

"the scarlet letter" a book by nathaniel hawthorne essay

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* depicts the narrow moral restrictions placed on sexuality in Puritanical America. Adulteress Hester Prynne suffers prison and public scorn, and must raise the child of her affair with the minister Arthur Dimmesdale alone and unacknowledged. Critics have speculated that the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne himself, the "artist and author that...comes before the public to condemn the sins of his generation and project his own future fulfillment" 1. Many critics understand this novel to depict Hawthorne's personal struggles against the establishment and the stifling social mores of his day.

The Scarlet Letter has been called "Hawthorne's struggle to justify romantic art in a culture dominated by pragmatic concerns" and critics point to "correspondences between the writer of the text and his artistic rebel, Hester Prynne, both...can be seen as subversive artists who must enter "the market-place" with a scarlet letter, signifier of pride and shame, achievement and alienation". 2

Critics describe adultery, the subject matter of the novel, as a metaphor for Hawthorne's artistic position in the community; the character of Hester Prynne the adulteress is often viewed as "a nexus for complex issues of vocation and gender Hawthorne had to confront at the moment of composing his novel and sketch". 3. In the same manner that Hester Prynne stands defiant against a community that judges her expression of love as sinful and her child as possessed by sin, art in Hawthorne's day stood firm in its endorsement of the value of romantic love, and was viewed as equally dangerous.

This essay asserts that the role of the narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* functions more as social critic of the Puritanical values that founded the United States; the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* represents Hawthorne's belief that the principles of Puritanism, devoted wholeheartedly as they were to the eradication of sin, the physical instrument of the Devil, remained counter to the spirit of life that invariably reveals itself through sexuality, romantic love, and the natural world.

Analysed as a thematic treatment of sin, critics have categorized *The Scarlet Letter* as the battle of the human spirit to balance romantic love and community-mindedness. "Sin and Sorrow in their most fearful forms are to be presented in any work of art, they have rarely been treated with a loftier severity, purity, and sympathy than in Mr. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The touch of the fantastic befitting a period of society in which ignorant and excitable human creatures conceived each other and themselves to be under the direct "rule and governance" of the Wicked One⁴.

Puritan Boston may aspire to lock down their life force for the perceived betterment of society; however the spirit of life will not be caged by the societal impositions of monogamous marriage, prison, or social ostracization. It is definitely Hawthorne's voice; however he imbues the narrator with a caustic, critical perspective on most if not all descriptions of the community that imprisons Hester Prynne. Thus the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* promotes the idea that romantic love remains a necessary expression of life, as opposed to an expression of Satanic evil, and that sin itself has been misconstrued and misinterpreted by the Puritan community.

In its obsession with vice, the Puritan moral majority mistakenly assume that they can control sin through public censure and ridicule such as that that befalls Hester Prynne. Yet the raw passion that forms the basis of life can never be controlled. In Hawthorne's view, which he argues through the narrator, when the Bostonians reject Hester Prynne, the narrator argues, they reject life. Evidence for this reading exists in the difference between the type of description that the narrator applies to the Puritan community and that which he affords the natural world and Hester Prynne.

The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* begins almost immediately to apply a different tone of description to the Boston community that punishes Hester Prynne and contrast it with descriptions of nature as well as Prynne herself. Note the tone of the description of the congregation outside the prison anticipating the release of Hester Prynne as " a throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments" 5.

Similarly, Hawthorne's narrator describes " the founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" 6. Immediately, we recognise the narrator's judgement of Puritanical Boston as a failed Utopia; in other words, if Boston were indeed a Puritan Utopia, why then the need for " the black flower of civilised society, a prison"? 7 We see Hawthorne's voice coming through the narrator in this example to point to the hypocrisy and paradox of the Puritan moral stance.

Witness a similar judgement implied in the narrator's description of the beadle, " like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and gristly presence of the town-beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender" 8.

Hawthorne's narrator consistently applies stifling descriptors to echo the stifling oppression of the Boston Puritan community.

Contrasting these heavy dark oppressive descriptors in the first instance, in the second instance we see the narrator's application of a wholly distinct form of description when discusses the natural world. Showcasing the rose bush that grows at the entrance to the prison, the narrator imbues it with a warmth and compassion that sharply contrasts the cold scorn imposed by the Boston Puritan community. The narrator's describes the " wild rose-hush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him" 9.

The implied compassion of the natural world to Hester Prynne's indiscretion remains another important function of the narrator. The narrator consistently describes the natural world as an empathetic friend to Hester Prynne, and also consistently offers support for the affair between her and Dimmesdale, not to mention their daughter Pearl, through the generous and lush descriptors the narrators applies to these characters.

A close reading of the narration of *The Scarlet Letter* divulges Hawthorne's thematic interplay between the Boston Puritans and the natural world, and the narrator definitively sides with both Hester and Pearl as embodiments of the passionate expression of life. We see this in the description of one of Pearl's forays into the forest when the narrator describes the sunlight as "linger[ing] about the lonely child, as if glad of such a playmate" 10. Hester Prynne, who suffers the same social ostracization as her mother, finds similar "approval in a natural environment," 11 when she throws the letter onto the ground.

The narrator describes Hester Prynne's life affirming action as consecrated by heaven itself. "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. The course of the little brook might be traced by its merry gleam afar into the wood's heart of mystery, which had become a mystery of joy" 12.

Similarly, in this same chapter, consciously labelled "A Flood of Sunshine," the union between Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale receives a warm endorsement from the natural world via the narrator's description: "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 death-like

slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world" 13

The natural world, as implied by the narrator's description, understands why Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale neither characterize their relationship as adultery, not as a sin, and why the fact that they risk eternal hellfire, according to the Boston Puritan community, is not enough for them to repent - because romantic love is an expression of life. The lovers do not express contrition, remorse, or confess their transgression in this scene, and the narrator's radiant description supports a reading that forgiveness need not be asked for or acquired in this case.

When Dimmesdale agrees to Hester's plan to escape Boston and begin again in Europe as a family, Hester renounces the scarlet letter and also allows her hair to cascade freely down her back, an expression of freedom and sexuality. Hester cries, " The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now? See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!" 14 Nature itself endeavours to support these lovers as they flout " the sin [they] have committed and intend to commit again. The narrator - we may call this figure Hawthorne - seems to insist that love and nature are insuperable values, [and] that morality has nothing to say to them" 15

When the narrator describes Hester Prynne singly, we also witness the same warmth, generosity and benevolence applied to Hester Prynne as he gave the descriptions of the natural world. " Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud,

were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out"

16. In the same instance, when Hester Prynne emerges from the prison, the narrator makes a note of her " the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity" 17.

Again, the narrator consistently attaches vivid, vibrant descriptive language to parallel the life affirming soul that is Hester Prynne. Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl - through the narrator's description, as well as their repeated proximity to the natural world in the novel - ostensibly become the personifications of the spirit of life: indomitable, unapologetic, and self actualized, needing no approval or backing from the Puritan Boston community.

By placing these two communities together yet describing them so differently, the narrator - and Hawthorne, by extension - successfully portrays the Puritan Boston community as antithetical to life, and Hester Prynne and Pearl as emblematic of life. Hester Prynne thus becomes the " moving principle of life which different societies in different ways may constrain but which in itself irresistibly endures. Her story is an allegory of the passion through which the race continues. She feels the ignominy which attends her own irregular behaviour and accepts her fate as the reward of evil, but she does not understand it so far as to wish uncommitted the act which her society calls a sin" 18.

In conclusion, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* the narrator operates as a means to further Hawthorne's criticism of the Puritanical

values that underlay the Boston community represented in the novel. The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* represents Hawthorne's belief that the principles of Puritanism, focused solely on the eradication of sin, cut themselves and their community off from the spirit of life by condemning romantic love and all expressions of passion as instruments of sin.

Hawthorne's narrator argues rather that life invariably expresses itself through sexuality, romantic love, and the beauty of the natural world.

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