

Open endedness of the scarlet letter

Literature



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Hawthorne wrote during the Romantic Period in American literature which lasted from 1830 to 1865. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Edgar Allen Poe, and Walt Whitman were his literary contemporaries. The Scarlet Letter is considered a piece of American Romantic literature because it is set in a remote past, the Puritan era 200 years prior to Hawthorne's time, and because it deals with the interior psychology of individual characters.

Some of the qualities of the novel are that its themes are relevant still today such as: Alienation; Appearance versus Reality; Breaking Social Rules amidst others which are presented through the appropriate language (it is to be noted that In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne tells the story using vocabulary and a writing style familiar to readers in 1850. The speech of the characters in the story, however, is that of Puritans in the early 1600s. Yet to many of contemporary readers, the speech of the Puritans seems more familiar than the “ more modern” language of Hawthorne's time.

This is because the Puritans left England around the time when the King James Version of the Bible was written. Therefore, their language is similar to Jacobean (Jacobus is the Latin word for James) English of the King James Bible), Hawthorne uses precise language to provide his readers with vivid descriptions depicting the time, place, and mood, or the setting for The Scarlet Letter. In addition, he has been able to present a text with no definite ending which allows for several interpretations without being castigated for attack on the ‘ morality’ of readers.

The ending of the movie based on the text is absolutely different from that of its archetype. Nathaniel Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* is a sad story about adultery and the strong consequences of the sin. Contrastingly, Demi Moore stated that a happy ending was appropriate for the movie because, according to the actress, people did not read the book anymore. However, from evidence throughout the book, it can be seen that no happy ending is possible in this book. The setting of the book, seriousness of adultery in the eyes of Puritans, and the weakness of Arthur Dimmesdale all add up to a sad ending for *The Scarlet Letter*.

A happy ending to this novel is inappropriate and would ruin the entire masterpiece for all its readers. There cannot be a happy ending for this story because it is set in a Puritan society. Another story set in the time period in Salem as *The Scarlet Letter* is *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. This play also ended up sadly, with many innocent people executed. These Puritan people did not show happiness, and were too strict to thrive as a group in the New World. The fact that this story is set in the Puritan settlement sends a strong premonition to the reader that the story ends in sadness.

Furthermore, Hawthorne describes all the other Puritans, such as Governor Bellingham, in an unfavorable light; Hawthorne does not believe these people were superior. As Hester goes to visit Bellingham about the custody of her child Pearl, Hawthorne describes the home of the Puritan governor. He writes, " This was a large wooden house? ;The brilliancy might have befitted Aladdin's palace, rather than the mansion of a grave old Puritan ruler" (Hawthorne 89). Here, the author attacks the Puritans for their hypocrisy.

However, the greatest hypocrite of the book may be the reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. The Puritans also punished too severely for undersized crimes not affecting the community, such as adultery. Crimes such as these affected the reputation of the settlement, but the sin was only between three people, not the entire community to mock and punish. This severity is shown by the women at the scaffold in the second chapter. One judge says, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book'" (45).

There was no willingness for forgiveness. This was in part due to jealousy by the older women towards the young and beautiful Hester, but the law had also been created in the statute-book of the community. The Puritans viewed adultery as a horrible sin to God, making Hester's crime worse. Another reason that Hawthorne used the crime of adultery may have been because it is one of the most serious sins to commit. A happy ending could not happen because such a serious crime had been committed in the book. The author did not believe that Hester deserved to live happily.

It was a strong sin that was heavily punished by the Puritans, as shown in the early chapters of the book. The author describes the high danger Hester was in by committing adultery in the days of the Puritans as opposed to his day. " On the other hand, 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" (44). She is saved from execution perhaps only because the other Puritans do not know that Hester's former husband Roger Chillingworth is in town.

Also, Reverend Dimmesdale decides to keep his secret all to himself. However, this great secret destroys the minister from the inside. He becomes sicker and sicker as the days pass, while nobody but himself knows the reason for his deterioration. The author writes about Dimmesdale's worsening conditions. " About this period, however, the health of Mr. Dimmesdale had evidently begun to fail? ;. with every successive Sabbath, his cheek was paler and thinner? ;" (150). Also, it is noted several times by Pearl that Dimmesdale consistently puts his right hand over his heart.

This, the reader later finds out, is because he has engraved a letter A there, showing the weak hiding of his sin. Another glaring clue throughout the book is the weakness of Hester's lover Arthur Dimmesdale. Hawthorne shows Dimmesdale to be selfish and afraid. He is too weak of a person to raise a family with the strong and defiant Hester Prynne. He cannot bring himself forward to confess his sin of adultery to the public. While he cannot confess because of his fear, Dimmesdale is driven by his own guilt to confess at night on the scaffold.

The author writes, " But the town was all asleep. There was no peril of discovery" . The author goes on to explain how weak Arthur Dimmesdale really is. He writes, " Crime is for the iron-nerved, who have their choice either to endure it, or, if it press too hard, to exert their fierce and savage strength for a good purpose, and fling it off at once! This feeble and most sensitive of spirits could do nether? ;" (130). This is one reason that this story cannot end up happily with Hester and Dimmesdale fleeing to Europe to start a family.

Dimmesdale only confesses when he knows he is about to die, leaving the guilt once again to his lover, as he had done for seven long years. This selfish being could not be a good father, so the author never gave him the opportunity to be one. There is nearly no evidence at all that a happy ending is possible. From the depressing Puritan setting, the great crime of adultery, and the weakness of Dimmesdale, this novel is sad. Demi's opinion is ridiculous and cannot be accepted. It can be different in movies, but it is absurd for Moore to question the ending written by the original author of the novel.

The ending written by Hawthorne is exactly how it should be. The ending gives the reader a sorry feeling for Hester, the heroine, while still giving hope to the reader that Pearl will have a good life. Although commonly called a novel, *The Scarlet Letter* is actually a romance. Hawthorne makes this distinction because at the time he was writing, novels were supposed to deal with realistic representations of human experiences or external truths. Romances, on the other hand, were concerned with internal truths, or “truths of the human heart,” as Hawthorne states in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Romances, therefore, allowed the author to deviate from reality in favor of imagination. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* is not an historical novel about Puritan Boston, but a romance set 200 years before Hawthorne's time in which he tells a tale that may have occurred, given some historical facts and many insights into human nature. Writing a romance about the past gives Hawthorne the freedom to present several versions of what might have happened, depending on whose perspective is presented. This is why after <https://assignbuster.com/open-endedness-of-the-scarlet-letter/>

the death of Arthur Dimmesdale, several theories are submitted as to how the scarlet “ A” came to be imprinted on his breast.

The insignia could have been self-inflicted, or wrought by Chillingworth’s magic, or a manifestation of Dimmesdale’s remorseful spirit. Hawthorne presents all three theories non-judgementally because what matters most is not how the scarlet letter got there, but that it confirms the truth about Dimmesdale’s adulterous heart. The genre of the romance also allowed Hawthorne to embellish the relationship between humans and nature. For example, the babbling brook in the forest scene appears to sympathize with Hester and Dimmesdale and adds “ this other tale to the mystery with which its little heart was already overburdened.... (p. 201).

In addition, the “ A”-shaped meteor which appears the night Governor Winthrop dies and Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold is interpreted as both a sign from heaven denouncing Dimmesdale as an adulterer and also as standing for “ Angel” as the soul of a revered magistrate ascends into heaven, depending upon the orientation of its observer. Many readings are possible through the open-endedness of the novel while themes connected with Sins and Past and Present are discussed extensively simultaneously. The open-endedness of the text allowed for a lot of criticism.

On its publication, critic Evert Augustus Duyckinck, a friend of Hawthorne's, said he preferred the author's Washington Irving-like tales. Another friend, critic Edwin Percy Whipple, objected to the novel's " morbid intensity" with dense psychological details, writing that the book " is therefore apt to become, like Hawthorne, too painfully anatomical in his exhibition of them".

Most literary critics praised the book but religious leaders took issue with the novel's subject matter. Orestes Brownson complained that Hawthorne did not understand Christianity, confession, and remorse.

A review in *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register* concluded the author "perpetrates bad morals." On the other hand, 20th century writer D. H. Lawrence said that there could be no more perfect work of the American imagination than *The Scarlet Letter*. Henry James once said of the novel, "It is beautiful, admirable, extraordinary; it has in the highest degree that merit which I have spoken of as the mark of Hawthorne's best things--an indefinable purity and lightness of conception... One can often return to it; it supports familiarity and has the inexhaustible charm and mystery of great works of art.

The book's immediate and lasting success are due to the way it addresses spiritual and moral issues from a uniquely American standpoint. In 1850, adultery was an extremely risqué subject, but because Hawthorne had the support of the New England literary establishment, it passed easily into the realm of appropriate reading. It has been said that this work represents the height of Hawthorne's literary genius; dense with terse descriptions. It remains relevant for its philosophical and psychological depth, and continues to be read as a classic tale on a universal theme. The open-endedness allows for various interpretations.