
The Scarlet Letter - An Insight into Logic towards the Quest for Truth

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ABSTRACT

*The Scarlet Letter has been hailed as the first **Symbolic and Psychological** novel depicting the stark realities of human nature, sin, guilt and pride ---- all timeless universal themes --- from a uniquely American point of view.*

Settings: *The Scarlet Letter is set in the mid-Seventeenth century in a Puritan colony on the edge of an untamed forest still inhabited by Native Americans. The landscape is wholly American. Many thematic elements are dealt by the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne to define the American National identity.*

-) *The effects of strict religious morality.*
-) *The long struggle against a vast frontier.*
-) *The troubled relationships between white settlers and Native Americans.*

The most remarkable aspect about this 150 year old American novel is that its characters play the same moral struggles as readers in the 21st century. The issues of Morality, Personal Freedom and Public Life are still hot topics of national debate. The novel highlights the American public's readiness to judge the sins of others remains just as strong as it remains 350 years ago.

About the Author – Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter is the writer's classic treatise on morality, judgement and exile in Puritan America. His love for books emerged when he was injured at the age of 9 yrs that kept him away from school for almost a year. He published his first novel Fanshawe: A Tale, anonymously and at his own expense in 1828. Nathaniel and his wife Sophia were both followers of the Transcendalist Movement that firmly believes in Divinity manifesting itself everywhere, particularly in nature and that people should foster individual relationships with the divine, rather than seek it through structured religion.

The Scarlet Letter is viewed by its author as a Romance and not a Novel. It has never influenced the author on the cultural American Romantic Movement of the time. A hall mark of American Romanticism is the rejection of the earlier strict narrow confines of religion and aesthetics--- Calvinism and Classism in favor of individual expression.

Some of the elements of **Romantic American identity** are as follows:

- High regard for the individual
- The western frontier
- Wide-open space
- Freedom from geographic limits
- Scientific Experimentation.

Subjects of literature of the Romantic Movement focused on

-) . quest for beauty
-) . escapism from contemporary problems
-) . nature as a source of knowledge
-) . stress of emotion and subjectivity

The distinction between '*Novel*' and '*Romance*' is lost today but in its time it used to be referred as two different approaches to fiction.

FICTION- Novel
Romance

Novel:

- It's a literary tool of realistic representation of human experiences to depict external truths.
- It should pay close attention to detail in creating its reality.
- It focuses on its characters and its audience's feelings for the characters.
- It pays close attention to detail in creating its reality.

Romance:

- Less focused on Realism.
- Less concerned with a story's credibility than its resonance.
- The product of author's imagination.
- Intuition, Inspiration and Imagination were seen as divine sparks that pointed to Truth.

The Plot

The Scarlet Letter is a Transcendentalist illustration of Puritan life. The impetus of the story is the sin, the adultery between Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, which takes place a year before the novel even begins. The repercussions of that sin, as well as the sins that preceded it and the sins that followed, form the story's dramatic arc.

- Did Chillingworth make the adultery inevitable by being an unfit husband?
- Was Dimmesdale's hypocrisy a bigger sin?
- Was the adultery a sin at all?

These questions are open for debate. What is clear though is that the perception of sin irrevocably altered the paths of the three central character's, leading directly to Dimmesdale's and Chillingworth's deaths and replacing Hester's youth and femininity with solitude and service.

The Scarlet Letter is also a love story, but one of unequal passion. Hester's love for Dimmesdale is selfless and protective. Despite his cowardice, selfishness and hypocrisy about his sin, her love for him does not waver. When they plan to leave Boston together, her youth and beauty return instantly and the Heaven's flood them with sunshine in approval.

From Roger Chillingworth's point of view, this is a story of vengeance and hate. His obsession with discovering and exacting retribution from his wife's lover turns him from a sympathetic character to a friend. Rather than being released or rewarded by "Heaven's own method of retribution", his quest has broken his spirit and ruined his health and without the obsession to sustain him, he has no reason to live.

(Acting out of wrath and never showing an inclination towards forgiveness, it seems the author may be telling his readers something very different about Heaven's methods)

Description of the Protagonist: She was tall, figure of perfect elegance with dark and abundant hair so glossy that it would reflect the sunshine with a gleam.

Face: beautiful with richness of complexion with a marked brow and deep black eyes, with a delicate, indescribable grace, evanescent – her attire –seemed to express the attitude of her spirit.

The Scarlet letter "A", so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom had an effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relation's with humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself. The neighbors' commented:

- Not a stitch in the embroidered letter, she has felt in her heart.
- She has a good skill at her needles that's certain.

It embodies their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion. Hester Prynne was always occupied with her needle, knitting and stitching for ceremonials of pomp and state, on the ruff of the Governor, military men on their scarfs, Minister on his band, it decked the baby's little cap, on the coffin of the dead but never on a single

instance, her skill was called to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. The exception indicated the ever relentless vigor with which society frowned upon her sin. (pg no.97)

Most of her leisure time, she spent in making coarse garments for the poor. There was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation. (A rich, voluptuous, oriental characteristic taste for the gorgeously beautiful. Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex.)

To Hester Prynne, it might have been a mode of expression and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. If she entered a church trusting to share a Sabbath smile of the Universal father, it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse. She grew to have dread for children, for they have imbibed from their parents a vague idea of something horrible in this dreary woman. With never any companion, but only one child. When strangers looked curiously at the Scarlet Letter, they are branded afresh into Hester's soul.

“An accustomed eye has its own anguish to inflict “.

But, in the lapse of toilsome, thoughtful and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the Scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, something to be sorrowed over, looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too.

It is a curious subject of inquiry and observation, whether hatred and love is not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its utmost development supposes a high degree of intimacy and heart knowledge, each renders one individual dependent for food of his affections and spiritual life upon another and each leaves the passionate lover, forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his subject.

Philosophically considered, therefore the two passions seem especially the same, except that one happens to be seen in **celestial radiance** and the other in a dusky **and lurid glow**.

The Infant: named Pearl – which had nothing of the calm, white, unimpassioned luster that would be indicated by the comparison. Hester named the infant 'Pearl' as being of great price – purchased with all she had. The child had a native grace which does not invariably co-exist with faultless beauty, its attire, however simple, always impressed the beholder. Her mother with a morbid purpose decorated the child's dresses with the costliest tissues and such was the splendor of Pearl's own shining beauty, that there was an absolute circle of radiance around her on the darksome cottage floor.

Looks: intelligent, yet inexplicable, so perverse, sometimes so malicious but generally accompanied by a wild flow of spirits, Hester could not help questioning whether Pearl was a human child.

Pearl's gaze upon the Scarlet letter was like the stroke of a sudden death --- always with that peculiar smile and odd expression of the eyes.

The Scarlet Letter – Use of Symbolism to show Psychological Effects of Sin.

1. There are two symbols in the town when sin isolates people – 1st Chapter – A plant stands out “ But on one side delicate gems “
2. Rosebush – Hester wears her scarlet letter among the solemnly dressed puritans just as the rosebush wears its scarlet blossoms amidst a small plot of grass and weeds --- Both stand separate from their surroundings.
3. We hear a conversation from Dimmesdale (Clergyman) and Roger Chillingworth (Hester's unknown husband). They discuss about a strange dark plant on a grave which bore no tombstone, except the ugly weeds which have taken upon themselves to keep him in remembrance. (They grew out of his heart, burying some hideous secret with him. Having avoided punishment in life, this person has been isolated in death---- these mutant weeds are symbolic of the evil desires emerging from the blackness of his heart. His sins are being manifested by natural powers.
4. Symbols in the Skies --- In famous Scaffold scene “a light gleamed far and wide over all the muffled sky – It was no doubt caused by some meteor forming the letter 'A' in lives of dull red light. This is God's condemnation of two sinners. Heaven here openly condemns his entry into the arena.
5. Hester estranged from society 'Mother, 'said, little Pearl, 'the sunshine does not love you, it runs away and hides itself. It's a Heavenly sign from God. Although she has received punishment, she never really repented, because of which God will never really grace her with his sunshine.

6. Natural symbols which we encounter in the forest: The boughs were tossing heavily above their heads Forebode evil to come. Dimmesdale and Hester decide to escape together. In those moments of joy, Hester, “so speaking, she undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet letter and threw it at a hand’s length, where it could have been just carried away by the brook. But there lay an embroidered letter like a lost jewel. Hester thought she can just cast off her ignominy, removing guilt as easily as the letter itself is removed. However she is not truly repentant of her sins, rather she is sorry that she was caught when the letter does not reach the river and isn’t carried away by the brook. She cannot be assimilated into the normal society until she proves herself sorry for what she has done.

The main sinners of this novel are constantly set apart from others and the whole world stands in disapproval. As St. Augustine noted, the idolatrous act is fleeting, but the after effects are loathed as they cause terrible things such as isolation. In our times, society is characterized by more and more immoral people, progressing until they are “past all moral sense”; they eventually give themselves over to loose conduct.(Paul, Ephesians 4:19)

Readers can appreciate the:

The Minister’s sensibility, the wonderful operation of his spirit on his body, the awful symbol being the effect of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart, outwardly and at last manifesting Heaven’s dreadful judgement.

Among many morals which press upon us, from the poor minister’s miserable experience, we put forward only this into sentence ---- In view of “**Infinite Purity**”, we are sinners all alike. “Be true” “Be true” “Be true”. It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry --- whether love and hatred can be weighed on the same scale. The intensity of both these feelings is same which involves:

➤ rendering an individual dependent

Forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his subject.

Earlier, in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame.

The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman indeed, but lofty, pure and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing sacred love should make us happy by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!

Key Words: Symbolic, Psychological, Romantic American Identity, Transcendentalist illustration, Women’s frailty, Celestial Radiance, Lurid glow, Infinite Purity.

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