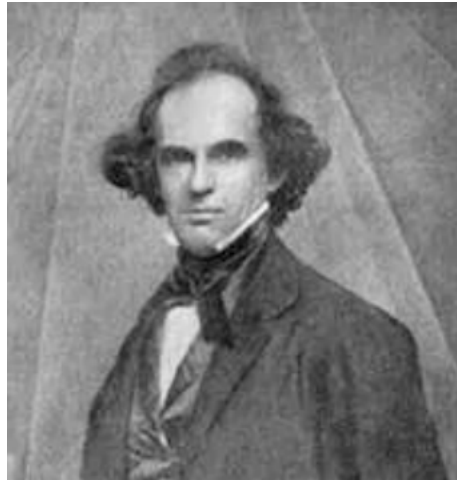


## ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

### *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)



Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

#### “The Custom-House”

Hawthorne’s allegories are evidence of holistic consciousness, which impels him to include himself as author in any vision of totality. Hence his prefaces. The self he includes is a modest “figurative self,” for he keeps “the inmost Me behind its veil.” Unlike the Calvinist Parson Hooper, whose veil is all gloomy black, the Victorian idealist Hawthorne is “a man not estranged from human life, yet enveloped in the midst of it with a veil woven of intermingled gloom and brightness.”

That is his description of a clergyman fit to live in the Old Manse, the legendary national monument in Concord that was his home for awhile, in the first paragraph of “The Old Manse” (1846). A subtle artist rather than a preacher, he dramatizes his spiritual ideals and moral judgments in the context of history, exposing “pernicious errors.” He gave his sensitive wife Sophia headaches when he read aloud to her from the manuscript about poor Hester Prynne, which he himself felt was “too much ungladdened by genial sunshine.” He considered his domestic Victorian romance *The House of the Seven Gables* more characteristic of his “mind and heart.” Hawthorne transcended himself in writing *The Scarlet Letter*, rendering the gloom in human life and history that was required to balance the brightness more characteristic of his own nature. Though balance implies equal weight, Hawthorne viewed life and history as brightening, in contrast to Melville, who saw the dark side as “two thirds” of life, corresponding to the ratio of sea to land on earth: “So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true--not true, or undeveloped”--like Jolly Stubb (*Moby-Dick*, Chapter 96).

Hawthorne married Sophia in July 1842, they moved into the Old Manse and he began cultivating the garden, which he compared to Eden. As put by biographer Randall Stewart, “The life of the newly married pair at the Old Manse is the classic of American marital idylls.” It lasted until the fall of 1845, when the son of the late clergyman who owned the house decided to take it over himself. “The Old Manse” is nostalgic for the bliss of his honeymoon, is the “brightest” of his works and is his most idealistic expression of Christian Platonism. There in Concord, in the midst of the Transcendentalist Movement, he wrote as part of the literary avant-garde, in the company of Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Lowell, Channing, Bronson Alcott and the scruffy Thoreau. Concord was all cultural vitality in a pastoral “good place” for writing and gardening and marriage.

Cast innocently out of their rented Eden, he and Sophia had to move in with his mother in Salem. In 1846 friends in the Democratic Party got him a government job as Surveyor in the Salem Custom-House with an appeal that he was “dying of starvation.” His Custom-House responsibilities soon had him feeling that his soul was dying of starvation: “I had ceased to be a writer of tolerably poor tales and essays, and had become a tolerably good Surveyor of the Customs.” He published nothing in 1847 or 1848. The Custom-House represents the customs and costs of society--the real world--outside the pastoral retreat of the Old Manse. Throughout the preface he contrasts the Old Manse with the Custom-House, past with present, growth with decay, bright with dark: “On emerging from the Old Manse... My doom was on me.” He balances the bright with the dark by paralleling his experiences at the two places as equal in duration: “In the Custom-House, as before in the Old Manse, I had spent three years.”

The artist revives when he discovers (imagines) the fictional scarlet letter A. Under the influence of moonlight (imagination) “the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.” The purpose of “The Custom-House” preface is to set up comparisons of the present with the past through a narrative structure in which each may imbue itself with the nature of the other, linked by the scarlet letter.

While working in the Custom-House, he was able to complete “Main Street” (1849), his allegory of New England history that conveys his vision of Old Salem as the paradigm of Puritanism. Its main street became his symbol of American social progress. He felt “doomed” to make Salem the “centre of the universe,” though he often shifts this centre to Boston, which eventually became the “good old capital of the Puritans.” In *The Scarlet Letter* he uses the device of “The Custom-House” to bring “two far-separated points of time very closely together,” as he said later in his *English Notebooks* of his own visit to England: “My ancestor left England in 1635. I return in 1853.” In *The Scarlet Letter* he visits the past almost exactly 200 years before “The Custom-House.” The climax of the book is in 1649, the year the Puritans decapitated King Charles I of England and exactly 200 years before Hawthorne got “decapitated.”

When he was a boy Salem had been a busy port, riding a crest of prosperity until after the War of 1812. By 1848 the town had grown quiet, “its long and lazy street” lounging from Gallows Hill at one end to “a view of the alms-house at the other,” emblematic of the stern beginning and the feeble ending of an era. Hawthorne attributed the decline to a loss of the Puritan virtues--especially self-reliance and moral vitality. New England was decadent, as epitomized by the corrupt personnel and customs in the Custom-House. Loss of self-reliance leads to “evil and corrupt practices, into which, as a matter of course, every Custom-House officer must be supposed to fall...in an institution like this, where its officers are appointed to subserve their own profit and convenience...”

Hawthorne had experienced socialism while participating in the Brook Farm experiment in communal living—“my fellowship of toil and impracticable schemes, with the dreamy brethren.” Finding that the dreamy socialists were egocentric and wanted to reform others before reforming themselves, he later satirized them in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Emerson and Thoreau refused to join Brook Farm. All the major writers of the period opposed socialism except Margaret Fuller near the end of her life. In “The Custom-House” Hawthorne explicitly criticizes the general tendency to socialism in America:

Many people are seeking, at this very moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle...with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labor, or anything else but their own independent exertions.... While he leans on the mighty arm of the Republic, his own proper strength departs from him. He loses, in an extent proportioned to the weakness or force of his original nature, the capability of self-support.... Why should he toil and moil, and be at so much trouble to pick himself up and out of the mud, when, in a little while hence, the strong arm of Uncle will raise and support him?... It is sadly curious to observe how slight a taste of office suffices to infect a poor fellow with this singular disease. Uncle Sam’s gold...[is like] the Devil’s wages.

*The Scarlet Letter* frames the first organic cycle of New England history by juxtaposing current decay with the vitality of the self-reliant Puritans. The frame structure sets up continuous implied contrasts that Hawthorne at times makes explicit, as when Hester first stands holding Pearl on the scaffold in "The Market-Place":

The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering at it. The witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a theme for jest in an exhibition like the present.

The corrupt degenerates of the present are heartless in a different way than the Puritans. *The Scarlet Letter* has an ironic undertone throughout owing to Hawthorne's contradiction of a reader's expectations and inclinations--assuming the reader is paying attention--as he subverts the common illusion of moral superiority to the Puritans and the romantic desire to idealize the rebel Hester, while yet empathizing with the poor woman.

His "figurative self" identifies with Hester when he lifts her figurative scarlet letter: "I happened to place it on my breast." His implied empathy is reinforced by paralleling himself to her, as he too must live "in an unnatural state," becomes a victim of puritan (political) authority, suffers a "martyrdom," is humiliated in public, resembles a person considering "suicide," and then is saved by the scarlet letter. At the same time, he knows the great differences between their situations make the parallel ridiculous, which accounts for his self-mocking tone when he compares himself to "Irving's Headless Horseman." His life is bright compared to Hester's: Soon "everything was for the best." He regains his head, is reborn writing *The Scarlet Letter* and is happier "than at any time since he had quitted the Old Manse." Ironically, as it turned out, his darkest tale brightened his life the most.

## Chapter 1

The vivid opening paragraph of one sentence is short yet dense with connotations that immediately characterize the Puritans. The details are realistic and symbolic at once, the highest accomplishment in the art of fiction when sustained through an allegory as complex as *The Scarlet Letter*. The unity of the colony resulting from conformity essential to their survival is displayed by all the men standing in a throng, all bearded and all wearing sad-colored gray garments and black hats with steeples like their church, suggesting that their religion is always uppermost and dominates their heads. Hence it is significant that some of the women are "bareheaded," as if not dominated by theology--women with hearts like Anne Bradstreet and like Dorothy Pearson in Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy"--and significant also that some women are wearing hoods in concealment.

The sentence is punctuated by 8 commas and is carefully measured in phrases--most of near equal length--with the rhythms of poetry as sonorous as scripture. The judicious style, objectivity and precision establish the authority of the narrator and give weight to his judgments hereafter. The sentence concludes with a proof of the human tendency to sin--or to do wrong, if secularists prefer: The heavily timbered oak prison door "studded with iron spikes" manifests the conviction, strength, rigidity, absolutism and punitive cruelty of the Puritans. Iron and oak in particular convey the strength required to subdue evil. Iron is Hawthorne's icon of Puritan character, a modifier and motif throughout his work. In the second paragraph he reminds us that, odd though it seems to moderns, the Puritans were Utopians, zealous in purifying their communities of threats to their social order. Since it is human nature to sin, the prison is "the black flower of civilized society"--both necessary and natural, as expressed by an organic metaphor.

Balancing the prison in contrast is the wild rosebush blossoming by the prison door: "in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind" to a prisoner. The rose is Hawthorne's icon of natural sympathy, out of which democracy grows. The Hawthornes named one of their daughters Rose. The prison and the rose introduce thematic polarities:

prison	rose
black	red
restraint	impulse
reason	feeling
judgment	sympathy
duty	desire
law	freedom
civilized	wild
Christianity	Nature
salvation	alienation
head	heart

In the first chapter the wild rose is not said to be red, but later Pearl in her red dress is identified with these roses. Their harsh conditions of life and the Calvinist religion that hardened, strengthened and inspired them polarized the Puritans against Wilderness and Nature. In Hawthorne's vision, psychological, social and theological salvation depend upon overcoming polarization. The poles in opposition listed above must be reconciled, as happens at the end of his story. At the end of the first chapter, Hawthorne presents a rose "to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." At the end, the sweet moral blossom is Pearl, cultivated from a wild seed into a genteel Victorian.

Hawthorne identifies the wild rosebush with Anne Hutchinson (1590-1643), who was exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638 for preaching a doctrine (Antinomianism) that subverted the government. The reference implies that Hester is comparable to Hutchinson in giving authority to her own conscience, or to her feelings, in disobedience of civil laws, as by committing adultery. 200 years later the New England Transcendentalists led by Emerson and Margaret Fuller similarly argued for the supremacy of conscience and moral feelings, which they called obedience to "higher laws"--especially Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" (1849), published while Hawthorne was writing *The Scarlet Letter*. Anne Hutchinson was very familiar to his readers (back then schools taught history) and he could expect them to transfer their concept of her to Hester Prynne.

Both of Hawthorne's major romances were inspired by radical women he both admired and criticized: In his imagination Hester redeems Anne Hutchinson as well as herself; and in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) aspects of Margaret Fuller are attributed to both dark Zenobia and fair Priscilla, who redeems Fuller from faults embodied in Zenobia the radical feminist. The allusion to Hutchinson introduces another concept of salvation:

#### DIFFERING CONCEPTS OF SALVATION

1. Orthodox Calvinism: Everybody is depraved and deserves to be cast into Hell, yet God in His infinite mercy elects a few to be saved and there is nothing you can do to save yourself. As Hawthorne dramatizes in "Young Goodman Brown," it is hard to live by this doctrine without going insane.
2. Puritan adaptation of Calvinist doctrine: Good works are a sign of election by God to salvation, as evident in the changing attitudes of the Puritan community toward Hester over the years.
3. Anne Hutchinson: Salvation comes by faith in personal intuition, a belief that you have received the grace of God and that He speaks from within you, regardless of your works.
4. Hester: Salvation comes by faith in good feelings, as she says in attempting to justify her adultery, "What we did had a consecration of its own; we felt it so."

5. Dimmesdale and Hawthorne: Salvation comes through repentance, or “penitence,” --this is the *decisive* issue in the story. Today, in the sentencing phase of criminal trials, the preferred term in common usage is “remorse.”

2

Hawthorne calls attention to the historical frame of his narrative by setting the scene as “not less than two centuries ago.” Anne Hutchinson is referenced again by the term “Antinomian” and the term “Quaker” adds another implied comparison to Hester, who is also similar to the alienated Quaker mother in “The Gentle Boy” (1832). The Puritans group them all with Indians and witches as threats to the community. The first paragraph establishes the scaffold with the pillory as the main public stage of *The Scarlet Letter* and contrasts present with past: “a penalty which, in our days, would infer a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself.”

At that time, public whipping was universal. In some towns such as Duxbury, an adulteress was condemned “to be whipt at a cart’s taylor through the town’s streets.” In Salem fornication was punishable by death, but the law was never enforced. John Winthrop of Boston records in his *Journal* (1644) the execution of Mary Latham for adultery. In the records of the Salem Quarterly Court for the 1688 term, a girl named Hester Craford is cited for fornication with John Wade, “as she confessed, to be severely whipped...a month or six weeks after the birth of the child...and the Worshipful Major William Hathorne [Hawthorne’s ancestor] to see it executed on a lecture day [when it would attract a maximum crowd].” Hawthorne combined the name Hester with the last name of a famous martyr, William Prynne, a Puritan in England who got his ears cut off for heresy.

Another contrast: “Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding, than in their fair descendants.” The hardened Puritan women deliver the first verdict against Hester, seeing her as a “malefactor,” “naughty baggage,” and a “brazen hussy.” One matron wants to “put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead.” Another wants her to be executed, “the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges.” It is a man in the crowd who calls for mercy. Reversing conventional gender roles, Hawthorne suggests how different these hardy Puritan women are from genteel Victorian ladies, with ambivalence about what has been gained and what lost in the evolution of New England women.

The town-beadle emerges from the prison “like a black shadow”: “This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law.” Beadle sounds like beetle. She “repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character.” This encapsulates her predicament: She broke the law, yes, but the Puritan code of law is repulsive. Her attitude is natural, as who among us would not feel resentful under such circumstances. In fact, as she submits to the verbal abuse, Hester seems heroic. There she is, a poor young mother abandoned by her missing husband and by the father of the infant she is holding “closely to her bosom.” Hawthorne starts by encouraging the reader to identify with the poor mother and disrespect the law. He knows that readers will naturally side with Hester and he makes the most of it, engaging their emotions while challenging their minds.

Then immediately, in the next paragraph, he begins subverting the stock response of readers by analyzing the state of Hester’s soul, or psyche, if secularists prefer: “...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, which was wrought or fastened into her dress.” (Italics added) At first, shame gives her an ulterior motive for what appears to be pure maternal love. The word “impulse” is repeated and becomes a motif characterizing Hester, who gets herself into trouble repeatedly by yielding to impulses. She then flaunts her punishment by displaying the scarlet letter fancily embroidered in gold thread, as if she is proud of her sin. Just four years before this fiction, the real Anne Hutchinson was exiled from the colony in part because at her trial, according to John Winthrop in his *Journal* (1638), she displayed a “pride of spirit” and “gloried in her sufferings.”

Most readers have already chosen sides with Hester and their first impression of her does not change. Their allegiance to her side is impervious to Hawthorne's analysis, like cheering for their home team. They really don't care what the author thinks, especially since the 1960s. Boo, Puritans. Yeah, Hester! Follow your impulses! Hester redeems herself in the end, but most readers today never redeem themselves from the romanticism that got Hester into trouble. By now, at the deadend of romantic Postmodernism, many readers no longer believe in psychological growth, morality, or the soul. They do not consider the harm Hester does to herself and do not care about the harm she does to her child, her husband and her lover. Postmodernists are self-centered and shameless. Hester has shame, she is a Christian, but she is so far from repentance she is already making her situation worse by embellishing her badge of shame "greatly beyond what was allowed."

She is "tall" with a "figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale." She is also strong, the opposite of how she was usually portrayed later in movies, as in the silent version starring poor weak little Lillian Gish. According to the old convention of the sinful or pagan Dark Lady opposed to the virtuous Fair Lady--especially prominent during the Victorian Age--Hester has "dark and abundant hair" and "black eyes." There is no Fair Lady to brighten *The Scarlet Letter* until Pearl is transformed and blossoms in the end. Hester's beauty shines out and makes a "halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped." However, this halo does not absolve her of guilt, for as Hawthorne says in the next chapter, a woman's soul is "sacred even in its pollution." The clothes she wears to the scaffold express "the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity." Due to her own fantastic gold embroidery the letter has enclosed her "in a sphere by herself" and her defiant attitude continues to make her ordeal worse.

In Hawthorne, such isolation is dangerous to the soul, as exemplified in "The Man of Adamant," "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil." Again he describes Hester as "haughty." When he compares the pillory to "the guillotine among the terrorists of France," he recalls his own facetious "decapitation" from "The Custom-House." In condemning the pillory as an "outrage" because the sinner could not "hide his face for shame," he in effect condemns the law that imposes the scarlet letter on Hester. Her punishment is worse, since it is virtually permanent.

Some critics have taken the halo image and the allusion to "the image of the Divine Maternity" as evidence that Hester is innocent of wrongdoing. They chop the sentence in half and disregard the second half of it, which says the image of the Virgin Mary should be seen "only by *contrast* [to] that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of *deepest sin* in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty." (Italics added)

The scene of Hester standing on the scaffold is one of the most dramatic in American literature: "under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom." The description culminates in a pun: "It was almost intolerable to be borne." Because she is "of an *impulsive* and passionate nature," Hester is as much a victim of herself as she is of Puritan law. The chapter ends with a memory of her pale and calculating husband, a "misshapen scholar" with "dim eyes" who is "deformed." He is her opposite in age, vitality and form: They are polarities of head and heart--both at unbalanced extremes--the cold (*Chill*-ingworth) and the hot Hester; fallow and fertile.

Hester notices an Indian on the "outskirts" of the crowd. In Hawthorne an Indian is an icon of Wilderness and primitive unchristian Nature. Standing beside the pagan, evidently his companion, is a white man clad in "a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume." This proves to be her missing husband, whose clothing and companionship with an Indian identify him with Wilderness on the "outskirts" of civilized morality, symbolized by the Christian village (City). Pointedly scarce in *The Scarlet Letter* is Garden space, representing pastoral values of the heart. The illicit love of Hester and Dimmesdale must be hidden in the Wilderness.

Chillingworth is “a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens.” This psychology also applies to Dimmesdale and partly explains the appearance of the scarlet letter on his breast in the Conclusion of the story. Chillingworth’s “deformity,” one shoulder higher than the other, is imbalance--a major theme in Hawthorne--as if his head is too heavy and is falling over. When he recognizes that the woman on the scaffold holding a baby is his wife, “a writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake.” A snake, of course, is a sign of evil in Western tradition and one of the most recurrent icons in Hawthorne, identified with Satan in “Young Goodman Brown” and associated with villains such as Rappaccini. When he questions a man in the crowd, Chillingworth says he has been “redeemed” out of Indian captivity. However, his ensuing pursuit of revenge is evidence that he is unredeemed morally and remains in “captivity” to barbarism. His torture of Dimmesdale turns him into the Devil and the narrative into an allegory of salvation.

To the Puritans the scarlet letter A is a *sign* of Adultery. Chillingworth approves of her sentence, a penalty less than death only because, for all the Puritan authorities know, her husband may be dead: “Thus she will be a living sermon against sin”--*for the rest of her life!* This simplistic thinking has reduced a human soul, in all its complexity, to the equivalent of a sandwich board and condemned her to a living hell. Hawthorne condemns their cruelty with irony, when a townsman approves of the punishment as lenient, an expression of “great mercy and tenderness of heart.” He responds to their primitive “simplicity,” their reductive thinking in sign language, with a complex allegory of symbols.

A loud solemn voice speaks to Hester from above--not God, but a minister of God--on the balcony appended to the meeting house. Also on the balcony is the theocratic Governor of the colony, “which owed its origin and progress...not to the *impulses* of youth, but to the stern and tempered energies of manhood, and the sombre sagacity of age.” The “impulses of youth” are embodied in Hester. “They were, doubtless, good men, just and sage. But, out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman’s heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil.” Hawthorne takes on the task of moral judgment himself, disentangling “the mesh of good and evil” in Hester and in the Puritans as well. He expresses his democratic faith, which his plot later confirms, when he says, “Whatever sympathy she might expect lay in the larger and warmer heart of the multitude.”

As her minister Dimmesdale is compelled to urge Hester to reveal the father of her illegitimate child--to expose *him!* This remains one of the most ironic scenes in American literature, matched only by some in *Huckleberry Finn*. Dimmesdale is pale with a “lofty” brow, a sign of idealism in 19th-century literature. But his richly ironic speech looking *down* on Hester exposes his weakness in contrast to her courage and strength, as Hawthorne reverses gender stereotypes conventional in the Victorian Age by making the male so dependent: “What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin?” As if she is forcing him to be a cowardly hypocrite. “Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayst work out an open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him--who, perchance, hath not the courage [his voice seems to crack on the verge of tears] to grasp it for himself--the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!” Throughout the story, Dimmesdale is too craven to take responsibility for his actions.

Though Dimmesdale is not an orthodox Calvinist in this speech, nor elsewhere except in speculation with Chillingworth later, he may have been modeled on Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705), the famous minister who wrote the first American bestseller, *The Day of Doom* (1662), versified Calvinist doctrine memorized by school children. Hawthorne no doubt read confessions such as these in Wigglesworth’s *Diary* (1653): “When I look upon my vile ungrateful impenitent whorish heart I am ashamed to think that God should love me or own 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.” The name *Dimmes-dale* describes his essential character: His heart is not a cultivated Garden but a “dale” such as may be found in a state of unimproved nature, virtually a Wilderness, from which as a Calvinist he has been dissociated by the doctrine of total depravity. Sexual repression contributed to his losing self-control in adultery and Calvinist doctrines prevented the cultivation of his heart. His heart or dale is “dim”

in the sense of darkened by doctrine like Parson Hooper's and is concealed in secret guilt by his failure to confess.

In response to Dimmesdale's voice, the baby "held up its little arms," but Hester refuses to expose Dimmesdale because: (1) she loves him; (2) he would be humiliated and severely punished, perhaps even executed; (3) exposure would end all hope of their running away together; (4) she feels defiant and rebellious toward Puritan authority, ironically represented by Dimmesdale himself. Since she does not feel they did anything wrong, she would not agree with Hawthorne that by exposing her lover she would deprive him of any opportunity to work out a triumph over the evil within himself and to save his soul by confessing.

Hester and Dimmesdale embody another set of polarities, as she with Chillingworth: heart and head in particular, again both in excess. Both are unbalanced, complementary opposites: She needs to develop her *head*, control her impulses and repent, while he needs to develop strength of *heart*, the courage to confess. Hawthorne reverses the conventional seduction plot in the tradition of Samuel Richardson, contradicting Victorian expectations: He makes the woman the seducer, as is evident from Dimmesdale's speech and from Hester's strength here and in her conduct later in Chapter 17 where she tries to seduce him by force of passionate argument.

4

Chillingworth is lodged in the prison like Hester, "not as suspected of any offense," but only until he is "ransomed" from the Indians who captured him. Appointed physician to Hester, he was "to treat with her as the man whom she had most deeply and irreparably injured." Her wrong, an act of pagan carnality associated with Indians, "ransoms" him from guilt for his wrong to her, freeing him from the prison of a guilty heart: "'I have greatly wronged thee,' murmured Hester. 'We have greatly wronged each other,' answered he. 'Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay... Between thee and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced'." At the end when Dimmesdale is dying, Hester uses the "ransom" metaphor again, explicitly: "Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe!"

If both Hester and Chillingworth would adopt the proper attitude at this point, if she would repent and he would forsake revenge, they would avert much of the suffering to come. However, when she refuses to reveal the identity of her lover to Chillingworth, she feels obliged to agree when the husband she wronged asks only that she not reveal his identity either. It seems the least she can do in compensation, under the circumstances, but it turns out to be another impulsive error. She is suspicious enough to wonder if he is the Devil, called the Black Man, who haunts the surrounding Wilderness. She asks if he has enticed her into a bond that will ruin her soul. "'Not thy soul,' he answered, with another smile. 'No, not thine!'" Acting on impulse again and collaborating in deception with a man who takes on the role of the Devil, Hester is subjecting the man she loves to torture by the vindictive fiend they betrayed.

5

"The very law that condemned her...with vigor to support, as well as to annihilate, in his iron arm--had held her up, through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy." Iron-hearted Calvinistic Puritanism strengthens Hester, as it did all the Puritans. Their beliefs made it possible for them to survive such harsh conditions of life in a "howling wilderness." In Hester's case, "giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point"--of "woman's frailty and sinful passion." So why doesn't she just leave?

1. Her traumatic experiences have given her psychological "roots" here--  
"a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom."
2. She loves Dimmesdale, "with whom she deemed herself connected in a union.... Over and over again, the tempter of souls had thrust this idea upon Hester's imagination."



3. What she thinks is “her motive for continuing a resident of New England,-- was half a truth, and half a self-delusion. Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom.”

Romantic readers in particular should note in this passage that (1) Hester is a Christian; (2) in her head, as opposed to her heart, she accepts “her guilt” for adultery; (3) she believes she should be punished with torture and shame; (4) she needs to “purge her soul.” This part is the truth. The rest is the self-delusion: that by simply enduring she can regain her innocence, if not her virginity, and become “more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom.” This is self-pity, defiance and pride. She feels superior to the Puritans (like most readers), not repentant.

Hester moves into a cottage “on the outskirts of the town,” like Chillingworth earlier on the outskirts of the crowd. The cottage had been abandoned “because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation,” indicating that Hester cannot grow in this place, which looks across a basin of the sea towards the west. In Hawthorne as in American literature overall since the Puritans, the west represents freedom, hope for a new life and the future. In her heart Hester remains in denial even though in her head she knows she is guilty. Instead of facing her guilt in the past, she is looking west toward the future, dreaming of freedom. She is still wild in her heart and still seeking escape in the Wilderness, where she committed adultery and where, later, in Chapter 17 she tries to persuade Dimmesdale to abandon his church and run away with her.

Doing “penance,” she becomes a seamstress for the poor, in accord with the Puritan belief that good works are a sign of salvation. During the Victorian period the seamstress was a popular type of the poor working woman, an especially sympathetic figure. Priscilla, the angel in *The Blithedale Romance*, also is a seamstress. “To Hester it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life.” Hawthorne understood *sublimation* long before Freud and also understood *displacement*: Instead of feeling guilty for her adultery, she feels guilty for doing fancy needlework: “This betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast *penitence*, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath.” (Italics added) This makes clear that her *penance* is no substitute for *penitence*.

Her resentment of her persecutors is natural but is evidence that her attitude is “deeply wrong”: “She was patient,--a martyr, indeed,--but she forbore to pray for her enemies; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse.” She evades responsibility by feeling singled out unfairly: There are many other sinners in town, she just happened to get caught. In making that rationalization she “sinned anew.” Like Young Goodman Brown, who likewise leaves his Faith behind for a sinful adventure in the Wilderness, Hester begins to suspect that everyone is depraved: “O Fiend, whose talisman was that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing...for this poor sinner to revere? Such loss of faith is ever one of the saddest results of sin.” Fortunately, “all was not corrupt in this poor victim of her own frailty, and man's hard law.” Hester is able to resist the doctrine of total depravity that dooms Goodman Brown.

6

Pearl has a name that images the soul, as symbolized in the famous medieval allegory *Pearl* (1350-80) and, earlier, in *Matthew* xiii, 45-46. Though she is a wild child, “there was an absolute circle of radiance around her... It was as if she were hovering in the air and might vanish, like a glimmering light that comes we know not whence, and goes we know not whither.” As can be seen in entries in his *American Notebooks*, Pearl derives from Hawthorne’s observations of his little daughter Una, in which he rejects the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity.

The first sentence of the chapter defines the soul of the child as (1) “innocent”; (2) sent by the “inscrutable decree of Providence”; (3) “lovely and immortal”; (4) as natural as a “flower”; (5) originating in a “guilty passion.” The first 4 characteristics apply to children in general according to Hawthorne, only the fifth to Pearl in particular. “God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child...to be finally a blessed soul in heaven!” Unlike the Puritans, God is merciful.

Unlike the scarlet letter, Pearl proves to be successful in guiding her mother toward penitence and salvation.

We are reminded that Hester “knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be for good.” Her own guilt prejudices her against her daughter, making her pessimistic and an ineffective parent:

The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken... The mother’s impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life... Above all, the warfare of Hester’s spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated in Pearl. She could recognize her wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper... Mindful...of her own errors and misfortunes, she early sought to impose a tender, but strict, control over the infant immortality that was committed to her charge. But the task was beyond her skill... Hester was ultimately compelled to stand aside, and permit the child to be swayed by her own *impulses*.” (Italics added)

Like many parents today, Hester cannot discipline her child because she cannot, or will not, discipline herself. Rather than reform herself, Hester is reproducing her faults. Pearl is a mirror of her mother’s soul, “a shadowy reflection of the evil that had existed in herself. All this enmity and passion had Pearl inherited...out of Hester’s heart.” Note the shadow metaphor, used much as Carl Jung does in the next century, as an archetypal image of repressed content. In some contexts Hawthorne meant by “heart” not only sensibility but what Jung meant by “collective unconscious,” which in “Ethan Brand” he called “the magnetic chain of humanity.” Hester sees her inner self “in the small black mirror of Pearl’s eye”—“fiend-like” and “full of smiling malice.” When the wild child throws “*wild-flowers*” at her mother’s bosom, targeting the scarlet letter, Hester submits without covering up. At last, for the first time in the story “she resisted an impulse.”

Then “a sportive impulse came over her, in the midst of her deepest suffering.” Her impish little girl is acting like a “demon offspring” and Hester finally asks her, “what art thou, and who sent thee hither?” Rather than give the stock response from her catechism, Pearl demands that her mother answer, functioning as a conscience. She denies that she has a Heavenly Father because she is a child of sin, which does not originate with God. Feeling justified by love, Hester still refuses to acknowledge her sin, just as Dimmesdale refuses to acknowledge Pearl. “It is thou that must tell me!” the child insists, speaking in the allegorical role of a conscience, sent by God. “But Hester could not resolve the query, being herself in a dismal labyrinth of doubt.”

7

Hester learns that the Puritan government is considering whether “to deprive her of her child”—much as welfare departments today evaluate parents. She goes to plead her case at the Governor’s Hall, with Pearl in a red dress: “It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life.” Waiting in the hall, Pearl calls her mother’s attention to a reflection in a suit of armor: “The scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions... She seemed absolutely hidden behind it.” The Puritans have greatly exaggerated her sin of passion and deprived her of humanity, denying the complexity of the human soul and its potential for growth and redemption. The suit of armor is a metaphor of Calvinism, the theological mentality that devised her punishment: rigid, cold, hard, clumsy, outdated, ineffectual and heartless—the breastplate is empty. “Pearl pointed upward, also, at a similar picture in the head-piece”—which also is empty. Nobody uses it (orthodoxy) anymore.

True to character, Hester refuses to look and changes the subject: “Come along, Pearl!” said she, drawing her away. ‘Come look into this fair garden. It may be, we shall see flowers there; more beautiful ones than we find in the woods’.” She expresses longing for a pastoral garden space—a peaceful heart attained through reconciliation of nature with society. The soil in this Puritan garden is “hard,” but does contain some rose-bushes, domesticated in contrast to the wild ones by the prison door. “Pearl, seeing the

rose-bushes, began to cry for a red rose, and would not be pacified.” The parallel to the wild roses implies that they too are red like Pearl in her dress shaped like the scarlet letter A. The wild child needs domestication: discipline by her mother and recognition by her father. Her parents are failing her and she is crying out for sympathy, represented by the icon of the rose. In Chapter 1 the wild roses are a “token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind.” Here the domesticated roses are in the garden--the heart--of the Puritan government, which is hard like the soil and the suit of armor. When the men who will decide her fate approach her out of this garden, Pearl screams.

8

Among them is Dimmesdale, giving the scene a dramatic intensity and sustaining the irony that he, her accuser, is more guilty than she. And Chillingworth too is here, a physician bent on torturing the hell out of his patient. Old Reverend Wilson calls Pearl “Red Rose” and asks her who made her. Pearl replies with heresy, saying that “she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door.” At this, when the Governor is ready to remove the child from her mother’s custody, Hester protests that Pearl is essential to her redemption: “Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?”

In response to her appeal, the cowardly Dimmesdale speaks up in her support, agreeing with Hester that Pearl was sent by God to be a retribution and a blessing. This defines the allegorical role of Pearl as a mirror of both the evil and the good in Hester, both her sin and her potential for salvation. Functioning as a conscience, Pearl is parallel to Chillingworth in relation to Dimmesdale, except that because of her relative innocence and her ultimate transformation she evokes Christ the redeemer, whereas the evil doctor evokes Satan. In this scene, Chillingworth infers that Dimmesdale is the father of Pearl and makes taunting insinuations to torture him. The worst “unpardonable sinners” in Hawthorne are the physicians Chillingworth and Rappaccini, because they betray and exploit the trust that gives them a uniquely privileged intimacy and absolute power over their patients. God is “the one Physician of the soul,” healing is a “holy trust” and a doctor has the moral responsibility of a priest.

Thanks to Dimmesdale, Hester has Pearl and thanks to him she is allowed to keep her. Leaving the Hall, she encounters bitter Mistress Hibbins, who is later executed as a witch and is the sister of the Governor! She rejects her invitation to join Satan and his followers at a gathering in the forest like the one in “Young Goodman Brown” because she still has a conscience in the form of Pearl. Had the Governor taken Pearl away, Hester would have gone to the Devil. “Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan’s snare.” It should be noted that, contrary to Arthur Miller in *The Crucible*, there were witches in New England, just as there were hundreds of Communists in government and Hollywood. There were people like Mistress Hibbins who considered themselves witches and behaved accordingly, as subversives who recruited souls and terrorized the community.

9

Chillingworth is truly a leech, as doctors were called because they used leeches to bleed patients. Hawthorne expresses his belief that divine Providence operates through Nature rather than, at least since biblical times, through miracles: “Individuals of wiser faith, indeed, who knew that Heaven promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage-effect of what is called miraculous interposition, were inclined to see a providential hand in Roger Chillingworth’s so opportune arrival.”

Among the ways that Dimmesdale is paralleled to Hester, he feels “the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework.” He indulges in speculative thinking with Chillingworth as Hester later does alone, but then he “withdrew again within the limits of what their church defined as orthodox.” This orthodoxy would not be strict Calvinism, but rather the compromised Calvinistic Puritan theology that allowed good works, including confession, to be considered signs of salvation. In the religious allegory, Chillingworth becomes more “ugly and evil” the more he takes revenge on Dimmesdale. Many townspeople see the minister as “haunted by Satan, or Satan’s emissary, in the guise

of old Roger Chillingworth.” Their faith that Good will prevail over evil is confirmed in the plot, after long struggles at great cost.

For all their faults, the Puritans confirm Hawthorne’s faith in democracy: “When an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed.”

10

Chillingworth “now dug into the poor clergyman's heart, like a miner searching for gold.” Dimmesdale is made vulnerable by his “sick heart” and by his Calvinistic belief in the tendency of human nature to depravity: “Trusting no man as his friend, he could not recognize his enemy when the latter actually appeared.” His guilt and suffering are rendered through a motif of “gripping hard at his breast” that culminates in the end when he reveals (by implication) a psychosomatic scarlet letter on his own breast, for “a bodily disease...may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part.” The doctor observes “A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body.” Again Hawthorne precedes Freud, whose early research included studies of psychosomatic illnesses--rashes, paralysis, etc.

Just as she had tossed wild flowers at her mother's scarlet letter, Pearl now tosses a prickly burr at Dimmesdale, who shrinks from it with nervous dread. The contrast between symbols, between flowers and a burr that is prickly and sticks to you, is a moral judgment enacted by Pearl that derives from God. She identifies Chillingworth with Satan: “Come away, mother!... Come away, or yonder old Black Man will catch you. He hath got hold of the minister already.” The fiendish doctor confirms his suspicion while Dimmesdale is asleep, baring his breast and exposing what is perhaps a rash in the shape of an A. Only that can explain his turning away “with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror...a ghastly rapture...making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom.”

11

God is moving this plot through human nature and the particular nature of each character: “Providence--using the avenger and his victim for its own purposes, and, perchance, pardoning, where it seemed most to punish.” Ironically, Dimmesdale’s guilt makes him a more sympathetic, eloquent and effective preacher: “The virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment that they imagined it to be all religion.”

Dimmesdale assumes that if he confesses he will lose this adoration, his ministry and perhaps his life. As it turns out, ironically, when he finally does confess he does not lose the adoration after all, but does lose his life. Meanwhile he confesses to himself: “I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!” And he confesses to members of his congregation that “he was altogether vile” without specific reference to his sin, but only in accord with the Calvinistic doctrine that applies to everyone. Consequently they “did but reverence him the more.” Hawthorne in his own voice condemns him: “remorseful hypocrite that he was!” Like Hester, though he knows better, Dimmesdale merely does good works as “penance,” rather than acting truly *penitent*. Dimmesdale is also like Young Goodman Brown alienated from his Faith: “It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his, that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us, and which were meant by Heaven to be the spirit's joy and nutriment. To the untrue man, the whole universe is false.”

12

After seven long years the minister is so consumed by pent-up guilt he sneaks out during the night while the town is asleep and stands on the scaffold when “There was no peril of discovery.... Was it but the mockery of penitence?” This is the second of the three scaffold scenes that form a symmetrical structure in

*The Scarlet Letter*. In an “agony of heaven-defying guilt and vain repentance,” Dimmesdale is overcome with horror “as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart.” Again a physical, psychosomatic punishment is suggested: “On that spot, in very truth, there was, and there had long been, the gnawing and poisonous tooth of bodily pain.”

Hester and Pearl join him on the scaffold. There, in “dread of public exposure,” he refuses Pearl's request that he stand with them in broad daylight. “And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynne, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol.” This is a tableau, a common theatrical genre in the 19th century. Figures are posed in a freeze-frame arrangement illustrating some famous work of art or historical event. Hawthorne uses symbolic tableaux as a technique to define his allegory in a vivid picture. When a light gleams in the sky, he says, “It was doubtless caused by one of those meteors.... Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances...as so many revelations from a supernatural source.” Dimmesdale is typical of Puritan ministers such as Wigglesworth and Cotton Mather in being egocentric:

In such a case, it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate. We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter,—the letter A,—marked out in lines of dull red light.

Dimmesdale projects himself into Nature here, as does Young Goodman Brown, and as Captain Ahab does when he interprets the white whale: “Another's guilt might have seen another symbol in it.” Hawthorne is a precursor of Modernism in rendering multiple points of view, but he also makes his own view explicit: First he calls the light in the sky a “meteoric appearance,” then twice he calls it a “meteor.”

The tortured minister begs Hester to reveal to him the identity of Chillingworth, but she refuses to expose her husband just as she refused to expose Dimmesdale, and just as he still refuses to reveal himself as the father of her child. Consequently, Pearl mocks him, “Thou wast not bold--thou wast not true!”

At the end of the chapter, the scarlet letter morphs from a *sign* into a *symbol*, as people interpret the scarlet A in the sky differently from the one imposed on Hester. The old sexton declares that the death of Governor Winthrop that night was marked by a “great red letter in the sky,—the letter A,—which we interpret to stand for Angel.” As a representative Puritan, the sexton interprets the letter as a *sign*--an image that stands for a single idea--whereas Hawthorne is using the term *symbol*, which differentiates his vision from the reductive “simplicity” of the Puritans. Now a scarlet A signifies moral opposites, both Adulteress and Angel. Now the A is problematic and complex, requiring us to transcend the moral categories of all Puritans--both the old Puritans who condemn Hester and the modern Romantics who romanticize her as a heroine. Symbolism elevates the A into the archetypal space of the Sky, above the town, the (City) space of the literal Puritan mind. Hawthorne considered symbolism the language of God, expressed in Nature as well as in the *Bible*.

13

Hester has broken “the magnetic chain of humanity” (“Ethan Brand”): “The links that united her to the rest of human kind...had all been broken...she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind.” Yet she serves society with good works as a “self-ordained Sister of Mercy”: “The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter A by its original signification. They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength.” As her *sign* changes meaning, it continues to evolve into a *symbol*--an image with various connotations.

Contrary to the public impression, Hawthorne depicts Hester as playing the role of martyr when acting humble toward citizens passing in the street, rather than truly redeemed: “This might be pride, but was so

like humility, that it produced all the softening influence of the latter quality on the public mind." After seven years of her good works "society was inclined to show its former victim a more benign countenance than she cared to be favored with, or, perchance, than she deserved." By now "individuals in private life...had quite forgiven Hester Prynne for her frailty; nay, more, they had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her many good deeds since." Ironically, now "the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom."

Hester has become nunlike also in her appearance, concealing her hair under a cap. It was a "sad transformation": "She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transformation. We shall see whether Hester Prynne were ever afterwards so touched, and so transfigured." This prepares for the forest walk scene, when she lets her hair down and seduces Dimmesdale into running away with her into the Wilderness. Until then, she is dissociated from her nature as a passionate woman. Her heart is so repressed that she finally begins to use her head, imbibing a spirit of speculation common in Europe at the time "but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter." Ironically, while she is forgiven at last by the people, she is actually worse than ever.

She is saved from becoming a rebel leader like Anne Hutchinson (who is compared to her for the third time) and perhaps from execution, by her sense of maternal responsibility--by Pearl. Another contrast is that Hutchinson's rebellion was religious, against dogmas of the theocracy, whereas Hester's is feminist, against "the whole system of society" and "the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature." Hester has become as radical as Hawthorne's feminist sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody, with whom his wife Sophia had ongoing arguments. He may have been thinking of Elizabeth when he wrote that a feminist reformer risks losing her "ethereal essence" as a woman: "A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish." Hester's tragic circumstances do not allow her heart to come uppermost and she "wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind"--until she verges on murder and suicide:

At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide. The scarlet letter had not done its office.

This is one of the most resonant understatements in American literature. Puritan sign language not only fails to rehabilitate Hester, it almost turns her into a killer and damns her to hell. She is saved by God through Pearl--a living "symbol." Her heart begins to come uppermost again when she is moved to help Dimmesdale by the experience of standing with him on the scaffold, under the influence of Pearl as a conscience. She regrets concealing the identity of Chillingworth from him. She agreed to the concealment on an "impulse.... She determined to redeem her error, so far as it might yet be possible." Hester has finally recognized that acting on an impulse was an error. Her impulsive errors include (1) agreeing to marry Chillingworth; (2) committing adultery; (3) flaunting her sin by embroidering the scarlet letter in fancy gold; (4) agreeing to conceal the identity of Chillingworth from Dimmesdale.

14

The Puritan magistrates consider allowing Hester to remove the scarlet letter from her bosom, but she says, "Were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into something that should speak a different purport." Since the people have already transformed the meaning of the letter from Adulteress to Able, Hester must either feel guilty or be playing martyr.

In her conversation with old Chillingworth, the physician is described as having transformed himself "into a devil" by undertaking "a devil's office." He is called a "fiend" 3 times in one paragraph and 6 times in the chapter, twice by himself: "I have already told thee what I am! A fiend!" He rejects Hester's plea that he stop torturing Dimmesdale, with a speech in which he uses the Calvinist doctrine of predestination as a rationalization for his revenge, just as Captain Ahab does in *Moby-Dick*: "It is not granted me to

pardon. I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith [Calvinism], long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer. By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but, since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity.”

His last rationalizations are self-contradictory: “Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have *snatched a fiend's office from his hands*. It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!” (Italics added) He is lying. He has already admitted twice to being a fiend. In the opening of the story, the prison is a symbol of guilt and is also called “the black flower of civilized society.” Here the black flower metaphor suggests that Chillingworth has imprisoned Dimmesdale in his guilty heart and imprisoned himself in his fiendish obsession, while claiming falsely that he is imprisoned by fate, or Calvinist predestination. That both men are secret sinners with free will who are responsible for their choices is obvious in Hawthorne’s many denunciations of them.

15

Her failure to dissuade Chillingworth provokes Hester: “Yes, I hate him!... He has done me worse wrong than I did him.” True, “But Hester ought long ago to have done with this injustice. What did it betoken? Had seven long years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery, and wrought out no *repentance*?” (Italics added) Rhetorical questions are one of Hawthorne’s most common stylistic devices. As a conscience, Pearl repeatedly asks her mother to explain the meaning of “the symbol” on her bosom. Hester thinks “the evil which [Pearl] inherited from her mother must be great indeed.” Pearl embodies the traits that got Hester into trouble and that inhibit her development: “an uncontrollable will,—a sturdy pride...and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them... In spite of [her] strict watch over her heart, some new evil had crept into it, or some old one had never been expelled.”

Pearl is a “spirit-messenger no less than earthly child,” sent to help her mother “to overcome the passion, once so wild, and even yet neither dead nor asleep, but only imprisoned within the same tomb-like heart.” Though released from the literal prison, Hester like Dimmesdale and Chillingworth is still imprisoned in her guilty heart. Pearl persists in calling her out: “Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?” Ironically, Hester calls her a “naughty” child, tells her to be quiet and threatens to shut her into the dark closet, like the prison.

16

Hester takes a forest walk to encounter Dimmesdale, not like “many a penitent,” but to warn him. The “primeval forest,” the archetypal Wilderness, “imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering.” Here the sunshine becomes a symbol of “cheerfulness” when it does not fall on poor Hester, for whom cheerfulness is “always at the farther extremity of some long vista through the forest”—but this image prefigures her eventual salvation. In contrast, Pearl “had not the disease of sadness, which almost all children, in these latter days, inherit, with the scrofula, from the troubles of their ancestors... She wanted--what some people want throughout life--a grief that should deeply touch her, and thus humanize and make her capable of sympathy. But there was time enough yet for little Pearl!” That grief comes upon the death of her father on the scaffold at the end, after he has finally acknowledged her.

Hester tells Pearl that the scarlet letter is the mark of the Black Man, or Satan: (1) acknowledging again that her adultery was evil; or (2) implying that the Puritans are equivalent to Satan for imposing it on her; (3) and that having been imposed from without, the letter has nothing to do with the state of her soul; (4) in any case evading responsibility for any wrongdoing as if by saying, The Devil made me do it. When he appears in the distance, Pearl mistakes her father for Satan, aptly, then asks why he does not wear the mark of Satan on his bosom like her mother does, as Hawthorne suggests again that a semblance of the letter A on his breast is a psychosomatic fact.

17

The conversation of Hester and Dimmesdale recalls the scene of their adultery, which took place before the story begins, and it ends with her seducing him by passionate argument to run away with her deeper

into the “moral wilderness.” Hester is so much the stronger and more passionate of the two, and he is so demoralized, the parallel between the two scenes implies that she seduced him in the first place.

She begins by trying to persuade him that he has “deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you, in the days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people's eyes.” With this she loses her credibility. Since he has never confessed and acknowledged Pearl, he is, in Hawthorne's words, “a remorseless hypocrite.” She asks, “Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works?” Dimmesdale is emphatic: “No, Hester, no... There is no substance in it! It...can do nothing for me! Of *penance* I have had enough! Of *penitence* there has been none!” (Italics added) And this applies likewise to Hester, as Hawthorne has indicated all along.

She recognizes that Chillingworth has corrupted the minister's “spiritual being. Its result, on earth, could hardly fail to be insanity, and hereafter...eternal alienation from the Good and the True.” This is Hawthorne's concept of damnation. Hell is eternal alienation. When she reveals that Chillingworth “was” her husband, Dimmesdale forgives her and declares that the fiendish physician is what Hawthorne calls an Unpardonable Sinner (in “Ethan Brand”): “He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!” No, their violation was *hot*-blooded: As he says before dying, “we violated our reverence each for the other's soul.”

Hester replies, “What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!” This is when she is most like Anne Hutchinson, though she differs in having no theological rationale--in fact she excludes God. She is more like radical feminists in Hawthorne's time and since: One's own subjectivity is supreme, desire is the same as conscience, morality is what feels good and saying so makes it so. Hester is disregarding the effects of their adultery upon Dimmesdale, on Pearl and on Chillingworth. Thoreau in “Civil Disobedience” placed his faith in conscience and argued that you should break any law that involves you in doing harm to another. Hester's adultery harmed others and now she is betraying her conscience--represented by Pearl. Though he knows better, in his weakness Dimmesdale abdicates his moral responsibility again as he did in their adultery, and begs her, “Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!” Of course she resolves to run away—“Begin all anew!” She is acting like Eve without acknowledging her Fall. Minutes before, she was arguing that he had already repented, now she declares that if he does not run away he will be “powerless even to repent!” She does not recognize the contradiction between running away and repenting. Furthermore, she ought to know Dimmesdale well enough by now to realize that, already, running away from his guilt and his God is killing him.

18

Hester “wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest...she roamed as freely as the wild Indian.” Ironically, in a moral sense, she has regressed further than Chillingworth on the outskirts of the crowd at the beginning of the story. According to a traditional controversy in theology, the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden was a “Fortunate Fall” because it gave humankind the opportunity to rise higher than the other animals by acquiring knowledge of Good and Evil. Hawthorne rejects this doctrine because it argues for sin: Any criminal can say he learned something and any crime can be rationalized as teaching someone a lesson. “Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,--stern and wild ones,--and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.”

Hawthorne defines how “much amiss” by setting forth a hierarchy of sins in three categories: “But this had been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even of purpose.” Ironically, in *The Scarlet Letter* the worst sin is of (1) *principle*, as exemplified by the Puritan authorities who dehumanize Hester by imposing the scarlet letter; (2) the next is a sin of *purpose* such as Hester and Dimmesdale are about to commit; and the least of sins is (3) one of *passion*, such as their adultery--from which they are running away. Most ironically, Hester's original sin, the focus of public infamy, is much less serious than that of her judges.

At first Dimmesdale enjoys the anticipation of running away with Hester: “It was the exhilarating effect--upon a prisoner just escaped from the *dungeon of his own heart*--of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region.” In the same spirit, Hester liberates herself by removing



the scarlet letter and casting it aside. The next passage is the most erotic in the romance: “O exquisite relief!... By another *impulse*, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders.” (Italics added)

“All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine.” Sunshine is an icon in Hawthorne, meaning either natural or divine sympathy, depending on context. Here the context is Wilderness--Nature “unredeemed” by Christianity. In this episode of the forest walk, sunshine is introduced as a natural image (an *objective correlative*) of “cheerfulness”: It does not fall upon the sad Hester. But then, after she casts aside the scarlet letter--religion and responsibility--the sunshine pours down, recalling the wild roses by the prison door: “Such was the sympathy of Nature--that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth--with the bliss of these two spirits! Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world.”

Meanwhile, in this scene Pearl is wildness rather than conscience and reflects the soul of her mother: She has wandered off into the “mother-forest” gathering wild flowers, becoming “a nymph-child, or an infant dryad, or whatever else was in closest sympathy with the antique wood.” All three characters are now the equivalent of the pagans cavorting with Indians in “The Maypole of Merry Mount” and of those dancing in the woods with the radical feminist Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*.

19

Hester and Dimmesdale recognize that “Pearl was the oneness of their being.” Yet “the child and mother were estranged...through Hester’s fault, not Pearl’s.” Earlier the child was identified with the brook, and now, as Dimmesdale says, the brook “is the boundary between two worlds,” separating Hester from all that Pearl represents. When she sees that her mother has cast off the scarlet letter, rejecting a moral boundary, Pearl once again acts as her conscience, while the brook becomes a mirror as Pearl has been, reflecting the wildness and conflict. Nature is the symbolic art of God and Hawthorne reads it allegorically: Pearl fixes her eyes on her mother, stamps her foot, shrieks and throws a fit--until Hester “advanced to the margin of the brook, took up the scarlet letter, and fastened it again into her bosom... So it ever is, whether thus typified or no, that an evil deed invests itself with the character of doom.”

20

The lovers have decided to run away by sea rather than by land, on a ship to Europe, where they hope life will be easier than among the Indians. Before they depart, Dimmesdale has an opportunity to preach the Election Sermon. He of all the ministers in New England has been chosen. The honor appeals to his pride, which Hawthorne calls evidence “of a subtle disease, that had long since begun to eat into the real substance of his character.” His hypocrisy has divided his soul much as the brook separated Hester from Pearl, alienating him from his faith, symbolized by his church, which has begun to seem no more than a dream. His confusion is similar to that of Young Goodman Brown after his secret sin in the wilderness alienates him from his Faith. Having surrendered his will to Hester, like her Dimmesdale is now overtaken by “impulses”: “At every step he was incited to do some strange, wild, wicked thing.” Such as “teach some very wicked words to a knot of little Puritan children.” Dimmesdale is so tormented by his own corruption that he wonders whether he is mad or has made a contract with Satan: “The wretched minister! He had made a bargain very like it. Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin.”

21

On Election Day, the market-place is populated by “the generation next to the early emigrants,” who “wore the blackest shade of Puritanism.” In the Calvinist theology of Dimmesdale, the term *election* meant chosen for salvation. The extreme severity of this generation was due both to their religion and to their bloody conflicts with the “savage” Indians all around—“painted barbarians” with “countenances of inflexible gravity, beyond what even the Puritan aspect could attain.” Yet the mariners from the Spanish Main are even wilder. They are “wild men of the ocean, as the Indians were of the land,” a parallel

implying fundamental racial equality in Nature. The mariners are “desperadoes” so fierce and arrogant they break laws with impunity and “a kind of animal ferocity.” Aptly, Hester and Dimmesdale, wild now themselves, are to be transported by pirates guilty like them of crimes against society. Their freedom proves to be an illusion, however: Satan talks his way on board in the form of a physician claiming to be in their “party.” The shipmaster mentions to Hester that Dimmesdale is “in peril” from the Puritan authorities, indicating that Chillingworth is trying to terrify his victim into surrender and “imprison” him on the pirate ship.

22

After criticizing the Puritans throughout, Hawthorne now balances his perspective by praising them in contrast to the New Englanders of his own day, for their (1) “higher and more heroic air”; (2) “brilliance” and “majesty” of soldiership; (3) “quality of reverence; which, in their descendants, if it survive at all, exists in smaller proportion, and with a vastly diminished force in the selection and estimate of public men”; (4) “long-tried integrity”; (5) “solid wisdom”; (6) “fortitude”; (7) “self-reliance”; (8) strength; (9) loyalty; and (10) bravery.

Pearl asks her mother if the minister in the procession is the same one who kissed her by the brook. Hester continues to evade responsibility and to suppress her conscience by telling Pearl once again to be quiet: “We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest.” This is the attitude of witches such as Mistress Hibbins, a deceptive attitude contrary to Hawthorne’s moral “Be True!” Ironically, the salvation of the minister is most at stake on this Election Day, as Dimmesdale preaches his heart out “to the great heart of mankind,” a concept again expressing Hawthorne’s faith in democracy, based on the common human trait of natural sympathy. His Jeffersonian belief in the basic goodness of human nature is common to the Romantic Movement. At the same time, he depicts the people as duped by the apparent goodness of their charismatic minister, a hypocrite in the power of Satan.

Meanwhile the wild child is cavorting among the Indians in the crowd. She looks one in the face “and he grew conscious of a nature wilder than his own.” The shipmaster reports that Chillingworth has said he will bring the minister aboard the ship after his sermon, as Hawthorne puts it, “to snatch back his victim from what he sought to do!” Hester has lost control of Dimmesdale. Her “spirit almost sank, at last, on beholding this dark and grim countenance of an inevitable doom.” In the end, Dimmesdale escapes in the only way he can. Hawthorne ends the chapter with the thematic motif of a psychosomatic A on his breast, leading into the next chapter, “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter”: “What imagination would have been irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching stigma was on them both?”

23

Ironically, motivated by hypocritical pride, Dimmesdale works himself up into such a high pitch of religious intensity that preaching his sermon exhausts him while at the same time it empowers him at last to confess in public, with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold. Inspired by his own sermon, he is reborn: He “resembled the wavering effort of an infant, with its mother’s arms in view, outstretched to tempt him forward.” The sunlight, an icon of divine sympathy now in the context of a church, shines down upon him as he confesses to the people, “whose great heart was thoroughly appalled, yet overflowing with tearful sympathy.” Dimmesdale declares that Hester’s scarlet letter “is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is no more than a type of what has seared his inmost heart!... Behold! Behold a dreadful witness of it!” With a convulsive motion he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed!” What an anti-climax if there is *nothing* on his breast! Yet many critics have been skeptics, even though “the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle.”

The revelation of the scarlet letter is followed by another miracle, an example of “the Marvellous” that Hawthorne claimed—in the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*--as the right of a Romancer as distinct from a novelist, a form of Expressionism that transcends Realism in rendering “the truth of the human heart”: As her father dies, “Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken.” This fairy tale language gives the Romance the character of a legend or myth with a significance far exceeding ordinary experience. The wild child is humanized (civilized) as by the touch of a magic wand, magnifying the import of

acknowledgment at long last by her father and through him by God. Ordinarily such a transformation would take some time, yet this sudden development is not unbelievable, especially as hyperbole. Pearl's broken "spell" is the equivalent of a religious conversion, which often transforms people all at once: "The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies [her heart]; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it."

Unlike her mother the radical, forever doing battle with the world, Pearl will become a "true woman" in the Victorian sense, like Sophia Hawthorne rather than like her radical feminist sister Elizabeth. Hester will not give up, however: "Shall we not spend our immortal life together?" she asks the dying man. Dimmesdale has moral authority deriving from his dying confession and from Hawthorne's themes and explicit statements throughout the text:

"Hush, Hester, hush!... The law we broke!--the sin here so awfully revealed!--let these alone be in thy thoughts... It may be, that, when we forgot our God,--when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,--it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows; and he is merciful!"

Hester's attitude is "vain" in the sense of egocentric and unrepentant. The Puritans punish her for adultery, whereas Hawthorne defines her sin not by the letter of the law but by the spirit: violating reverence for the soul of a loved one. They did great harm to each other, as well as to Pearl and Chillingworth. By the end, her adultery--and her attitude thereafter--has killed two men, subjected her little daughter to years of persecution and nearly caused her to murder Pearl and commit suicide. Dimmesdale gives her hope by emphasizing that God is merciful: "He has proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast!" Hawthorne is realistic in depicting Dimmesdale as still imperfect even after he implicitly earns salvation from a merciful God. The minister's pride is still evident in his feeling of "triumphant ignominy before the people!"

## 24

"Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER--the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne--imprinted in the flesh." How observant of them. Others see nothing, but most do. "As regards its origin, there were various explanations..." Hawthorne presents three alternatives, concluding with the one he endorses, according to principles of rhetoric he learned in school: (1) ascending in order of authority or weight; (2) successively increasing the number of words and the lengths of sentences; (3) building rhetorical force in moving from the first two explanations which are contrary to his themes to the third which confirms them; (4) endorsing the third explanation as by "those best able."

The first explanation is that the letter is "penance"--"inflicting a hideous torture on himself." The second is that the letter was inflicted by Chillingworth "through the agency of magic and poisonous drugs." This would be artificial, imposed from the outside, and would not be evidence of guilt. "Others...those best able to appreciate the minister's peculiar sensibility, and the wonderful operation of his spirit upon the body,--whispered their belief, that the awful symbol was the effect of the ever active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at last manifesting Heaven's dreadful judgment by the visible presence of the letter. The reader may choose among these theories."

Yes, the reader may choose, but should notice that the third explanation is the only one consistent with Hawthorne's rhetoric, themes, dramatic scenes and explicit statements about Dimmesdale's "bodily disease," the "strange sympathy between body and soul" (Chapter 10). The third explanation has the most psychologically depth, moral import, spirituality and dramatic power. Those "best able" to appreciate the psychology of Dimmesdale see the letter as having emerged from within, like the bosom serpent in another tale by Hawthorne.

After giving strong implicit support to the third explanation, Hawthorne returns to the spectators who “denied that there was any mark whatsoever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant’s.” This implies that Dimmesdale is as innocent as a baby, which we know is ridiculous. They also deny that Dimmesdale confessed to anything, that he is the father of Pearl or that he is guilty of adultery. They claim that Dimmesdale (like Parson Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil”) merely enacted a parable to teach the lesson that “we are sinners all alike.” Yes, but not to the same degree. The disbelievers no doubt include the virgins in his congregation who have idealized him: “Without disputing this version of Mr. Dimmesdale’s story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man’s friends--and especially a clergyman’s--will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him as a false and sin-stained creature of the dust.”

#### MORAL

Insofar as Hawthorne was able to reduce the rich complexity of his narrative to a single idea to satisfy his Victorian readers, it is: “Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” Honesty is the best policy, as Ben Franklin advised. Other implicit morals: Look before you leap; and, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

#### ALLEGORY

Chillingworth “positively withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun.” As the guilt of Dimmesdale personified, he is uprooted when the minister confesses, irradiated by the iconic sunshine. Weeds are an icon explicitly defined in the context of *The House of the Seven Gables* (Chapter 6) as “symbolic of the transmitted vices of society.” Chillingworth is a poisonous weed. Though he has been an Unpardonable Sinner, the God of Hawthorne is so merciful that, “In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister--mutual victims as they have been--may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love.” This expresses Hawthorne’s generous version of Christianity as a religion of the heart--the opposite of mainstream Calvinism.

Chillingworth “bequeathed a very considerable amount of property, both here and in England, to little Pearl... So Pearl...became the richest heiress of her day, in the New World.” The Puritans believed that God rewards the virtuous with success in this life. Hawthorne uses monetary inheritance as a metaphor of spiritual inheritance. By acting as his guilty conscience, the doctor forced Dimmesdale into confessing and acknowledging Pearl, in that sense “bequeathing” to her the spiritual inheritance of transformation and salvation. That makes her the “richest heiress” among the Puritans, because she grew up wild, natural and free of conditioning by their gloomy culture, preserving her heart--her capacity for sympathy and joy. In this ironic salvation she is comparable to Huckleberry Finn later, who is saved from the effects of society because he is an outsider.

This is why Pearl is returned to England in the end: She is too different from the Puritans to live among them anymore and becomes a “true woman” ahead of her time. Ironically, it is Pearl and not Hester who prefigures the “new truth” of Victorianism, which established “the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.” In the end, according to common belief, Pearl is “married, and happy, and mindful of her mother,” and by implication pregnant--cozy by her fireside while Hester knits baby booties. Hawthorne’s name was often pronounced *Hearth*-orne and the hearth, the heart of the home, was a popular Victorian icon of family values.

When eventually Hester returns to New England and puts on the scarlet letter again “of her own free will,” it is proof that she is finally united with Dimmesdale in the belief that their adultery was a sin *without* a “consecration of its own”: “Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. (*Italics added*) “Yet to be” means she is *STILL NOT PENITENT*, but the ending implies that she will be. Hawthorne affirms feminism in its Victorian form by having Hester, under the divine influence of Pearl, declare that, “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 how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! So said Hester

Prynne.” Perhaps with his wife Sophia in mind, or even Jesus, in contrast to his radical sister-in-law, Hawthorne concludes his masterpiece by declaring that a feminist leader should set an example of purity, joy and “sacred love.”

The lovers are buried beside each other “yet with a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one tombstone served for both.” That they share a tombstone, a monument representing to believers a transition to the heavenly afterlife, expresses faith that Dimmesdale was right that God is merciful and that Hester’s dream will finally be fulfilled hereafter. The final image, however, is appropriate to the tragic story in condensing all the thematic polarities of black and red that were first represented at the beginning by the wild red roses by the prison door. *Gules* is an heraldic term for red.

## AESTHETICS

The most perfectly constructed allegory ever written, or at least since Dante, *The Scarlet Letter* is rooted deep in human nature and prehistory by its evocation of superstition, witchcraft, mythology, the struggle to establish civilization and the dangers of Wilderness. Its allegory derives from medieval and Renaissance literary tradition and from the mentality of the Puritans that Hawthorne felt he inherited. An historical Romance, it is also Realistic, meticulously detailed and precisely accurate in representing the Puritans both inside and out--the most instructive, vivid and influential depiction of the Puritans in literature.

Neoclassicism is expressed in the relentless critique of Romanticism, the symmetrical structure based on the three scaffold scenes, the many parallels among the main characters, the theme of psychological balance, the reasonable objective tone, the emphasis on restraint, the abundant irony and aspects of the prose style. Nature as the symbolic language of God derives from the Puritans and from the Romantic movement, especially Emerson. Romanticism is also expressed by the “Marvellous” in atmosphere and events and in the sudden transformation of Pearl, but Romanticism is mainly criticized as represented by Anne Hutchinson and Hester. Hawthorne’s vision and morality are essentially Victorian, but he is exceptional in mitigating didacticism with probing analysis, reserve, equivocation and alternative interpretations. He anticipates the Realists in his psychological analysis and the Modernists in his evocation of different points of view, his complex synthesis of aesthetic modes, and the many ironies generated by the tightly interrelated personifications of ideas in his allegory.

## MORALITY

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. Lover's 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 Christianity.

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.”

*History of Plymouth Plantation II*  
William Bradford (1620-1657)

## 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 the 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)

## SIGMUND FREUD ON 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.”

*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)