation of the feminist movement, he was associated with many eminent feminists of his day such as Harriet Martineau, Geraldine Jewsbury and Margaret Fuller, among the Boston

¹ *A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion*, 1840-1844, Boston.

transcendentalists. His sisters's in law Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann, were among the most prominent "heroines" of the day.

Hawthorne finished *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, two years after the Seneca Fall's convention; Hester, the strong woman in the book, was considered by many, to be his contribution of a strong female voice to American Literature. Some critics believe Hester's character was based upon Hutchinson.¹

3. THE STANDARD ATTITUDES OF THE PURITAN COMMUNITY IN THIS STORY

In this story the main female character and the reaction by the other characters to her serve as a strong base for both an analysis of Hawthorne's views and for a comparison to the standard attitude of the time.

The setting of *The Scarlet Letter*, seventeenth century, Puritan Boston, plays a significant role in Hawthorne's development of Hester Prynne. Although Hawthorne exaggerates the severity of Boston's Puritans they provide an appropriate backdrop that emphasizes Hester's strength and her impact on society. This strength in one of the masculine features with which Hawthorne endows Hester. These characteristics, like "boldness and rotundity of speech" and natural dignity and force of character (Hawthorne, p. 78) are attributes to the puritan women but to Hester in particular. In spite of these masculine features, Hester is described as a "young woman ..., with a figure of perfect elegance" (Ibid., p. 80).

These attributes so strongly represented in Hester, however, are dangerous to society in that such individualistic attitudes would destroy the community (Fryer, p. 74). This community adds to Hester's plight because it did not allow for individuality, creativity, or any moral deviation. A woman like Hester, who did not strictly adhere to the expectations of such a society was destined to be an outcast.

The acts (specifically those of a sexual nature) of women "need constant surveillance and regulation because of the threat that ... (they) would otherwise pose to the moral and social order" (Carol Smart, p. 8).

Through his characters Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne elaborates on a decidedly negative and critical commentary on Puritan society. This discourse on Puritanism begins in chapter 2, "The Market Place". As Hester emerges from prison, a man asks, "is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows?" (Hawthorne, p. 79). Hawthorne reveals to us the condescending attitudes that the midwives

¹ The similarities between Anne Hutchinson and Hester Prynne cannot be ignored. There are two references in the novel linking the two. In the first chapter, Hester emerges from the prison door, where a wild rose bush bloomed under the footsteps of the "sainted" Anne Hutchinson (p. 76). In chapter thirteen Hawthorne again alludes to Hutchinson saying that had it not been for her child Pearl, Hester "might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson as the founder of a religious sect." (Hawthorne, p. 183). See also Michael J. Colarurcio, 1988: "Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of *The Scarlet Letter*", pp. 213-230, New York, A Norton Critical Edition.

held toward Hester, even going so far as to suggest that “at least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead” and, even, they prompt that she ought to die (Ibid., p. 79).

This raises the most significant question of where morality comes from; is it derived from the community that decides on the appropriate punishments, or is it to be found within the individual? The text suggests that morality is imposed by the community. The Puritans, intolerant of moral errors make it exceedingly clear to Hester that she is not a respected member of their society: “Lastly, in lieu of these shifting scenes, came back the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement, with all the towns people assembled and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne, ... who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, ...” (Ibid., p. 86).

The reader’s view of the Puritan society is enlarged in chapter 5, “Hester at Her Needle”, where Hester is executing her penance for her sin. She remains in Boston which itself is like a torturous prison, and dresses in the simplest manner. Most significant, however, is that despite these extreme penitential acts, “Dames of elevated rank, likewise, whose doors she entered in the way of her occupation, were accustomed to distil drops of bitterness into her heart; ... Continually, and in a thousand other ways, did she feel the innumerable throbs of anguish that had been so cunningly contrived for her by the undying, the ever-active sentence of the Puritan Tribunal ... Clergymen paused in the street to address words of exhortation, that brought a crowd.” (Ibid., p. 109).

However, Hester, already an outcast, must rely on her strength to affirm her privacy and ignore the discrimination and intolerance she is subject to on the part of the community. Hester also employs her strength from succumbing to the pressures of this society. She retains her dignity through her unwillingness to blench under these unmerciful puritans: “Hester is defiant of society even as she adheres to its strictures.” (Pimple, p. 269). For Hester, not even the most proactive approach toward a new acceptance by the community seemed to be a great enough effort. One of her most obvious displays of her rebellious mentality is her wearing of the Scarlet Letter A to her clothing, indicating her adultery. She fulfills the judicial sentence, but she elegantly embroiders the Scarlet A that becomes the bone of contention of many puritan women: “But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer ..., was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself.” (Hawthorne, p. 81).

It is through such provocative exhibition of individuality that Hester makes it known that while enduring her punishment, she can simultaneously lead her life as she chooses.

According to Charles Feidelson in his essay “The People of Boston”, “... Hester represents a positive individualism, alien to Puritan society but capable of creating a human community of its own. By her refusal to play out her appointed role on the scaffold, she becomes doubly an outcast from Boston; and yet, standing there in all her concrete individuality, she seems to claim, a general truth, a concrete universality. She tacitly challenges the abstract city of their abstract God.” (Feidelson, p. 373).

Hester, conversely, overcomes the stigma of adultery through her good and charitable works, as much as possible; she is a true survivor because she has gained respect in the society despite her moral transgression. The letter "A", which had stood for adultery, later took on alternate meanings, like "able", for the townspeople (Hawthorne, p. 180).

Hawthorne's negative view of Puritan life surfaces quite blatantly in the form of an ironic statement:

Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter, which has such a potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, whose place was on that same dishonored bosom, to connect her parent for ever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven. (Hawthorne, p. 113).

Hawthorne by highlighting the severity of Hester's punishment, while at the same time questioning the immorality of her action, calls into question the morality of the society more than of the "fallen" woman. It is evident that while the Puritan community feels that the sin is unforgivable and heinous, Hawthorne believes it to be a forgivable act by a merciful God. Hester was conscious that the consequences of her sin had evil roots, and her brave attempts to gain forgiveness reflected this fact.

From the beginning, Hawthorne calls into question the traditions of morality, both of Puritan New England, and of his contemporary America. Hawthorne attacks Puritanism with his use of Arthur Dimmesdale as well. As the other partner in this sinful act, Dimmesdale does not suffer publicly the way Hester does, but he suffers internally as a result of extreme guilt. As an ordained minister in the Puritan church, he compounds his sin of adultery by concealing it. Dimmesdale offers two explanations for the concealment of his sin: "... it may be that they are kept silent by the very constitution of their nature. Or ... they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because, thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them; no evil of the past be redeemed by better service." (Hawthorne, p. 153).

Dimmesdale is presented as a weak man, he, a Puritan minister, who not only is supposed to be absolutely pure by the doctrines of his faith, but who also fervently urges his congregation to confess and repent for their sins in an open manner. In putting himself forth in this manner while knowing that he is incapable of following what he implies and even demands of others shows a great deal of hypocrisy.

Overall, Hawthorne asserts that the Puritan community takes upon itself more judgment of the soul than it is fitting for people to assume. There is a certain heartlessness to their discipline, and the punishments they proscribed for wrongdoing were quite severe (Fogle, p. 120). Because Hester's marriage to Chillingworth is cold, and her passion for Dimmesdale "consecrated", the reader wonders if the community is justified in condemning her actions. By questioning the immorality of Hester's action, Hawthorne questions the moral authority of

the society that punishes her for it. Further, Hawthorne also proposes through this construction of her wrongdoing that Hester's inner morality is as important, if not more so, than that of society (Baym, p. 256).

Both the scarlet letter "A" and Pearl can be considered physical incarnations of Hester's sexuality; they are the results and a constant reminder of her moral transgression. The reactions of both Hester and the rest of the community to these, the emblems of her sexuality, can be useful in understanding the roots of their morality. Hester herself thinks of Pearl as "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (Hawthorne, p. 125) even dressing her daughter in scarlet. But while she must be ashamed of the letter on her chest, Hester can love and cherish this emblem of her sexuality, and thus is freed by Pearl and allowed to embrace, even if only symbolically, the woman she is.

But as much as Hester would prefer to embrace Pearl and cast off the scarlet letter, casting off all ties to this society at the same time, she is, in the end, unable to deny her ties to the community. When Hester removes the letter in the forest, Pearl, the embodiment of her sexuality, refuses to acknowledge her until she reattaches it to her bosom (Hawthorne, p. 228).

The fact that Hester is punished by society when Dimmesdale is only punished by himself (his inner torment is the punishment he receives, with this being nearly severe as Hester's shame) is not to say that Hawthorne is expressing a biased attitude. His attitude is shown later in the story, when Dimmesdale's shame basically drives him to the grave. Conversely, Hester becomes known for her strength and experience in the town after the event on the scaffold: "people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble." (Hawthorne, p. 275). In this way, the double standard of punishment seems to work in the opposite way from which it initially appears. It is Dimmesdale who is punished more severely in this sense, because he is tormented and guilt-ridden for life, where as Hester gains respect and status through her strength and past public humiliation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Scarlet Letter makes an interesting study of the constraints on women by the morality of society. The control of society over the morality mid-to late-nineteenth-century women is unshakable because no woman can be viewed as an individual apart from the community.

In the terms of his views of women in the workplace, Hawthorne follows the popular views in-as-much as he confines Hester to what is described in the novel as "almost the only job within a woman's grasp: needle-work". This certainly fits the normal view, yet Hester goes beyond mere needle-work. Her work becomes the fashion of the town, and Hester earns respect through it. Hester is not held down or restricted by the social system which prohibits her from finding another job; she moves ahead within the line of work available to her. It is in this way that this part of the novel, and Hawthorne's views expressed through it, breaks from the accepted workplace discrimination around 1850.

In reference to more general topics, Hawthorne's viewpoint again digresses from the popular views of women. For committing her sin, Hester is outcast from the society and humiliated whenever she is seen by the townspeople. On the surface, this punishment would be satisfactory to the people around the time of the publishing of the book, because Hester was guilty of committing a terrible sin against the established family values. Also, had Hester announced her "fellow-sinner" to the town, it would have indicated power on her part. This power represented a movement which was being suppressed at the time. Hester's ability to speak out, and her choice not to do so represents the perfect female character free from the "corruption" of politics.

On a deeper level, however, the fact that Hester earns respect through her strength in the progression of the plot plays a more important role in indicating Hawthorne's opinion. In allowing Hester to become the woman in the town who is sought out by other needing help with their own trouble, Hawthorne shows his belief that Hester is a character who should be respected. By portraying her in this way, his view is shown that a woman is not spoiled for life by a sin, and that a woman should be respected for the trouble she was put through by her illicit companion (Hester and Dimmesdale).

This analysis of the feelings expressed in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* shows that he did intend for his work to slightly advance the conventional wisdom of his readers. What is interesting to look at, however, is the degree to which these views have changed over the passage of time. Such a comparison will justify or explain the reason modern readers might feel differently about the ideas of the book than did the original audience.

The most change has occurred regarding moral issues. When analyzing Hawthorne's work, the modern reader would feel that Hester is a fairly modern character, despite the old-fashioned punishment she receives. Therefore, although the viewpoints common in today's society have changed toward adultery, Hester, as a character, fits with the change.

Hester's strength in the face of the anger of society is central to her survival, and is an integral part of her character.

D. H. Lawrence acknowledges Hester's victory over public opinion:

Hester lives on, pious as pie, being a public nurse. She becomes at last an acknowledged saint, Abel of the Scarlet Letter. She would, being a woman. She has had her triumph over the individual man, so she quite loves subscribing to the whole spiritual life of society. She will make herself false as hell, for society's sake, once she's had her triumph ... (Lawrence, p. 91).

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