

CONCISE ANALYSIS

The Scarlet Letter (1850)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* has been the most influential Romantic figure in Hawthorne. She is a poor mother abandoned by her creepy old husband Chillingworth, unacknowledged by her cowardly lover and minister Dimmesdale, humiliated on the public scaffold, insulted by the village women, forced to wear a badge of disgrace and cast out by her community. Worst of all, the Puritans may take Pearl away from her. Their religion, Calvinism, is symbolized by an old suit of armor in the Governor's Hall: it is hard, cold and outdated. It is heartless, with an empty breastplate. It mirrors the A they impose on Hester "in exaggerated and gigantic proportions," reducing her humanity to insignificance behind it.

Unlike the Quaker mother of "The Gentle Boy," Hester does not abandon her child and run away. She lives on bravely with her child Pearl in a remote cottage and becomes a seamstress and virtuous caregiver. All this is too much for most readers to overcome. From the outset, they are cheering for Hester and booing the cruel Puritans. They never recover from the opening scaffold scene. If they notice that Hawthorne is presenting a more complex vision, they ignore him. They also ignore Hester: "She knew that her deed had been evil" (Chapter VI, first paragraph).

Hester is a Christian in the 17th century. She makes a series of errors by acting on *impulse*: (1) she agreed to marry Chillingworth; (2) she committed adultery with her minister; and (3) she agrees to conceal her vengeful husband's identity from her lover, subjecting Dimmesdale to torture: "Under that impulse, she had made her choice... She determined to redeem her error." The word *impulse* is an insistent motif throughout her story: "It seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token..."

"Of an impulsive and passionate nature," Hester is all heart, and a wild heart at that, reflected in her wild child Pearl. She is an impulsive Romantic who suffers from a lack of self-discipline and an undeveloped head. In the third paragraph of *The Scarlet Letter* a reference to Anne Hutchinson implicitly compares Hester to the rebel who got exiled by the Puritans in 1638 for heresy. Hutchinson rejected the Puritan ministry and preached salvation by faith alone, based on her intuition, rather than salvation by works. Her doctrine, called Antinomianism, was similar to radical Quakerism at that time and to New England Transcendentalism two centuries later.

On the scaffold, unable to feel sorry for her adultery or to expose him because she loves him, feeling resentful and unfairly treated, she refuses Dimmesdale when he begs her to name *him!* as the father of her baby, because he is too cowardly to confess. The scene is the most densely ironic in American literature before *Huckleberry Finn*. As a Victorian feminist, Hawthorne is reversing conventional gender roles in making Hester the braver and stronger of the two lovers. Her strength and her seduction of him near the end of the story implies that she seduced him into adultery. Dimmesdale knows very well they have sinned, whereas Hester feels justified by her feelings alone: "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so!" Note the differing concepts of what is required for salvation: (1) Puritans--good works are a sign of election; (2) Anne Hutchinson--follow your intuition on faith alone; (3) Hester--do what feels good; then compensate by doing good works; (4) Dimmesdale and Hawthorne--repent.

On the scaffold, Hester has a "haughty smile" and flaunts her sin by wearing an A with "an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread." She feels like a martyr rather than a sinner. She "sinned anew" repeatedly by rationalizing that other sinners get away with it, whereas she just happened to get caught. At the end of Chapter XIII, after some feminist speculation, she "wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind," to the verge of murdering Pearl and killing herself: "Had seven long years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery, and wrought out no repentance?"

What Dimmesdale says of himself in the forest scene applies to them both: "Of penance [good works] I have had enough! Of penitence [repentance] there has been none!" Nevertheless, near the end Hester tries to seduce him again by urging him to run away with her, into the wilderness again: "There thou art free!" And damned to eternal alienation, Hawthorne implies. Hester is self-absorbed in overlooking that Dimmesdale is being tortured to death by his own conscience in the form of Chillingworth and that running away would soon kill him. "She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest... Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,--stern and wild ones,--and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss." She casts the scarlet letter aside. "By another *impulse*" she lets her hair down. It is Pearl as her conscience who demands that she put the letter back on and behave like a mother.

Pearl is introduced writhing in convulsions of pain, "the forcible type, in its little frame, of the moral agony which Hester Prynne had borne throughout the day." Her "*innocent* life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of *Providence*, a lovely and *immortal* flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a *guilty passion*." (Italics added) In the medieval allegory "Pearl," the pearl is the soul. "There was an absolute circle of radiance around her," even though "in giving her existence, a great law had been broken," causing her "wild, desperate, defiant mood." The "warfare of Hester's spirit...was perpetuated in Pearl"; "An imp of evil, emblem and product or sin, she had no right among christened infants"; "Hester was ultimately compelled to stand aside, and permit the child to be swayed by her own *impulses*." (Italics added) Hester sees her own face "fiendlike" reflected in the mirror of Pearl's eye. In their dialogue at the end of Chapter VI, Pearl speaks in the allegorical role of her mother's soul. She is both sinful—"I have no Heavenly Father!"--and embodies the potential for salvation. She declares that Hester must answer her own question "whence did thou come?" But Hester is lost in a "labyrinth of doubt."

When she persuades Dimmesdale to run away with her, both are committing a greater sin than their adultery. According to Hawthorne's hierarchy of sins in the third paragraph of Chapter XVIII, the worst sin is of *principle*, exemplified by the Puritans in their cruel Calvinist punishment of Hester. The second worst is a sin of *purpose* such as they are now committing; the least is a sin of *passion*. "Tempted by a dream of happiness, [Dimmesdale] had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin." Like Michael Wigglesworth the Calvinist minister of that time, who was tortured by "carnal dreams" caused by severe repression, Dimmesdale is so besieged by temptations and evil impulses, he wonders if he has gone mad.

By now critically ill from a tortured conscience, Dimmesdale works himself into such a pitch of religious fervor giving the Election Day sermon, he collapses. His death scene is an example of the latitude Hawthorne allowed himself in writing a Romance as distinct from a Novel. Pearl is so moved by her father's acknowledgment of her at long last, she is transformed on the spot from a wild child into a "true woman" in the Victorian sense, as in a fairy tale. Even now, Hester is still unrepentant and following her heart alone, as she asks Dimmesdale, "Shall we not spend our immortal life together?" The dying minister advises her to repent. "It may be, that, when we...violated our reverence each for the other's soul,--it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter." Then he says, hopefully, that God is merciful.

Chillingworth withers like a weed after Dimmesdale confesses and dies, because like Pearl to Hester, he has been acting as a bad conscience and now has "no more devil's work" to do. He leaves a very considerable inheritance to Pearl, in the sense that as her father's conscience, his torture of him led to his confession and made possible her positive transformation. Thanks to Dimmesdale at last, Pearl "became the richest heiress of her day, in the New World." In the tradition of the Puritans, who believed that virtue is rewarded, Hawthorne repeatedly rewards the virtuous with an inheritance.

A motif throughout the story compares Pearl to a rose, associated at the beginning with "the deep heart of Nature." Now she has too much heart to thrive in the Calvinist environment, she is too much ahead of her time and too happy. She moves far away from Calvinism. The iconic image of her pregnant, sitting with her family at the hearth while Hester knits baby garments implies a promising Victorian homelife. The mature Pearl has become the "sweet moral blossom" promised at the end of Chapter 1. Since she has been a mirror of her mother's soul, this reflects well on Hester, implying that "her wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued, and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness." She proves it by returning

to New England of her own free will and putting on the scarlet letter once again. “Here had been her *sin*; here, her sorrow; and here was *yet to be her penitence*” (italics added).

Many readers are inclined to see Hawthorne’s morality in the story as out of date today, in an age of situation ethics. Yet all the main characters suffer as a consequence of the adultery. Two die. Lovers’ triangles are even more common today, often ending in murder. People continue to suffer like Dimmesdale from psychosomatic afflictions--including rashes that might take the vague shape of an A. Hawthorne’s psychological analyses remain valid even if a reader wants to disregard his morality.

Victorians looked for a moral to a story. Hawthorne usually gave them a resonant one, knowing he could not reduce the complexity of his psychological allegories to adages such as “Do unto others” and “Look before you leap” and “Honesty is the best policy”—“Be true! Be true! Be true!”

Michael Hollister (2015)

GOVERNOR WILLIAM BRADFORD ON EPIDEMIC OF SEX OFFENSES

“It may be in this case as it is with waters when their streams are stopped or damned up, when they get passage they flow with more violence, and make more noise and disturbance, than when they are suffered to run quietly in their own channels. So wickedness being here more stopped by strict laws, and the same more nearly looked unto, so as it cannot run in a common road of liberty as it would, and is inclined, it searches everywhere, and at last breaks out where it gets vent.”

William Bradford (1590?-1657)
History of Plymouth Plantation II

REVEREND MICHAEL WIGGLESWORTH HAS WICKED DREAMS

“When I look upon my vile ungrateful impenitent whorish heart I am ashamed to think that God should love or owne me. I abhor my self o Lord for these renewed incurable distempers... Last night some filthiness in a vile dream escaped me for which I loathe myself and desire to abase myself before my God. O Lord deliver me from the power of that evil one... Carnal heart! I am afraid, ashamed.”

Diary (1653)

THE PURITANS AND SEX

“They passed laws to punish adultery with death, and fornication with whipping. Yet they had no misconceptions as to the capacity of human beings to obey such laws.... Breaches must be punished lest the community suffer the wrath of God, but no offense, sexual or otherwise, could be occasion for surprise or for hushed tones of voice....

The Puritans became [used] to sexual offenses, because there were so many. The impression which one gets reading the records of seventeenth-century New England courts is that illicit sexual intercourse was fairly common. The testimony given in case of fornication and adultery--by far the most numerous class of criminal cases in the records--suggests that many of the early New Englanders possessed a high degree of virility and very few inhibitions.”

Major reasons for abundance of sex offenses:

1. Many of the first settlers had to leave wives behind in England.
2. Most indentured servants were forbidden to marry by their masters.
3. Girls easily won paternity suits, so children would be supported.
4. Excessive sexual repression stimulated reaction.

Edmund Morgan, “The Puritans and Sex”
New England Quarterly XV, No.4 (December 1942)

REPRESSION OF SEXUAL INSTINCT

“A good part of the struggles of mankind centre round the single task of finding an expedient accommodation between [the] claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group... It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means) of powerful instincts... It is the cause of the hostility against which all civilizations have to struggle.”

Sigmund Freud
Civilization and Its Discontents (1930)

SITUATION ETHICS

“If people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside marriage, it isn't--unless they hurt themselves, their partners, or others.”

Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*
Professor of Social Ethics
Episcopal Theological Seminary

REBUTTAL

“This would seem to give religious sanction to adultery as well as to premarital intercourse--so long as those who might be hurt by it do not find out about it. How easy it would be to convince oneself that such an act, in a particular situation, would be entirely harmless! This seems to state that if some people object to some laws, then we should eliminate them and rely instead on one of our emotions (love), even though this emotion is usually characterized as blind, and leads often to biased or disturbed judgment.”

Graham Blaine, Jr., “Should God Die?”
Mademoiselle (August 1966)

Michael Hollister (2015)