

The wilderness and freedom in hawthornes the scarlet letter essay

[Philosophy](#), [Freedom](#)



Hawthorne's presentation of the wilderness in *The Scarlet Letter* is both literal - the unexplored and untamed wildness of forest beyond the town - and also metaphorical - he describes Hester's as being cast into a "moral wilderness" because of her punishment at the hands of the Puritan community of New England. At the same time, Hester's life in the "moral wilderness" and the forest itself are always juxtaposed with civilization - or the Puritan civilization of 17th century New England. Hawthorne was descended from New England Puritans, but as a Transcendentalist he has a rather different attitude to the wilderness and nature. The typical 17th century response to the wilderness can usually be seen in captivity narratives of that era, where the prevailing attitude to the nomadic life of the native Americans is one of sheer incomprehension. At the end of her captivity narrative, Rowlandson writes of her safe return to 'civilization'

Yet I see, when God calls a person to anything, and through never so many difficulties, yet He is fully able to carry them through, and make them see, and say they have been gainers thereby. And I hope I can say in some measure, as David did, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted." (p 340)

In one sense, this can be seen merely as a piece of Puritan propaganda - demonstrating that faith in God can save the true believer and that the indigenous people deserve to have their lands stolen and their civilization (or what passes for one in Rowlandson's eyes) should be obliterated. Hawthorne proposes and presents a much more problematic and profound relationship between the wilderness and civilization, and *The Scarlet Letter* can be read as an indictment of the stifling morality which punishes Hester for her "sin."

The town and the wilderness represent different and opposing moral

universes. The town symbolizes civilization, and is bound by rules where the individual's behaviour is closely scrutinized and where sins or wrong-doings are admonished and punished. The wilderness, on the other hand, is a place where human authority does not extend and where natural feelings and instinct are the only authority. In the wilderness the rules of the town do not apply and the individual can be true to his or her real feelings. This can lead to lewdness and immorality – the midnight rides of Mrs Hibbins – yet for Hester and Dimmesdale it represents a greater opportunity for openness and honesty. The wilderness, then, is seen as a sanctuary from the sterile moral rigidity the town.

In Chapters 17, 18 and 19 we can see the effect of the the wilderness on Hester. In these chapters she and Pearl are alone with Dimmesdale (Hester's former lover and the father of Pearl) in the wilderness of the forest. It is as if only when they are removed from society that they truly be themselves. When Hester takes the letter A off and discards it, takes off her cap and loosens her hair, we see the freedom that this creates, and she and Dimmesdale can be happy lovers yet again:

All at once 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. (Hawthorne, 220)

Only in the wilderness, away from the oppressive town, can Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale recreate their passion and their mutual love.

Hester's beauty becomes clear and radiant in this scene, and we are made

aware of how she must feel in town, oppressed by the stifling morality of Puritan New England.

Prior to this episode, in Chapter 16, Pearl had said to her mother

“ Mother... the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom... It will not flee from me, for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!”

“ Nor ever will, my child, I hope,” said Hester.

“ and why not, mother?” asked Pearl, stopping short....” Will it not come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown?” (Hawthorne, 214).

Pearl is very perceptive to have noticed the lack of “ sunshine” (happiness) in her mother’s life, but the full implications of her final remark are chilling, because she seems to suggest that all human beings are marked by Original Sin – which was consistent with Puritan theology; even, more disturbingly, in the context of this passage, Pearl’s remark seems to suggest that it is only women who are stigmatized in this way.

In Chapter 18 Hester and Arthur take the decision to flee to Europe together. It is clear from this passage at the start of the chapter that we are intended by Hawthorne to admire Hester;

... Heater Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed from society.... had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness.... The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers – stern and wild ones – and they ahs

made her strong... (Hawthorne, 222).

This is the central irony of the novel: that the scarlet letter imposed by the town can be simply discarded in the wilderness and, even in the town, by the end of the novel, has not had the effect of punishment and admonition that was intended when Hester was made to wear it, as we shall see.

The wilderness, from the Puritan point of view, is simply a place of amoral chaos. Throughout the novel Hawthorne seems to be criticizing the Puritan sensibility which wanted to label and define everything in the New World according to its very narrow moral precepts. The episode of the comet is a good example of this: it is interpreted differently by different people, but Hawthorne's criticism is that it is interpreted at all. It is actually just a comet.

The wilderness is a wilderness. Even the letter A – intended to stand for adulteress, has by the end of the novel accrued different meanings through the way Hester has lived her life and the qualities of character she has displayed. In other words, the natural world and also human behavior defy the Puritan attempt to label and categorize them. Tanner (24) argues that in one sense the letter the community force her to wear symbolizes America and the egotism of its settlers who think that by naming it, they can own it and define it. For example, when Dimmesdale looks up at the sky at night and sees a letter A, it as if, Hawthorne writes man “ 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.” (253) Hester, like America, “ refuses to be pinned down by one meaning.” (Tanner, 24). Poirier (115) comments that Hawthorne's “ struggle was not only to reveal the limitations of Puritan allegory; it is also to cast off the restraints of

literary and social artificiality.” “ To cast off the constraints of... artificiality” – those words recall uncannily Hester’s casting off of the letter A in the wilderness. Hester proves able to defy and transform the meaning of the letter that is she is forced to wear.

After their clandestine meeting in the forest, Pearl says to Hester in Chapter 22, “ Mother... was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook?” (230), but, as if to reveal the enforced dichotomy between the freedom of the wilderness and the constraints of civilization, Hester has to reply, “ Hold they peace, dear little Pearl!.... We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest.” (230). Thus suggesting that even the plans made in the freedom of the wilderness cannot survive the critical scrutiny of the town. Indeed, the plan to flee to Europe comes to nothing, suggesting even more strongly that true freedom can only be found in the wilderness.

The location of Hester’s cottage is very significant. It lies on the boundary of the town and the wilderness. She remains in sight of the town but apart from it and this freedom allows her to transform her life, just as she had transformed the letter A while she was in prison. As the years go by, Hester’s skills as a needlewoman are very much in demand and slowly she is able to resume relations with society, once again showing that the effect of the letter is not what the town had intended. Matthiessen (276) comments on her progress through the novel: “ Her purgatorial course through the book is from a desperate recklessness to a strong, placid acceptance of her suffering and retribution.” However, it might be argued that “ suffering” is not at all the right word: Hester prefers to live on the edge of a town whose laws and

morality she can neither respect nor approve of.

... as Hester had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself been through a mighty trouble. (275)

And so through wearing the scarlet letter, Hester, in the course of the novel, moves from ignominy to freedom by the end, her help and advice sought by other women who have also rebelled against society's rules. Hester's story is that of a rebel, one who chooses to live as an outlaw, outside society, because she feels constrained by society's laws and values, and can find true freedom only in the wilderness.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1854. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Print.

Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance*. 1941. New York: Oxford University Press. Print.

Poirier, Richard. *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Print.

Rowlandson, Mary. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration*. Pages 308 – 340 in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume A*. 2003: New York: W W Norton & Company,

Tanner, Tony. *City of Words: A Study of American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. London: Jonathan Cape. Print.