

Erich Musick

AP English 3 – *Scarlet Letter* Essay 2b

Mr. Kosek

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Symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*

Throughout the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, the author, Nathaniel Hawthorne uses a few key symbols to represent major themes in the book. The most obvious and well known, as it is in the title, is the scarlet letter Hester is forced to wear. Three other symbols are the scaffold, the sun, and the forest.

To begin with, the most important and influential symbol in the entire book is the infamous scarlet letter, hence the title, *The Scarlet Letter*. In the second chapter, Hester walks out of the prison, wearing the infamous scarlet letter ‘A’. During the first few years of Hester’s punishment, the letter was a daily reminder of shame. In chapter five, Hawthorne writes, “...*Hester Prynne had always this dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture.*” As the story unfolds, though, this letter comes to mean other things to Hester and the people. Rather than bringing torture to Hester, it eventually becomes a symbol to some people meaning “able.” In chapter 13, Hawthorne writes, “*They said that it meant ‘Able’; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.*” A few pages later, Hawthorne writes, “*The scarlet letter had not done its office.*” The scarlet letter was meant as a punishment for Hester, and yet here we see that it hasn’t punished Hester. Then, in chapter 18, Hawthorne writes, “*Thus, we seem to see that, as regarded Hester Prynne, the whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this very hour.*” Although the scarlet letter does bring shame to Hester, as Hawthorne writes, it has not performed its duty. Hester plans to skip town and go back to Europe with Dimmesdale. If she had learned anything from the letter, she would have known better than to run away with a man who wasn’t her husband.

Throughout the book, there are various meanings to the scarlet letter. It means different things to different people – a sign of wealth to the butler, curiosity for Pearl, guilt for Dimmesdale, rebelliousness, revenge or motivation for Chillingworth, and betrayal of one’s spouse, to name a few. Regardless, the true duty was to punish and teach a lesson, neither of which the letter performed successfully.

The scarlet letter is only one of the symbols representing Hester’s shame and punishment. Another

one we see early in the novel, at about the same time we see Hester wearing the scarlet letter for the first time in public, is the scaffold on which she stands after walking out of the prison. In the second chapter, Hawthorne writes, “*It was, in short, the platform of the pillory; and above it rose the framework of that instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze. The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron.*” These few sentences pretty much sum up the significance of the scaffold in the story. The scaffold, like the scarlet letter, to the Puritans, is a place of public shame for those persons who decide to break the Puritan Law. It represents the sin of the person standing upon it and it shows the Puritan way of dealing with sin.

Among the other symbols we see in the book is the sun and its shining. Its importance becomes more evident as the book comes to a close, but the earlier parts of the book are used to build up its significance. Throughout the book, we see that the sun shines on Pearl quite often, but never on Hester. Then, in chapter 18, we see Hester and Arthur talking in the forest. After deciding to go to England and live as a family (Arthur, Hester, and Pearl) there, Hester takes off the scarlet letter, to show that she is no longer bound by it. Hawthorne writes that after she had taken off the letter, “*All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now.*” This can be interpreted to mean that nature is happy with Hester and Arthur (as well as Pearl). According to Natural Law, Hester and Arthur aren’t guilty, since they are no longer oppressed. Because God has control over nature, He is happy with them. Although I think this is what Hawthorne tries to convey when he mentions sunshine over and over, his reasoning is incorrect. In the Ten Commandments, God tells His people it’s wrong to commit adultery. Many people say that Hester and Arthur never committed adultery because Hester, in their minds, was never actually married. Even if they weren’t, those saying Hester and Arthur are not guilty would still be wrong. Elsewhere in the Bible, God says fornication (sex between two people who aren’t married to each other) is wrong. Although the sunshine is meant to signify nature’s, and, consequently, God’s, happiness with Arthur and Hester, the reasoning behind it is incorrect. The Bible says in Matthew 5:45, “... for He [God] maketh **His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the**

unjust." This verse shows that just because God makes the sun rise or the rain fall for a person doesn't mean that he likes what they are doing.

The last of the four major symbols in the book is the forest. Hawthorne writes in chapter four, "*Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us?*" By saying this, Hester is continuing the belief of the Puritans in the story, who see the forest as dark, or evil, as the place where the witches go at night to have meetings, and a home of the devil. A possible interpretation of why the Puritans made up things about the forest could be that they were trying to keep the people from the Natural Law – they wanted people to be subject to the Puritan Law. I think this is what Hawthorne is trying to get across, but, as with the last symbol and the common interpretation of it, I think he errs in his point. As we discussed in class, Hawthorne tries to make the Puritans look bad. (For example, in chapter 21, Hawthorne writes, "*Their immediate posterity, the generation next to the early emigrants, wore the blackest shade of Puritanism, and so darkened the national visage with it, that all the subsequent years have not sufficed to clear it up.*") The common interpretation Hawthorne tries to get across implies that Natural Law (as seen in the book) is equal to God's Law, and that the Puritans have all their beliefs mixed up and they're wrong. This is where Hawthorne errs. In reality, Puritan Law is closer to God's law than is Natural Law, as we see it in the book. The Puritans base their law on God's Law, but the Natural Law portrayed in the book isn't based on God's law.

In closing, Hawthorne uses several symbols to portray themes and ideas in this novel. Each of these has common interpretations, many of which aren't completely accurate.