

THE USE OF SYMBOLS IN THE SCARLET LETTER

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ABSTRACT

The Scarlet letter makes extensive use of symbols. There is a difference between the Puritans' use of symbols (the meteor, for example) and the way that the narrator makes use of symbols. The present paper tries to find out how the symbols foreshadow events or simply comment on them after the fact. How do they help the characters understand their lives, and how do they help the reader understand the novel in a better way. In Puritanical New England, Hester Prynne was branded a treacherous and subjected to scorn and embarrassment by others in her town. While Hester was, to Hawthorne, a symbol of a repressed woman, the paper will try to examine the use of symbolism in The Scarlet letter.

KEYWORDS: *Puritanism, Adultery, Cemetery, Pearl, Prison, Sunlight*

INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter has been read as evidence of Hawthorne's "transcendentalism" and of his "Puritanism". It has been interpreted as a declaration in favor of feminism and as a half-hearted, and to that extent defective, statement of pragmatic modernism. The Puritans were a group of people who were formed by English experience and complete contribution in religion. The Puritan society molded itself and created a government based on the Bible and implemented it with force. The Puritans frizzled grace, fidelity, prayer, and self-examination to get religious virtue while including a basic knowledge of unacceptable actions of the time; this was expected to secure order and peace within the Puritan community. The Puritan culture is one that recognizes Protestantism, a sect of Christianity. Though a fundamental of Christianity is forgiveness is designed for one's sins, this seems to have been forgotten amongst the women of the community: "Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fiber in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding, than in their fair descendants." As read between the lines we can notice a concern about Hester's acceptance within the Puritan community. Hester sees that in the society the cycle of women is not accepted. The word "coarser fiber" makes understanding the relationship that she once had. It also sends an insight into the women of the community. The etrosity that Hester committed provoked to anger, and dissatisfaction. This was considered a severe punishment as per the belief of the Puritan. As a consequence, the people from Boston got attached to Hester's life and her crime of adulatory. Hester was openly punished and tortured. As per the Puritan society. its religious and social structure depicts that Hester's entire life and even her existence revolved around her sin and the Puritan society. This is very much clear from the Hester in "The Scarlet Letter" that her character has been constructed by the Puritan's community.

Hawthorne in the first chapter described the three main symbols. These symbols indicate that they will give way to the structure of the story on the thematic level. Hawthorne also hints at the fourth symbol. The opening sentence shows the darkness ("sad-colored," "gray"), the rigidity ("oak," "iron"), and the aspiration ("steeple-crowned") of the people

“amongst whom religion and law were almost identical.” The closing words of the chapter use the color as a metaphor. Hawthorne is of the view that a wild rose beside the prison door may serve “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.” There are mixed images in the text. These images have the element of figurative extension. Though they are pure since they have both literal and figurative colors in them. The jail is somewhat “gloomy” that means the darkness is on both sides physically as well as emotionally. One example of the mixed type of image is “his face darkened with some powerful emotion.” So this powerful emotion can literally be darkened the faith. The symbolic effect of the darkness is very clear in the text that denotes fear and evil.

The third type of image is not used much than the other. We find the “black flower” of civilized society and we feel that black is secretive. Though the jail has been termed as dark. But it is not black in the literal sense. The term “coarser fiber” implicates the relationship which Hester Prynne (heroine of the novel) had once in her life. She committed the sin of adultery which generated a sudden expression of violent anger in the puritan community. Because the Puritan gave very importance to their ideology. They believe in the Majesty, righteousness, and sovereignty of God. So the Puritan community gives punishment to those who commit a crime. So as in ‘The Scarlet Letter’, the sin of adultery committed by the Hester generated a sudden expression of violent anger in the Puritan community. Just because of her crime, the town of Boston powerfully involved in it. After asking questions about the father of her child, she rendered a punishment to carry the Scarlet Letter ‘A’. Hester's existence moved around her sin of adultery in the Puritan society which had its own religious, governmental and social design. It is clear that to some extent Puritan community has constructed Hester’s character.

In addition to the Puritans themselves, the jail before which they stand, and the weeds and the rose, one other object, and only one, is mentioned in this first chapter.

Hawthorne tells us that “The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allow a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another as the site of a prison.” The three climactic scenes of the novel take place before the scaffold in front of the prison.

The Cemetery, the prison, and the rose, with their associated values and the extensions of suggestion given them by image patterns that intersect them, as the ugliest weeds are later discovered growing out of graves, suggest a symbolic pattern within which nearly everything that is most important in the novel may be placed. The Cemetery and the prison are negative values, in some sense evils. There is no strong suggestion of moral goodness in this first chapter, nor will there be in what is to follow.

Hawthorne introduces the three important symbols in the opening chapter. These symbols provide the structure to the story on the thematic level. The beginning of novel suggests the darkness (“sad-colored” “gray”), the rigidity (“oak”, “iron”), and the aspiration (“steeple-crowned”) of the people among them the religion and the law were almost identical. The colors imagery suggested through the words “weather stains”, “a yet darker aspect”, and the word “gloomy”. On the other side, the closing lines of the chapter symbolize some sweet blossom. Hawthorne hopes that a wild rose beside the prison door will be resulted in something valuable in Pearl.

Hawthorne also shows different contrasts and associations in "The Scarlet Letter," through the examples of the cemetery, weeds, rose, prison and the hats of Puritans. The Cemetery and the weeds contrast with the rose. And the "steeple-crowned" hats of the Puritans contrast with the prison which is gray in color. It is a color which further symbolizes a stronger negative association.

The pure sensory image is being used in Hawthorne's work. And this image is used as literally but not as figuratively. There is no use of exaggeration. So in this way literalness or accuracy of this image will not destroy the intrinsic symbolic value of it. Secondly, there is the color or shade of light or darkness although it has specific symbolic value that must be taken literally. Eventually, the image cannot be taken literally which has only symbolic value. So these images can be said as pure, mixed and drained images.

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The Cemetery and the prison are negative values, in some sense evils. There is no strong suggestion of moral goodness in this first chapter, nor will there be in what is to follow. It is clear that this sort of classification cuts across other types of analysis, such as that which distinguishes between emphatic and casual imagery and that which seeks to isolate implicit paradox or distinguish types of ambiguity. The strategy here is intended to bring out the degree of "literalness" with which Hawthorne writes, and this matter in turn, has an important bearing on the question of whether "The Scarlet Letter" is symbolism or allegory.

On the other side, mixed images which have more than that suggestion of figurative extension may be denoted as both literally and figuratively colors. That is why in such images the natural symbolism of colors becomes very clear or in a definite manner. The jail is "gloomy" that is, both physically and emotionally dark.

Here is an instance of the mixed type of image: "his face darkened with some powerful emotions". It has symbolic as well as literal meaning. The powerful emotion may literally darken the face by flushing it. But in a symbolic sense, it shows something fearful and something evil. No doubt it also shows the "darkness" of Chilling worth.

There is also a less frequent type of image. The word "black flower" is mentioned on the first page. Here "black" shows the figurative value. No doubt it has been described as dark as weather stained but it is not black.

In the words of Leland Schubert, the use of colors in the novel is rhythmic which means it has a repeated pattern of images or colors. This rhythm is functional and expressive. There are twenty-two color images in "The Interior of a Heart". Among them, two images are black or white. The heart of Dimmesdale moves back and forth in an unsteady way between good and evil, between supernatural and unnatural. It is rightly said that he should be associated with the darkness of Chilling worth and the brightness of Mr. Wilson.

He is never associated with such bright colors like green, yellow and red of sunlit nature.

The most significant use of color can be seen in three important scenes. These three scenes are related with the scaffold. Hester on the scaffold with her infant Pearl, Dimmesdale with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold at midnight, and three again on the scaffold at the end of the novel. In the first scaffold scene, it can be seen that the whole crowd watches her with a astonishment. She is dragged into the light with a "scarlet token of infamy". Here a scarlet letter suggests as a mark of shame. The author makes it very clear through the quoted line " mid-day sun burning down upon her face and lighting up its shame." In the second scene there another symbol which stands for darkness. It is the darkness of an "obscure night of early May." There is another kind of light which appears in the novel. The brightness of the lantern of the Reverend Mr. Wilson who appeared beside the scaffold in his emblazed circle with the "shine of celestial city." And Dimmesdale is saved because Mr. Wilson's light does not reach to him.

The contrast also exists in the novel between the forces of darkness and of light. The darkness in the novel also shows that some characters are in the struggle and in trouble. On the other side, it also stands for evil. This darkness also symbolize the gloom of puritan society. The source of light is represented by the scarlet letter which is worn by Hester on her breast. It is shining out of the darkness. There is a predominance of pure images. The two drained images exemplify the point. The quoted line "The holy whiteness of the clergyman's good fame" which has been said in reference to Dimmesdale, draws its meaning from the light which is associated with Mr. Wilson and Christian Revelation. But it shows another part of its meaning which the light of the meteor reveals. The light of the meteor reveals "the black, fleshly turned earth" of the garden plots near the scaffold.

Hawthorne's use of natural imagery in *The Scarlet Letter* reflects Pearl's wild, a capricious character that serves as a constant reminder of Hester's sin, whose romantically idealistic beauty frightens the Puritan society.

The pure and drained images move back and forth. Hawthorne calls this movement the "mesh of good and evil". It is a true mesh which has many parts but all these parts are intertwined. Hawthorne doesn't abruptly start with drained images. Firstly he presents a pure image after that he presents a mixed image. At last, he uses the colors in drained images.

There are neither static and schematized or free and arbitrary relations between the light and color images and between their symbolic values. But there is a contextual relation within in a general framework which is provided by the traditional patterns of color symbolism. The traditional patterns of color between darkness and light can be seen through -out the novel. One side there is the darkness of death and sin and on another side the light of life and goodness.

Pearl's antagonism to Puritan society is very much justifiable because she constantly suffers from agony and torture from Puritans' children. Nobody plays with her. Moreover, everybody stares at her wherever she goes into town with her mother. Because Pearl serves as a symbol of her mother's sin of adultery for them. The Puritans consider her a product of sin or evil. Pearl looks very beautiful like Hester's scarlet letter. It also serves as the purpose of jealousy to the Puritans. Eventually, it can be said that black, red, sunlight, green, yellow and gray are not simply descriptive of the setting and the different characters. But these different colors have negative as well as ambiguous values.

Hester's scarlet letter remains as ambiguous in its implications as her social position. She stands as a sister of mercy, adulteress, and light of the sickroom. Hester remains, as Hawthorne might have said, a "type" of those paradoxes of human nature that we have seen earlier in Rappaccini's daughter.

The *Scarlet Letter* is the most nearly static of all Hawthorne's novels. There is very little external action. We can see one of the evidence for this, and perhaps also one of the reasons for it, when we compare the amount of space Hawthorne devotes to exposition and description with the amount he devotes to the narration. It is likewise true, in a sense not yet fully explored, that on the deepest level of meaning the novel has only an ambiguous movement. But in between the surface and the depths movement is constant and complex, and it is in this middle area that the Principle value of the work lies.

Since "history" is created by the interaction of natural conditions and human choice, there is a significant sense in which Pearl has no history in the story. She moves in and out of the foreground, a bright spot of color in a gloomy scene, serving to remind Hester of her sin and the reader of the human condition by the absence of one of its two poles in her being, but never becoming herself fully human. In the final scaffold scene, Hawthorne shows us Pearl weeping for the first time and tells us that her tears "were the pledge that she would not grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it."

But the others, including the Puritan populace, have histories and are involved in the larger movements of history created by all of them together existing in nature as creatures and moral beings. Hester might not have committed adultery, Chillingworth had a warmer heart, or perhaps even had he been younger or less deformed.

The dominant symbols, once more, are the Cemetery, the prison, and the rose. The religious idealism suggested by the steeple-crowned hats is ineffective, positively perverted even, as the man of adamant's sincere piety was perverted by his fanaticism. The clearest tones in the book are the black of the prison and the weeds and the grave, and the redness of the letter and the rose, suggesting moral and natural evil and natural goodness, but not moral goodness. "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules" of the literal and figurative light, one, the sunlight, is strong and positive, while the other, shining, as St. John tells us, from the light of the world, falls fitfully and dimly over minor characters or is posited in mere speculative possibility.

The Puritan society looks at Hester as a woman fallen from grace, Dimmesdale as a saint-like personality, and was likely to consider Chillingworth as a victim and a betrayed husband. The author turns these interpretations around; he ultimately shows Hester as a sensitive human being, strips Dimmesdale of his saint-like facade, and reveals Chillingworth as an offender of humanity who pursues evil and revenge.

The Puritan mentality refuses to accept the reality of these characters. Hester is shunned and Dimmesdale's confession is not believed by many people. This shows that underneath the public displays of piety so favored by Puritanism, there exists a grim underside that goes unseen. The static and stagnant thinking of the Puritanical society is shown through the transformation of characters as symbols and the subsequent refusal of the society to accept this change.

The *Scarlet Letter*, then, like the majority of the best tales, suggests that Hawthorne's vision of death was a good deal stronger and more constant than his vision of life. This is indeed, as Hawthorne calls it, a dark tale, and its mesh of good and evil is not equally strong in all its parts. Hawthorne was right in not wanting to be judged as a man solely by it, though I think he must have known, as we do, that it is his greatest book. For in it there is perfect charity, and a real, though defective, faith, but almost no hopes, unlike most of us today, Hawthorne was close enough to historic Christianity to know its main dogmas, even those he did not fully share.

He preferred not to seem to be denying so central a part of the Christian Gospel as that man can be saved from their sins.

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