

BLOCK**2****Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Scarlet
Letter**

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CORE COURSE (BEGC-105): AMERICAN LITERATURE

Welcome to CORE COURSE BEGC-105: AMERICAN LITERATURE.

This Course aims at giving you a complete orientation and understanding into the diverse genres and dimensions of American literature. In the first block which is dedicated to Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, we discuss with you American Drama: An Introduction in Unit 1. *All My Sons* is based upon a true story, which was pointed out in an Ohio newspaper. The news story described how in 1941–43 the Wright Aeronautical Corporation based in Ohio had conspired with army inspection officers to approve defective aircraft engines destined for military use Unit 2 takes up *All My Sons* for a detailed Study so that you are exposed to all the critical interpretations. Unit 3 discusses thematic Concerns in *All My Sons* followed by a comprehensive discussion on the aspects of Characterisation in the last unit of the block.

In the next block, we take up an equally important and interesting text *The Scarlet Letter* is a work of **historical fiction** by author Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1850. Set in Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, the novel tells the story of Hester Prynne who conceives a daughter through an affair and is forced to wear the scarlet letter. *The Scarlet Letter* was one of the first mass-produced books in America and is considered a classic work today. In Unit 1, A Socio Cultural Background of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* is taken up. The art of Characterization as displayed by the novelist is discussed in Unit 2. Unit 3 deals with all the diverse Themes and Their Expression through Imagery as found in the novel. Unit 4 discusses other important issues and aspects such as Structure, Narrative Style and Special Features

Block 3 of this course is dedicated to Short Fiction and you will find it very appealing and interesting. Unit 1 offers you a detailed introduction of Short Fiction. Unit 2 gives you a complete view of O' Henry's *After Twenty Years*. Unit 3 which is centered on Willa Cather's *On the Gull's Road* is good to bring out complex issues. Unit 4 brings out all important themes in Ernst Hemingway's *Snows of Kilimanjaro/ Killers*.

Block 4 is designed and developed in such a way that you are able to understand the complete essence of American Poetry. Unit 1 takes up the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson: *Brahma, Hamatreya*. Unit 2 takes into account the diverse themes and issues in Walt Whitman's 'O Captain, My Captain' & 'Passage to India' (lines 1–68). Unit 3 explores the poetry of Emily Dickinson with special reference to poems such as *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, *A Thought Went up My Mind Today* and *Death Sets a Thing Significant*. Unit 4 deals with the imaginative side of Alexie Sherman Alexie as demonstrated in the poems such as 'Crow Testament' & 'Evolution'.

Have a great time reading the Course.

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In Block 2, we take up an equally important and interesting text. The Scarlet Letter is a work of **historical fiction** by author Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1850. Set in Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, the novel tells the story of Hester Prynne who conceives a daughter through an affair and is forced to wear the scarlet letter. The Scarlet Letter was one of the first mass-produced books in America and is considered a classic work today. In Unit 1, A Socio Cultural Background of the novel The Scarlet Letter is taken up. The art of Characterization as displayed by the novelist is discussed in Unit 2. Unit 3 deals with all the diverse Themes and Their Expression through Imagery as found in the novel. Unit 4 discusses other important issues and aspects such as Structure, Narrative Style and Special Features.

Have a great time studying.



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UNIT 1: THE SCARLET LETTER: A SOCIO CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Setting-up of Colonies
 - 1.2.1 The Early Settlement
 - 1.2.2 The Pilgrims and Puritans
 - 1.2.3 The Puritan Psychology
- 1.3 Life in the Colonies
 - 1.3.1 Family
 - 1.3.2 Class Structure
 - 1.3.3 Government
 - 1.3.4 Religion
 - 1.3.5 Social Life–Sports, Pastimes, Holidays, Food, Clothes etc.
 - 1.3.6 Trade and Economy
 - 1.3.7 Legal System
 - 1.3.8 Science
- 1.4 Let Us Sum up
- 1.5 Answers to Exercises

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit intends to make you familiar with 17th Century America. This period in American history is known as the colonial period.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the colonial period. In fact, looking at certain events in the novel, it is possible to fix the precise timing of the story. The novel describes the events that are supposed to have taken place between the years 1642-1649. The setting is Salem, Massachusetts. Since the way of life in America of those days was very different from that of our times, it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with some of the details of colonial life. This unit, thus, introduces you to colonial America in general and to the way of life in the Massachusetts Bay colony in particular.

1.2 THE SETTING-UP OF COLONIES

1.2.1 The Early Settlement

The Spanish explorer, Columbus, as you know discovered America in 1492. Soon after that - that is from the sixteenth century onwards - many European nations like England, France and Netherlands undertook expeditions to this “New World” in search of gold and silver. The dominant considerations of these expeditions were commercial. In 1588 the Spanish Armada - the biggest naval fleet of Spain - was defeated by the English maritime adventurer - Francis Drake. From then on England emerged as the most powerful presence on the Atlantic and Pacific waters.

Trade considerations made the European nations set up their own colonies. The first English colony was set up in Virginia in 1607. The name - Virginia - was given by Elizabeth I. In 1609, Virginia was separated from North Virginia. And to this separated part, Captain John Smith gave the name “New England” Massachusetts is one of the New England states. Some of the residents still call it the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a hangover from the colonial period. Informally it is referred to as the Bay state after the Massachusetts Bay around which the earliest European communities were founded. First colonised by English religious dissenters - known as Dissenters or Separatists because they wanted to break away from the Church of England - Massachusetts is one of the oldest centres of permanent English settlement.

1.2.2 The Pilgrims and Puritans

The Europeans visited the coast of Massachusetts many times, before the Pilgrims - the Dissenters - landed there in the ship *Mayflower* in 1620. But none of these resulted in permanent settlements. The Dissenters came to the New World, persecuted back home by English Churchmen, and set up a colony in Plymouth in 1620, and elected William Bradford as their governor.

During the 1620s many groups of English people founded small communities around the Massachusetts Bay, to the north of Plymouth and independent of the Pilgrims. The most important of these was the community of the Puritans in Salem, set up in 1626. In the next ten years, the Puritans came to the Massachusetts Bay in large numbers and with their arrival began the main settlement of Massachusetts.

These Puritans, like the Dissenters, were also not happy with the English church. But unlike them, the Puritans wanted to change the English Church from within. They did not want to break away. Many of these Puritans were well-to-do landowners and merchants. In 1620 they invested largely in a company called Massachusetts Bay Company. In 1630 they decided to form a Puritan Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bay Colony and sent about 1000 emigrants to Salem. These emigrants joined the Puritans at Salem and set up a new colony in Boston. The leaders of the emigrants persuaded the Company to transfer its charter and administration to America Thus the charter - book of rules and regulations - became the chief instrument of government in the colony. As earlier decided, John Winthrop - whose death is mentioned in *The Scarlet Letter* - was elected the Governor of the Colony. The charter contained some glimpses of democracy, but the colony, in its - early years, was a strict theocracy that is, government by religious

1.2.3 The Puritan Psychology

Credit must be given to the early settlers for their grit and sense of purpose in building up their colonies against an unfriendly environment. To understand these qualities, it is necessary to know the Puritan psychology.

John Smith, in his glowing report on America, described it almost as if it were the lost paradise. Suffering from economic and religious repression in England and dissatisfied with the Church of England, these early settlers believed themselves to have been chosen by God to re-establish Christianity in all its purity in the new world. John Winthrop, in his sermon on board the ship *Arabella* warned the fellow passengers that the eyes of the world were upon them and upon their venture of building a city of God upon a hill and that if they failed in that mission they would become the laughing - stock of history

For the Puritan mind the Human is essentially a fallen creature. After the Fall, when Adam and Eve disobeyed the will of God by eating and forbidden fruit, the human was justly condemned. However, by some chance, God has selected some (the Elect) for salvation through Grace. Salvation is through faith and not through outward actions. The world is a structure of dramatic oppositions like good/evil, Man/God, the Elect/the Fallen, Faith/Deeds. The fallen man's vision is corrupted and therefore it cannot read the will of God in Nature. Every person is thus trapped in his/her own individual interpretation of the world, which, for him/her due to the fall, is an enigma or mystery. The earlier Church had solved the problem of the corruption of human vision by appealing to the infallibility of the Pope and the Church. But Puritans denied both and spoke of the general consensus of a community of the chosen ones (the Elect). The general opinion of the community of these "visible saints" was taken to be the expression of God's will. The Puritans, therefore, exerted a powerful pressure on the members of the community towards consensus and conformity.

Once they arrived in America, the Puritans began to see themselves as the latter-day Jews, fleeing from a land of oppression to a land of liberation. Just as in the Old Testament, the Jews, God's chosen people, fled from Egypt, where they were persecuted, to the promised land of Canaan, similarly the Puritans were the modern Jews running away from England to this new promised land of America. It was all a part of the divine design. Now that they were in their 'Canaan', it was up to them to build a city on a hill in God's honour. This was the mission of their life.

1.3 LIE IN THE COLONIES

1.3.1 Family

In contrast to modern American families, during the colonial period the family tended to be a large and extended institution. Life centered around the family. In addition to the parents and several brothers and sisters, a colonial child was likely to share his/her home with at least one grandparent, unmarried uncle or aunt and perhaps a few orphaned cousins. After the marriage of the older brother, nephews and nieces would fill the house. The colonial family consisted of at least 12 members as one generation succeeded

another. Large or extended families served an important economic function. For in the days when there were no machines, many hands were required to make a household self-sufficient. The family led a highly close-knit life, as its members worked and played together. Such a family life is almost unknown now in America.

1.3.2 Class-Structure

Unlike the English Society, the colonial American Society did not have a titled aristocracy. It was vaguely divided into wealthy, middle or lower classes. The wealthy class consisted of rich planters, merchants and professional men. They constituted ten percent of the Society. The majority of them, about **60%**, comprised the middle class that included fanners, shopkeepers and artisans. The lower class represented the black slaves and the white indentured labourers and apprentices. The notable feature of this social structure was its mobility. The fact of one's birth did not stop anyone except the blacks, from moving into higher classes, provided she was prepared to work hard.

1.3.3 Government

The most important political development during the colonial period was the tradition of self-government. The basic principle throughout almost all the colonies was that local political decisions should be made by the wealthy property owners of a particular region. This means practically two thirds of the white males had a say in the decision-making. The delegates to the legislature were elected annually, but only the wealthy would contest the elections for they had the necessary leisure to look after the management of affairs in the colony.

1.3.4 Religion

As pointed out earlier, religion had a vital importance in the lives of the colonists. Since the majority of the early settlers were either Dissenters or Puritans, and since our novel deals with Puritanism, it is instructive to examine in detail the way these colonies were managed by the religious leaders.

In Massachusetts Bay, only church members were eligible to become "freemen" that is, citizens with a right to vote. And to become a church member, an individual had to testify that he had experienced conversion and then his declaration had to be approved by the minister, the church officers and the congregation. This rigid procedure kept the effective power in the hands of only a pious minority. In the early days of the settlement, each New England community centred round its church with its minister as the chosen leader. (Look at the admiration and hero-worship of Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*).

The church was normally located at the centre of the New England town. Some Puritans would like to call the church "meeting-hall" as the word church smelt of "Popery". These Puritan meeting-halls were austere buildings both externally and internally. Church attendance was compulsory and people had to listen to unending sermons sitting on rough wooden benches without backs. Prayers were equally long. And during all this procedure, total attention was demanded. Young boys and girls were forbidden from making eyes at each other. If somebody dozed off during sermons, a special

officer on duty - tithingman - would tickle the faces of ladies and girls with foxtails and give a rude punch or tap on the heads of the men and boys. As the preacher went on and on about the hell-fire, the people listening to him in the freezing cold, many have craved even for the warmth of the hell- fire.

Even God rested on the seventh day. Hence Sunday was strictly observed as the Sabbath Day/Lord's Day when all frivolous activities were forbidden. Games were not allowed. People were supposed to pass the day in attending various church services and in contemplation. Any light-hearted behaviour, raucous laughter, fast walking or driving were positively forbidden. Any violation of the Sabbath by madwoman/ child was reported to the church authorities by the tithingman. The offenders would be cautioned and after continued violations, the offender would be set in the stock and be taught to sit still. One couple was fined five shillings by a magistrate in Connecticut for exchanging smiles on Sabbath.

The notion that Puritans had about themselves as God's chosen people, governed even their day-to-day life. For example, fear of wasting God-given time was an obsession with them. No time was to be lost in activities that did not directly or indirectly contribute towards this construction. "An hour's idleness is a sin as well as an hour's drunkenness", wrote Hugh Peter in a tract called *A Dying Father's Last Legacy* (1660) The Puritans were concerned about the way children wasted their time especially on holidays. In fact they were against all holidays and festivals, as they constituted a sad waste of time. Christmas passed without merriment or pomp in these Puritan colonies. Though drinks were not forbidden as a part of one's regular diet, the Puritans objected to frivolity. Constant diligence in one's vocation and sobriety were advocated.

Secondly the Puritan divines exhorted total social cohesion. No deviation from the norms of social behaviour they had laid down was tolerated. Since the City of God was to be built against many odds like the hostile environment, wild Indians and religious heresies, the people must stay together bound by a common religious faith. What Benjamin Franklin said in another context really sums up the Puritan frame of mind in the early days of the settlement. "We must, indeed, all hang together or most assuredly we shall all hang separately"

Under these circumstances, no individual deviation, no danger to the social cohesion was tolerated. The Puritans looked down upon solitary existence. Man must stay in society along with fellow human beings. Massachusetts in fact forbade solitary living: between 1669 and 1670, sixty people were hounded out for living alone. Solitary existence was a punishment to be given to sinners like Hester Prynne.

It is ironic that the Puritans, who suffered great repression back in England at the hands of Archbishop Laud, were equally intolerant of other religious opinions and beliefs. Any moral individualism or departure from the accepted norms was severely dealt with. The controversy known as the Antinomian controversy in an excellent example of the Puritan repression of other beliefs. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were expelled from the colony for expressing opinions that went against the Puritan ideas of faith, grace and salvation. These rebels set up a new colony in Rhode Island, where "nobody would be persecuted for his religious beliefs".

In 1662, the Reverend Michael Wigglesworth wrote a long poem *The Day of Doom*, which painted vividly the punishments meted out to those who strayed from the path shown by the Puritan Elect. Maybe the hysteria this poem whipped up, combined with the supernatural interventions, a constant topic in the New England sermons, led to the Salem witchcraft scandal of 1692. The belief in the supernatural was not confined to New England alone, but it had its most dramatic manifestations there. Besides, the work of two most powerful preachers, father and son, Increase and Cotton Mather gave moral authority to the belief. This belief in the supernatural was deeply ingrained in public consciousness, especially after the publication of King James' book *Demonology* (1597). No eccentric person, no crotchety old woman or ill-tempered man was safe after the outbreak in Massachusetts in 1692. By that time the whole area around Boston was seething with rumours of witchcraft. Salem was the nerve centre of supernaturalism and Cotton Mather offered all his help and the power of the church to stamp out this work of Satan. Accordingly, some two hundred people were accused of witchcraft. After twenty witches, both men and women, were hanged and one old Giles Corey was pressed to death by weights for refusing to plead, the hysteria came to a close. (Although the witchcraft scandal belongs to a period later than the one covered by *The Scarlet Letter*, you will find how Hawthorne slightly alters the history by characterizing Mistress Hibbins as an emissary of the devil). After these infamous witchcraft trials of 1692, the authority of the Puritans got considerably weakened, till it was finally overthrown in the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s.

Though the stern and grim regimen of the Puritans is foreign to the permissiveness of modern times, it has left a deep imprint on the American character. For example, the notion that idleness is a sin is deep-seated in the American mind and their persistent application to duty and fear of wasting God's precious time helps explain the material success of America. Secondly, the Puritans believed that they were the elect of **God**, chosen to set right the time that was 'out of joint'. This doctrine has also shaped to some extent the American character. Americans find it easy to believe that they enjoy the favour of God and that their ways should be adopted by all other people. Perhaps that direct heritage from the Puritans.

1.3.5 Social Life: Sports, Pastimes, Holidays, Food, Clothing etc.

Although the Puritans advocated an ascetic way of life, they could not always succeed in suppressing the craving in human nature for sports and amusement. In the early days of the settlement, life was a hard struggle for mere survival and people had little time for sports and pastimes. But as the colonies stabilized, they began to look for entertainment. One of the popular amusements of those times was dancing, though Puritan authorities looked down upon it. Horse-racing was another sport, especially among those who were rich enough to own horses. But cockfights were popular at all levels of society. Hunting and fishing were originally necessary activities for food but gradually they developed into favourite sports, so much so that every young boy thought it his birthright to fish and his ambition was to own a gun of his own. In towns, the favourite games were cards, football and bowling (In *The Scarlet Letter* little Pearl, excluded from society along with her mother, has no one to play with. She consoles herself by playing with natural objects.)

Though the Puritans frowned upon wasting “God’s precious time”, even they had to take a few days off to mark the special occasions like the Thanksgiving Day, Election Day and Training (Muster) Day. Election Day was a time of merriment all over the New England colonies. In spite of the innings of preachers, the day took on a distinctly irreligious tone. One minister complained that the day had become an occasion when men gathered, “to smoke, carouse, swagger and dishonour God with greater bravery”. In some communities, a special beer was brewed for the occasion. In others, housewives customarily baked a particular kind of cake, known as the Election cake. (Remember how Salem wears a festive look on the Election Day, when Dimmesdale delivers his memorable sermon. Read the final chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*).

One of the pastimes most families indulged in was story-telling and reading. The family in those days, as you have already been told, was a large affair. In the evening when the daily chores were done, they would gather to hear someone read or tell a story. The family might sing together or play games. All this has now become practically extinct with the advent of radio and television.

In the beginning, colonists of necessity led a simple life. Foodstuffs such as corn, squash and wild-game, turkey, deer, pigeon and rabbit - formed the staple diet with fish thrown in 2s a variety. During long winters, it was necessary to preserve meat by smoking or salting, fish was dried or pickled. Many farm families kept a cow for milk. In addition, beer (in the middle colonies) rum (New England) and cider (in the back country) were popular beverages.

People in the colonies dressed much as they had done back in England. Men wore coats, vests, shirts, knee breeches and shawls. Rich people imported clothes from England. But the commoners went in for homespun, home-made clothes. (See how Hester can make a living by sewing).

1.3.6 Trade and Economy

The colonial economy, to begin with, was largely agricultural. In Southern colonies, where an individual could acquire as much land as he wanted, the plantation system was found to be the most convenient form of agricultural production. By and large plantations were devoted to the cultivation of such marketable/exportable crops like tobacco and cotton. Trade had been one of the chief motivations of several English companies that founded colonies. But the companies were not much successful; the individual settlers carried on the work and by the end of the 17th century became prosperous by exporting rice, tobacco and sugar. The goal of all the trade activity was to procure for American colonies the necessaries. As trade prospered, many mariners, shipmasters and captains made fortunes. (At the end of *The Scarlet Letter* a shipmaster arrives. who is supposed to take Hester and Dimmesdale to a new country)

1.3.7 Legal Systems

In most colonies the Governor and his council sat as the highest court of justice in the 17th century, there were hardly any trained lawyers in the colonies. (Hester has no lawyer to plead for her). These courts generally followed the English Common Law and Criminal Code. The latter had many corporal punishments like whipping, cutting of limbs, branding etc. But

because labour was very scarce in the colonies, such severe punishments were rarely given. Offenders were less likely to be thrown into dark, filthy dungeons than publicly humiliated, pilloried or at most whipped. The intention was to reform the criminal by public humiliation and also to set an example to others. (Hester is not hanged, but made to stand at the scaffold to be jeered at and booed and then, made to wear the scarlet letter A.)

1.3.8 Science

In the period covered by the novel, a strong utilitarian interest dominated all scientific activities. Naturally, the colonists were curious to make discoveries regarding the natural history of the New World. But they studied their environment not so much for pure knowledge as in the hope of making practical discoveries. Thus Botany was studied for the sake of medical herbs. (Remember how Chillingworth goes about hunting for herbs in the woods) and metallurgy aided the quest for iron ore and useful meds. Science and medicine largely remained a dark mystery like witchcraft. (How easily Chillingworth becomes a dark figure). There is no doctor in Salem, except Chillingworth.

EXERCISE I

1. Briefly describe Puritan psychology and state how this has left an imprint on the modern American character.
.....
.....
2. What were some of the reasons for the Salem witchcraft trials?
.....
.....

1.4 LET US SUM UP

To recapitulate, *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the colonial period of American history. Soon after Columbus' discovery of America, many European nations started colonizing the land, for commercial purposes. The first English colony was set up in Virginia in 1607. With the arrival of the Pilgrims and Puritans in the 1620s, the main settlement of Massachusetts began.

Life in the colonies was by no means easy. The settlers had to contend with a strange climate, wild beasts and Indians. But the Puritans slowly overcome these difficulties by their faith in their mission. They saw themselves as chosen by God to build a new Jerusalem in this "virgin" land. In this task of reconstruction, the Puritans demanded total social cohesion and submission by the community to the dictates of the church. Any form of deviation was severely punished. Till the 18th century, religion and church played a very important part in the day-to-day life of the people.

1.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

1. Refer to 1.2.3 and 1.3.4
2. Refer to 1.3.4

UNIT 2 THE SCARLET LETTER: CHARACTERIZATION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Characters as Symbols
 - 2.2.1 Science, Art, Religion and Nature
 - 2.2.2 Id, Ego and Superego
 - 2.2.3 Heart, Soul and Mind
- 2.3 Hester
- 2.4 Dimmesdale
- 2.5 Chillingworth
- 2.6 Pearl
- 2.7 Let us Sum Up
- 2.8 Answers to Exercises

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Unit IS to enable you to have an insight in to the four major characters in the novel and to understand their motivations and behaviour. After reading this Unit carefully, you should be able to:

- identify the main characters;
- explain their purpose, function and significance in the novel;
- study them in relation to the main themes of the novel.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we shall begin by considering the characters as symbols. We analyse them first as embodiments of science, art, religion and nature, then as the specimens of the Freudian systems of id, ego and superego and finally as representing heart, soul and mind. Then we approach the four major characters from other perspectives in the following order: Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl. After you have read this unit, you will be ready to deal with different aspects of the form and technique of the novel.

2.2 CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS

The major characters in the novel are symbolic at different levels.

2.2.1 Science, Art, Religion and Nature

Chillingworth is a scientist. A devoted scholar all his life, he is known in this Puritan settlement as a physician gathering a wide variety of herbs. He is also described as a miner, a geometrician and an engineer. He goes “deep” into Dimmesdale’s mind and heart: there he “delves,” “probes,” “burrows” like “a treasure seeker in a dark cavern”; he “dug into the poor clergyman’s heart, like a miner searching for gold.” He studies Dimmesdale as a “geometrical problem.” As an engineer, he knows “the spring that controls the engine” of the minister’s nature. He brings a “terrible machinery to bear” upon him, and tampers with “the delicate spring” of his mind and conscience. In short, he analyses, dissects and studies Dimmesdale as a scientist looks at his material.

Hester represents art. In the first eight chapters, she is SIX times spoken of as “pedestated” like a statue; elsewhere she is “majestic and statue-like” of “marble quietude,” and of “marble passiveness of brow.” Chillingworth is said to have made her a “marble image of happiness. Before she came to Dimmesdale, she had “a marble coldness.” She is also inclined to impart artistic shapes to things. The scarlet letter that she wears is ‘gorgeous’, ‘luxuriant’ and “artistically done with” an elaborate embroidery”. The clothes she makes for Pearl are of a “fanciful, fantastic ingenuity.”

Dimmesdale, the clergyman, represents religion. He is a “heavy ordained apostle,” an “angel” in speech and action, a ‘miracle of holiness” and “of whitest sanctity.” He is constantly associated with the white colour, embodying holiness. He is a kind of lamp whose light is the word of God he fasts and prays to “keep the grossity of the earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp.”

Pearl is a symbol of Nature. She grows up in the lap of Nature, away from the community and other children. As a “natural child,” Pearl, rejecting the companionship of human children, became intimate with growing things. She plays in tide pools with horse-shoe crabs and seaweed. In the forest scenes, she is garlanded with wild flowers and she moves among wild animals without alarming them. In fact, “she ran and looked the wild Indian in the face, and he grew conscious of a nature wilder than his own” (p.279). She plays with her reflected image in a pool of water and seeks a passage for herself with its sphere of impalpable centre and unattainable sky” as though she would become one with the elements.” The truth seems to be “that the mother forest and these wild things which it nourished all recognised a kindred wildness in the human child.” (p. 233) She is also described in terms of nature imagery She is seen as a bird of scarlet plumage,” “tropical,” a “seabird,” a “humming bird.” She has a “bird like voice,” and flies “like a bird.” She is also compared to flowers, the Northern Lights, the day, a brook, a deer, a butterfly and sea foam sparring natural phenomena, vegetation and animal kingdom.

At the symbolic level, their interactions become highly meaningful. Thus Hester leads Dimmesdale away from his religious duties and diverts him from the path of Puritan righteousness, indicating that art secularized religion. Their union results in Pearl the adulterous child. Suggesting that the

product of art, religion is invariably illegitimate. It is also closer to art and bears no affinity to religion as Pearl resembles Hester and not Dimmesdale. The creative powers dominate over the redemptive powers.

Art and Science are opposed to each other like Hester and Chillingworth. Their union is barren and sterile like this marriage. This mating of a rose with winter symbolizes the contrast between the youth and animation of art and the cold analytical nature of science, the vital, life-giving nature of art and the life-destroying thrust of science

Science is quite destructive for religion. It dissects it, analyzes it and breaks it into fragments just as Dimmesdale is analyzed, cut and laid threadbare by Chillingworth in his attempt to violate “in cold blood the sanctity of a human heart.” (p. 222)

2.2.2 Id, Ego and Superego

Pearl, Hester and Dimmesdale respectively symbolize the well-known Freudian systems of the “Id,” “Ego” and “Superego.” As Freud mentions in his essay “The Structure of the Unconscious,” the Id “has no organisation and no unified will.” It is the “biological” part of the personality, the seat of the instincts and is governed by the “pleasure principle.” P&I with her wild, impulsive, amoral nature is animated by her id. As the novelist writes, “The child could not be made amenable to rules.” (p. 103).

In contrast, the Ego is operated by the “reality principle.” It is in touch with the “real world” and as Freud says, “it interpolates between desire and action the procrastinating factor of thought.” It “stands for reason and circumspection.” It also reconciles the demands of the id and the superego. Hester embodies the ego. She is rational, practical and able to master the external reality. She also serves as a bridge between Pearl, the id and Dimmesdale, the superego.

The Superego represents the social and moral side of personality and it is governed by the perfection principle. As the seat of our conscience, it engenders our feelings of guilt and inferiority. As Freud says, the “severe Superego holds up certain norms of behaviour, without regard to any difficulties coming from the id and the external world.” Dimmesdale, as the shepherd of the flock, as the earnest Minister of the community represents the Superego. He has a severe conscience which constantly breeds the feeling of guilt in him for his act of moral transgression in committing adultery with Hester. His superego incessantly punishes him in “the drama of guilt and sorrow.”

2.2.3 Heart, Soul and Mind

Hester represents the heart, the seat of emotions and feelings. She is always the kindly spirit, instinctively feeling for and helping people, not only Dimmesdale, but even those who spurn her and ridicule her. As the angel of mercy she embodies the spontaneous sympathies of the heart.

Dimmesdale the man of religion symbolizes the Soul. Not only does he care for the souls of others but his own soul is tormented by his pangs of conscience.

Chillingworth is primarily governed by his mind. His cold, calculating, scheming nature revealed in a gruesome manner in his attempt to analyze and dissect Dimmesdale, indicates clearly that he stands for the mind. Bereft of a feeling heart and unconcerned for the damnation of his soul, he is a narrowly “cerebral” personality.

2.3 HESTER

Hester within limits resembles several literary figures and also the literary and philosophical movements of the period. She can be seen as a transcendentalist who rejects both society and religion. She shows her allegiance to her community by staying on and accepting her position as an outcast but at the same time she defies the narrow moral code of the Puritans by “fantastically” decorating the scarlet letter with “wild and picturesque peculiarity” and even flaunting it.

Her physical and moral isolation also indicates streaks of transcendentalism in practice like Thoreau’s stay near the Walden Pond. Her isolation is also quite Romantic. Like Wordsworth, she can be perceived as a Romantic individualist enjoying retirement and contemplation in the lap of nature away from the community. If we look at her as a moral rebel, she comes close to the romantic rebel like Byron or Shelley. “The World’s law was no Jaw for her own mind.” Her emancipation from the Puritan ideas is indicated quite distinctly. “She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the Scarlet Letter. In her lonesome cottage, by the seashore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England: shadowy guests that would have been as perilous as demons to their environment could they have been so much as knocking aloud at her door” (p. 187). Her giving “all to love” also has a romantic streak about it. Her temperament also has a romantic intensity in her passion: her state of excitement, bordering on frenzy, in the prison after her first exposure to the crowd - her “moral agony” reflected in the convulsions that have seized the child her alternation of despair and defiance all reinforce this view.

Her “literary” ancestors include Eve and the Virgin. She bears a general resemblance to Milton’s Eve. Her nobility, her devotion to her lover and her fall parallel Eve’s. On the other hand, in her first “exposure” on the scaffold, Hester, holding her child is linked to the many portraits of Madonna and her Child. “With the infant on her bosom, an object to remind him [a “Rapist”] of the Image of Divine Maternity.” (p. 65) Her source can be found in the author’s own “Endicott and the Red Cross” (1837) which also had a beautiful young woman” whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown and even her children knew what the letter signified. She also had embroidered the letter in “scarlet cloth with golden thread and the nicest art of needlework.”

Hester grows as a person, and Hawthorne shows her spiritual development. She learns’ through years of contemplation that she must willingly adjust her life to the requirements of nature and even society. This change is

also recognized and registered by her community. Her initial image as a “fallen woman” gives way to a new image as an angel of mercy. Years of self-denial and toleration of humiliation coupled with speculation on the possibility of “a new morality” in the “new world” enable her to achieve spiritual greatness. Early in the novel, Hawthorne had said of her, “she had in her nature a rich voluptuous Oriental characteristic.” (p. 95). Later “her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling to thought.” (p. 186). She finds her fulfillment across the Atlantic: She becomes “the object of love and Interest - with some inhabitant of another land,” (p. 237) but she returns and resumes of her own free will” the Scarlet Letter, the symbol of Sin and penance which ceases to be a “stigma” and is looked upon with “awe” and “reverence.”

2.4 DIMMESDALE

Unlike Hester, Dimmesdale spiritually belongs to his age. His sermons embody the ideals and the values of the Puritan society, and his moral transgressions never lead him to question the ethical and theological values which inform his community. For him there cannot be an escape to Europe as there was one for Hester and Pearl. He was happier dying on the scaffold than sailing to Europe. He naturally asks Hester before his death, “Is not this better than what we dreamed of in the forest.” (p. 288). It is his firm commitment to the Puritan ethos which breeds his acute anguish at his moral transgression.

Indeed, Dimmesdale’s acute mental and even physical anguish far exceed anyone else’s. Even before he met Chillingworth, he was in terrible health. He already has a habit of putting his hand over her heart. This would anyway indicate that he is in pain and agony, but the gesture gathers added meaning from the fact that his hand lies at a place similar to the one where Hester’s Scarlet Letter hangs. What Chillingworth sees there must again indicate a sign of adultery, a proof of his being the lover of Hester at the end of his life when he tears the cloth off his breast people see the letter itself there. “Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER - the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne - imprinted in the flesh.” (p.293). Much earlier, we are told “And now through the chamber which these spectral thoughts had made so ghastly, gilded Hester Prynne, leading along little Pearl in her scarlet garb, and pointing her forefingers, first at the scarlet letter on her bosom, and then at the clergyman’s own breast.” (p. 165). His tremulousness also is psychosomatic, reflecting the state of his shaky and disturbed mind.

“Seven long years” after Hester ascended the scaffold Dimmesdale stands on it in the middle of the night and enters the final phase of his agony that ends with his death on the very same scaffold after his sublime speech. On his first visit there, “he shrieked aloud” in sheer anguish, but the townspeople did not come. He indulged in “constant introspection wherewith he tortured but could not purify himself.” (p. 164). His sickened mind leads him to see visions. When a meteor flashes, he sees the letter A in the sky. Hawthorne writes, ‘We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister looking upward to the Zenith, beheld there the

appearance of an immense letter, - the letter A. - marked out in lines of dull red light.” (p. 176).

Dimmesdale is only temporarily buoyed up by Hester’s plans for escape from his community. For a moment, he becomes even sacrilegious in his defiance of the Puritan ethical code that has engendered all her torture. On the way back from the forest, he finds everything changed and feels that he himself is a new man now. He is tempted to be flippant, unholy and blasphemous in his dealings with several persons but he controls himself. However, his Puritan conscience gets the better of itself on the Election Day.

Dimmesdale tends to blame Chillingworth for his tortures, but it is his own guilty conscience that makes him so vulnerable to the machinations of the leech. When Hester tells him the identity of Roger Chillingworth, he cries out, “Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!” (p. 221). He soon says of “that old man” that “He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart.”(p. 222). However the fact remains that his heart with its guilty secret is easy to violate. Unlike Hester, he regards his adultery with her as definitely wrong and sinful. After he decides to run away with Hester, we are told, “Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself, with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin.” (p. 253).

In Dimmesdale’s personal destiny, his position as a Minister of the community is a decisive factor. The crucial commission of adultery in itself stems from his position as the Pastor. It IS this which makes exacting demands upon him, and it is also the factor that draws a person like Hester close to him. It is because he occupies such an exalted position that he cannot easily confess his moral transgression and it is also for the same reason that his guilty secret is magnified manifold. As the shepherd of the flock, he is expected to inspire and lead his congregation, but his guilt isolated him from his community, rupturing the natural bond that should exist there. It is only in his last moment after he makes his confession that he returns properly to the fold of the community he is supposed to lead and inspire. Even as it superficially alienates from his flock and makes escape a superfluity, in a larger sense it brings him back from his spiritual and mental isolation.

2.5 CHILLINGWORTH

Chillingworth is basically a pathological study of revenge. Totally forgetting the well-known dictum that it is for God, not for man to judge others, he plans his revenge on Dimmesdale in cold blood and in the process becomes a friend. As a physician he is expected to nurture and nourish the body of Dimmesdale, but instead he saps all the strength and peace out of his patient. Many people regard from the beginning this leech as an emissary of the Devil.

The novelist soon corroborates this impression: “sometimes, a light glimmered out of the physician’s eyes, burning blue and ominous, like the reflection of a furnace, or let us say, like one of those gleams of ghostly fire

that darted from Bunyan's awful door-way in the hell-side and quivered on the Pilgrim's face." (p. 146). When he enters Dimmesdale's room and discovers the letter "A" on his breast, he is as "Satan comforts himself when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom." (p. 157). When Hester met him, "there came a glare of red light out of his eyes." (p. 152). The novelist comments "Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office." (p. 153). He calls himself a "fiend." His "study of revenge" also parallels that of Milton's Satan. He also resembles Mephistopheles in *Faust* in so far as his assault on the spiritual defence of Dimmesdale is aimed at alienating him from God and winning him for the Kingdom of the Devil. At the same time, he is like Faust, a scholar rejecting the basic spiritual values and damning himself in his quest for power.

Again, Chillingworth was not "badness incarnate but goodness perverted" like Milton's Satan. When Hester's affections were alienated from him, his thwarted love turned to hate. He realizes that what he expected from Hester was not reasonable. He tells her, "Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed the budding youth with a false and unnatural relation with my decay." Yet, he is angry at the scheme of things which has cheated his hope of domestic bliss and felicity. In trying to get even with the man, he thinks has wronged him, he becomes worse Dimmesdale justifiably tells him before his death, "Thou too hast deeply sinned!" (p. 291)

His physical appearance indicates his evil tendencies in more ways than one. The gradual growth of his hump symbolizes the perversion of his character. The appearance is also described in terms of imagery we associate with evil in general and the Devil in particular. When he first recognized Hester on the scaffold, "a writhing horror, twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them." (p. 70).

Vis-a-vis Dimmesdale, Chillingworth is a physician in both positive and negative ways. As an examiner of the priest's guilt, he is a "leech draining his patient of nerve, will and physical energy" but he is also the healer. Only by knowing, confronting him, face to face can Dimmesdale grow morally. Only then can the physician say, "Thou hast escaped me!" (p. 291).

2.6 PEARL

Pearl is the Scarlet Letter incarnate. She stands for the "rank luxuriance of guilty passion." In the Governor's hall, she is described as the scarlet letter in another form, the scarlet letter endowed with life (p. 115). Later we are told, "Pearl had been offered to the world, these seven years past, as the living hieroglyphic in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide - all written in this symbol." (p. 235). The novelist refers to her as "Pearl, who was the gem on her mother's unquiet bosom." (p. 260). She had "no principle of being" save "the freedom of a broken law." As the "visible embodiment of truth about the particular sin," she becomes "by extension the universal truth about the original sin."

At the same time, she had concrete sources. She was based on Hawthorne's own daughter Una. She also, "in her awareness of the passions around her" resembles Mamillius in Shakespeare's play *Winter's Tale* who dies of "thoughts high for one so tender." Her other source however is symbolic. Hester regards her as the Pearl "of great price". In the Bible theologians have often interpreted this pearl as Christ himself, but it has also been regarded as "life eternal or beatitude. She was purchased with all she (Hester) had - her mother's only treasure." (p. 101) Hawthorne comments, "the infant was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden." (p. 102). She is a great beauty and is wonderfully attired.

Nevertheless, as Pearl has inherited sin, she is seen by many citizens as a child of the Devil. Even Hester has her moments of doubt. She wonders "whether Pearl was a human child. She seemed rather an *airy* sprite" (p. 104). When the child looks at the scarlet letter, she has a "peculiar smile" and "odd expressions of the eyes." Once "this freakish, elfish cast came into the child's eyes" and Hester felt: "It was as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just then peeped forth in mockery." (p. 110). 'Indeed, some of the neighbours "had given out that poor little Pearl was a demon offspring." (p. 112).

Much later on the day of the election, Mistress Hibbins tells Pearl, "they say, child, thou art of the lineage of the Prince of the Air." (p. 276).

Pearl also represents the youth and happiness that Hester has lost forever. This is presented very effectively in symbolic terms when they take their forest walk. As they go through the dark forest, the light always evades Hester, but Pearl is able to run and catch the sunshine.

Pearl is both a typical child and an unusual baby. She has the energy and vivacity of a child, but her isolation from other children sets her apart; she is not a complete child. However, when Dimmesdale recognizes her as his daughter, "she is swept into the community of men." Now she is governed by the laws of society and prepares for her future life as a "complete" woman.

Exercise I

1. Write a note on the Transcendental and Romantic elements in the personality of Hester

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2. Analyse the mental anguish of Dimmesdale.

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3. Why does Dimmesdale suffer more than Hester?

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4. What makes Chillingworth a greater sinner than Hester or Dimmesdale?

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5. Between Pearl and Chillingworth, who is closer to the Devil and why?

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have seen that

Chillingworth represents science, Hester art, Dimmesdale religion and Pearl nature.

Pearl, Hester and Dimmesdale respectively symbolize “Id,” “Ego” and “Superego.”

Hester stands for heart, Dimmesdale for soul and Chillingworth for mind.

We have then looked at the other salient features of the character of Hester including her sources and literary predecessors, and her growth.

We have seen Dimmesdale as an anguished being, as a person and at the point of death.

Our discussion of Chillingworth has concentrated on his Satanic personality and the nature of the evil in him.

We have considered Pearl as an emblem of Hester’s sin, as an “inhuman” being and finally as a child.

Note

- (1) In this Block, all the page numbers are to the following edition:
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Random House, 1950)
- (2) The suggested reading is common to all the units in this Block and provided at the end of the last unit.

2.8 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Ref. to 2.3

Ref. to 2.4

Ref. to 2.3 and 2.4

Ref. to 2.5

Ref. to 2.6 and 2.5



UNIT 3 THE SCARLET LETTER : THEMES AND THEIR EXPRESSION THROUGH IMAGERY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Hawthorne's Engagement with Puritans and Puritanism
- 3.3 The Organic and the Mechanical
- 3.4 Other Recurrent Images
- 3.5 Let us Sum Up
- 3.6 Answers to Exercises

3.0 OBJECTIVES

Whereas in the last unit we examined certain themes in relation to the characters who embody them, here we focus on (other) themes as aspects of Hawthorne's moral vision. Since our novelist has woven a complex network of imagery to embody not only features of characters but also ingredients of his vision, we will also see how he uses his images to represent his worldview or to convey the meaning of the novel. This unit will enable you to comprehend what Hawthorne is trying to say in this work and how a set of images serve as effective instruments for his ideas.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we analyse at the outset Hawthorne's attitude towards Puritans and Puritanism, his treatment of the motif of adultery, the Puritan philosophy regarding the position of women and then we observe the organic-mechanical antithesis in the work. The other recurrent images which will be examined at length are those of mirrors, colours, light and shade, the heart, geometrical forms and patterns and journeys. This unit will complete our discussion of the "content" or the "meaning" of the novel and its expression through imagery.

3.2 HAWTHORNE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH PURITANS AND PURITANISM

Hawthorne has examined the Puritan tradition of New England- in the novel. Although he questioned it and challenged some of its tenets, he could not entirely free himself of its

At the outset, we should mention a rather interesting essay by Nina Baym. “Passion and Authority in *The Scarlet Letter*” published in *Nineteenth Century Literature* which argues that “Dimmesdale is a seriously distorted Puritan, and the settlement is distorted in this manner” because “Puritan religion has been replaced by nineteenth century sentimental piety.” She refers rather persuasively to the fact that God is not a pervasive presence in the novel. However, in the analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* in this unit, we are concerned not with the theology but the ethics, particularly the sexual ethics of the Puritan community which is not tangibly altered by the novelist.

Although, as Baym points out, the novelist does not directly refer to the Original Sin, he is often preoccupied with the sinfulness of man. For him, the crucial sin is self-centeredness. Hester attains a high moral stature by virtue of her selfless service to others. One sin however that exceeds self-centeredness in its undesirability and viciousness is “intellectual pride”. He also believed firmly in retribution. The guilty, he thought, would be punished one day if only by the knowledge of their sins. Dimmesdale cannot escape the inevitable moment of reckoning. Thus in his plot. Hawthorne laid more stress on sin and retribution than on reformation through Divine Grace Like a Calvinist, he could believe in predestination, but also like a Roman Catholic, he put his faith in Absolution and confession.



The Market Place

An important aspect of Hawthorne’s concern with sin is the theme of Fall, which is manifested here in the adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale. How does Hawthorne conceive adultery? For him, is it a matter of the immortal soul as Van Doren feels or merely of the civil order? When Hester first emerges from the goal with a baby three months old, the child is seen as a “token of her shame” (p. 61). This basically implies that the consequences of adultery are mainly social. However, her decision to stay on in New

England and suffer the yoke of social ignominy implies an acceptance of the social judgment on her. She could easily have left this New World and gone to the old as she plans to do much later and actually does after Dimmesdale's death. Notwithstanding the fact that her decision may have resulted from the fact that she can no longer continue the old relationship, it implies a desire for penance on her part. Hawthorne's next crucial statement again underlines the stigma flowing from her act without exactly defining the social or the religious nature of her transgression, "it had made a mark upon her more intolerable to a woman's heart than that which branded the brow of Cain" (pp. 95-66). However, he soon states his position more unequivocally. "She knew that her deed had been evil" (p. 101). The other "sinner" Dimmesdale has been from the outset aware that his act of adultery has disturbed the moral order of the universe. That obviously accounts for the depth and the intensity of his guilt. When the novelist says, "Here was the iron link of mutual crime, which neither he nor she could break" (pp. 181-82), he does not unambiguously state that their transgression was a matter of the immortal soul, but he does imply that it was something more than a mere violation of a social code. Hester and Dimmesdale may agree in their meeting at the brookside, "what we did had a consecration of its own". (p. 222). But we cannot entirely disregard R.W.B. Lewis's statement in *The American Adam*, "Hester's deed appears as a disturbance of the moral structure of the universe."

Hawthorne's treatment of adultery differs radically from that of his great Russian parallel Tolstoy's *Anna Karenna*. Whereas Tolstoy shows the conflict between the desires of the flesh and the conventional morality in its fullness, Hawthorne as Van Doren points out, leaves the flesh unsung. The bliss of sensual gratification is hardly alluded to. Although the French novelist, distances himself significantly from Emma when narrating her affairs with Rodolphe and Leon in *Madame Bovary*, she herself initially regards her erotic life with them as a glorious experience. In contrast Hester's love life with Dimmesdale is never described - her passion is entirely a matter of the past.

Hester's predicament is also seen as representative of the inferior status of women in society, especially in Puritan society. As he talks of "the whole race of womanhood," Hawthorne asks, "Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?" (p. 188). He goes on to comment, "Thus the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (p. 188). Although she seeks no solution for her own problem, her mind "still ranges the universe" for "some cure for the injustice her sex inherits"

One can conclude with Robert Spiller that Hawthorne's attitude towards his Puritan material was "critical" and "skeptical" but within limits. He can afford not taking sides partly because his "central theme is not sin as a theological problem but the psychological effect of the conviction of sin" on the lives of the early Puritan settlers. His aim is to "reveal" rather than "resolve" the dilemmas of his creations.

3.3 THE ORGANIC AND THE MECHANICAL

An important conflict that has developed in the book the organic mechanical antithesis”, the struggle between the possible organic growth of the individual and the mechanical restrictions imposed upon it by the Puritan Society. It is clearly introduced in the opening chapter as the prison door with its many spikes and heavy iron work; its “beetle browed and gloomy front” is contrasted with “a wild rose-bush”, which recalls the wildness of America before the arrival of the settlers. “The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken-door” made the prison clearly an “ugly edifice”, but immediately outside was “a grass-plot. much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation” (pp. 55-56) Standing with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door” are the local Puritans with faces “petrified” in “grim rigidity”. Hester bears the “heavy weight,” the “leaden infliction” of eyes lowering upon her beneath the brims of “steeple-crowned” hats. Women are “iron-visaged”. The scaffold, suitably placed near the market place is “a portion of penal machine”. The pillory above it is an “ugly engine” which represents the crushing grip of the Puritan society upon its individual members.

Outside this repressive society are Pearl, the Indians and the sailors. Pearl, not amenable to rules, is organic like the rose bush. She is a being “whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder”. In fact, the child perversely informs John Wilson at the Governor’s place that her mother found her in the rosebush, that she “had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison-door” (p. 126). She decorates her hair with flowers which are said to become her perfectly. She is reflected in the pool in her “adornment of flowers”. Her image has the glory of a “bright flower” and she represents the “naturalness” and the beauty of these flowers. At the New England holiday, at the end, one can distinctly see the Indians and the sailors stand out from the Puritan society. “A party of Indians stood apart”. However “nor wild as were these painted barbarians, were they the wildest feature of the scene. This distinction could more justly be claimed by some mariners.... They were rough-looking desperados ... They transgressed, without fear or scruple, the rules of behaviour that were binding on all others” (p. 265).

Hester herself is torn between Pearl, the lawbreaker and Dimmesdale, the “conformist”, who needs a faith “supporting while it confined him within its iron framework”. The description of her visit to the Governor is heightened by the organic-mechanical antithesis. Hester herself is frequently associated with normal flowers and the scarlet letter attracts flowers Governor Bellingham’s mansion has “stucco in which fragments of broken glass are plentifully intermixed” and is “further decorated with strange and seemingly cabalistic figures and diagrams”. This mechanical exterior is matched by “the iron hammer that hung at the portal” (p. 117) and the heterogeneous furnishings within the gilded volumes and the artificial oaken flowers carved on the furniture. As a “mechanical” society distorts and exaggerates individual observation, so the suit of mail of most modern date magnifies the scarlet letter and makes Pearl look like an imp.

This mechanical mansion contrasts with the organic sea and the forest which now sustain Hester and inspire her to exhort Dimmesdale to action in terms reminiscent of Hawthorne's contemporary Emerson of "Self Reliance": "Exchange the false life of thine for a true one" The revival of their love is echoed by the sympathy of the organic nature: "each green leaf is gladdened and the yellow fallen leaves are transmuted to gold." In the forest Hester revolts not only against civic order but also against the Church and the Puritan Sexual Code. The forest setting stirs Dimmesdale, who has no association with growing things, enough to impel him to almost flout all the Puritan Codes of behaviour and etiquette. He is tempted to be flippant and unholy and blasphemous in his dealings with several persons, but with effort, he controls himself. The forest, at the same time, is seen to possess moral wilderness which Dimmesdale's meeting Mistress Hibbins there well illustrates as this embodiment of evil recognizes "a secret intimacy of connection" with the Pastor.



The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

There is also a contrast between flowers and weeds. Weeds are associated with moral evil in general and with Chillingworth in particular. Chillingworth is connected with "blackweeds" that have sprung up out of a buried heart with "vegetable wickedness". The Puritan community also is linked with weeds and black flowers. The "weeds" that Pearl attacks are Puritan children. Weeds and black flowers are, on several occasions, allied even with Hester. She suggests to Dimmesdale that they let the "black flower" of their love "blossom as it may".

3.4 OTHER RECURRENT IMAGES

The vision of Hawthorne is embodied in an intricate network of symbolism. As we have seen in the unit the main characters all have symbolic dimensions and they represent various things and concepts-Now we can observe how the symbols encapsulate different motifs and themes in the novel.

3.4.1

Thus Hawthorne filled his novel (and many of his short stories) with a wealth of mirrors. He adorned his halls and landscapes with looking glasses, burnished shields, pools, anything that could reflect the human form. At the Governor's mansion Hester looks at herself in the gleaming mirror at Pearl's request. "Owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it" (p.120). Here the convex mirror represents that distorted social perspective in which Hester can see herself only as an adulterous sinner. When Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest, Pearl plays by the brook and looks at her reflection. "This image, so nearly identified with the living Pearl, seemed to communicate somewhat of its own shadowy and intangible quality to the child herself (p.237)." In the brook beneath stood another child - another and the same - with likewise its ray of golden light" (p.237) Pearl points her hands towards the mother's breast which is now bereft of the scarlet letter. "And beneath, in the mirror of the brook, there was the flower-girdled and sunny image of little Pearl, pointing her small forefinger too" (p.238). When Pearl stamps her foot in response to her mother's beckoning to her. "In the brook, again was the fantastic beauty of the image, with its reflected frown, its pointed finger, and imperious gesture, giving emphasis to the aspect of little Pearl" (p.239). This description, continued at some length, considerably heightens and accentuates the gestures and response of Pearl. Moreover, whereas the mirror at the Governor's palace distorts the picture of Hester and shows her as she is seen by the Puritans, the natural mirrors like water tell the truth, especially the truth of the heart.

3.4.2

Other seminal visual images relate to colours and light and shade. Thus the novel uses dark colours in the beginning. Wilson's light is contrasted with Chillingworth's blackness. The gray of Hester's dress and the Puritan hats reflect the drabness of Puritan clothing. The red colour has a variety of associations. It suggests roses and carnality- "the scarlet woman" for example Pearl is dressed in red, Hester's letter is red, the bloom on healthy cheeks is red and the flow in Chillingworth's eyes is perceived as red emanating from the fires of Hell. In general the darker colours have negative associations and they often suggest evil. Thus Wilson, a sympathetic character has "white" hair and coloured ("gray") eyes but in contrast Governor Bellingham has a "dark" feather and a "black tunic". Dimmesdale has "white" hair and "brown" melancholy eyes but his black dress represents his unhappy frame of mind. In the chapter, "The Interior of a Heart", there are twenty two colour images, mostly black and white which show Dimmesdale, wavering between good (white) and evil (black). He is never associated with light and bright colours such as green and yellow and red. In contrast the chapter "Hester at Her Needle" has eighteen colour images, eleven of them red and the rest black, dark and white. Hester stands in an ambiguous position between Chillingworth and the white maidens as Dimmesdale does between Chillingworth and Wilson, but she differs from

him in her relation to the heart. Pearl in contrast creates a green letter A to wear on her own bosom. In Chapter XXI Hawthorne provides us with a fine mosaic of colours. Hester was clad in a garment of coarse gray cloth against which stood out “the scarlet letter” (p.258). This contrasts with the bright dress of Pearl. The “general tint” of “human life in the market place” was “the sad gray, brown, or black of the English emigrants but “enlivened by some diversity of hue”(p.265). There is “A party of Indians- in their savage finery of curiously embroidered deer-skin robes, wampum-belts, and yellow ochre, and feathers” (p.265). The “black cloaks” of the Puritan elders contrast with the “showy and gallant figure” of the commander of the vessel. “He wore a profusion of ribbons on his garment, and gold lace of his hat, which was also encircled by a gold chain, and surmounted with a feather”(p.266) Another deviant from the path of sombre righteousness of the Puritans, Mistress Hibbins, an emissary of the Devil, is “arrayed in great magnificence, with a triple ruff, embroidered stomacher, a gown of rich velvet and a gold-header cane” (p.274 Ch XXII). Thus all the colours are meaningful and suggestive.

Light and shade like brightness and darkness evince considerable symbolic richness. Thus sunlight suggests in ample measure joy, truth and health. Dimmesdale, whose failure to tell the truth, accounts for his ailment, walks by choice in “shadowy” bypaths. Hester’s candour and vitality are in accord with glints of sunlights in her hair When she throws *the scarlet letter* away, “forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest” indicating her cheerfulness and joy (p.23 1). The circle of “radiance” around Pearl is emblematic of her animation and life. The sunshine that often accompanies her, also represents her sunny and cheerful nature. Thus in chapter XVI, as Pearl and Hester go through the dark forest walk, the light always evades Hester, but Pearl is able to run and catch the sunshine. In contrast, Chillingworth is enveloped in darkness, except for the reddish glow in the eyes. The exposure of Hester’s adultery is in broad daylight with “the hot mid-way Sun burning down upon her face and lighting up its shame”. In Chapter XII, the darkness of the “obscure” night representing the gloom in Dimmesdale’s hearts pierced by the arrival of Rev Wilson, radiant with the “distant shine of the celestial city” offering him the possibility of a way out of misery through an open confession. Much later, when Dimmesdale actually gathered enough courage to make a public confession, he along with Hester and Pearl ascended the scaffold In the bright light of the sun. A crucial scene that leads up this confession. The forest scene (Chapters XVIII) similarly plays upon the imagery of sunlight and darkness. Hester and Dimmesdale meet in “the gloom of this dark forest”, but when they decide to escape from this community and Hester symbolically flings her scarlet letter away, “All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdened each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees”(232)

Now, these images of light and darkness are both literal and symbolic and also “mixed” Thus expressions like “the gloomy jail”, “iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine” have both literal and figurative meanings as Hester is taken from the darkness of the jail into the sunshine outside and her

“iniquity” is made public there. Purely figurative examples are “his face darkened with some powerful emotion”; the jail is the “black flower of civilized society” the tale has a “darkening close”; Rev Wilson speaks to Hester of the “blackness” of her sin. In contrast, the grayness of the hat and the “weather stains” the prison are more literal than narrative.

3.4.3

Another important image in the novel is that of the heart. The heart in Hawthorne is often compared to a dungeon or to a cavern or a tomb. The heart is a chamber in which Dimmesdale keeps his vigil in utter darkness and which Chillingworth enters. The heart is a place where the devil is most apt to set his mark. The seminal chapter between the minister and the physician “The Leech and his Patient” begins and ends in heart imagery. “He now dug into the poor clergyman’s heart, like a miner searching for gold; or rather, like a sexton delving into a grave” (p. 146). It ends with Chillingworth looking directly at Dimmesdale’s heart inside his vestment. However, the most extended heart image is the forest scene. The forest in which Hester and Pearl take their walk has all the attributes common to natural human hearts. It is black, mysterious, dismal, dim, gloomy, shadowy, obscure and dreary. It is thought by the public to be the meeting place of Satan and his accomplices. It has in its depth a stream which as it mirrors the truth whispers “tales out of the heart of the old forest” .When Hester and Dimmesdale decide to follow the dictates of their hearts and, escaping man’s law, live by nature, then “the wood’s heart of mystery” becomes a “mystery of joy” and sunshine replaces the gloom on the spot.

3.4.4

The novel is also built around a set of geometrical forms and patterns. The main effect of the circle or the chain image is to decrease or qualify Hester’s guilt and increase the guilt of the Puritan people and community. The letter, which also serves as a testament of the Puritan’s lack of charity, “had the effect of ... enclosing her in a sphere by herself. “They had created «a sort of magic circle» around her. She is cast away like «the fragments of a broken chain». As she breaks the connection in the «electric chain» of mutual sympathy and interdependence, she enters the «magic circle of ignominy». Images of height suggest aspiration piety or loftiness of purpose, and the twisted suggest evil. Thus the «steeple-crowned» hats of the Puritans embody lofty aspirations and devotion to their religious duty Dimmesdale’s height embodies the nobility of his spirit whereas Chillingworth is «low». «twisted» and «deformed» reflecting his mean, dwarfed and perverted personality and outlook.

3.4.5

Another important image in the novel is that of journeys. In fact the novel begins with Hester’s ritual journey from the prison to the scaffold and ends with Dimmesdale’s formal journey from the Governor’s palace to the meeting house. Whereas Hester’s journey leads to her separation and exile, Dimmesdale’s brings about his reunion with society and the end of a spiritual exile. Between these two symbolic journeys, there are many other

journeys with some symbolic overtones such as Hester's forest walk in which she confronts Dimmesdale. The idea of a journey also occurs in the passages of narration and description as a metaphor. Thus Hester's life is a "track along which she had been treading since her early infancy." The scene of her guilt is "the pathway that had been so fatal". Her conduct makes people think that she has returned to the "path" of virtue. Dimmesdale is "at a loss in the pathway of human existence": he is "a poor pilgrim, on his dreary and desert path." Pearl is a "stumbling block" in Hester's "path". Chillingworth's probing intellect "had now a sufficiently plain path before it" Hawthorne thus emulates Bunyan in comparing life to a journey.

Hawthorne has woven in the novel a rich and intricate tapestry of symbols and images imparting considerable depth and power to the literary expression of his vision.

Exercise I

1. Does Hawthorne accept the moral ideas of Puritans especially regarding adultery?

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2. How does Hawthorne present the organic - mechanical contrast in the novel?

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3. Write a note on the «visual» imagery in the novel, especially the images of light and darkness.

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4. Examine Hawthorne's use of some of the recurrent images in especially those of geometrical patterns and journeys.

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen that

- *The Scarlet Letter* deals with the theme of sin and retribution in a Puritan context, although Hawthorne's picture of the Puritans is not very accurate. He regards adultery as an act of moral transgression.
- In the work, the organic growth of individuals is thwarted by the mechanical restrictions of the society.
- Plain mirrors "made" of various objects reflect truth whereas a convex mirror shows distortion of truth by Puritan Society.
- Different colours have symbolic associations. Light represents joy, goodness and truth, whereas darkness stands for misery, evil and falsehood.
- The human heart is compared to a variety of things.
- Geometrical patterns indicate the situations of characters and the society.
- Journeys are significant in the work. They represent metaphorically the life of the spirit.

3.6 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

1. Ref. to 3.2
2. Ref. to 3.3
3. Ref. to 3.1.1 and 3.4.2
4. Ref. to 3.4

UNIT 4 THE SCARLET LETTER - STRUCTURE, NARRATIVE STYLE AND SPECIAL FEATURES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Structure of the Novel
- 4.3 The Relevance of “The Custom House”
- 4.4 The Narrative Technique and Point of View
- 4.5 The Genre of *The Scarlet Letter*
- 4.6 Special Features of *The Scarlet Letter* and Other Similar Novels
- 4.7 Let us Sum Up
- 4.8 Suggested Readings
- 4.9 Answers to Exercises

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit intends to give you an insight into the structure of the novel – the way in which the work is organized – with special reference to the Custom House section and its technique of narration. The unit will help you understand the relationship between different parts of the novel, the principle of division, the link between the Custom House section and the main story, the role of a personalized narrator and the combination of the elements of “showing” and “telling”.

In addition we try to define the kind of work *The Scarlet Letter* is. We examine whether it is a “pure” novel or a romance. We consider its special features as fiction and think of novels it can be compared with. The questions and the bibliography will round off the entire block on *The Scarlet Letter*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we initially consider two principles of division in the novel: the placing of the Scaffold Scenes and the Shift in the “activating agent” of the action. Then we briefly compare the “epic” format of the structure of the novel. Many motifs in the “Custom House” will be seen as relevant to the novel itself. We finally look at the relationship between the narrator, the original manuscript and the reader and the combination of the dramatic and the descriptive in the novel. The unit will enable you thus to appreciate the “form” of *The Scarlet Letter*.

We shall also define the “sub-genre” of *The Scarlet Letter* and analyse, partly in the light of Hawthorne’s own distinction between Novel and Romance, the elements of “Romance” and “pure Novel” which are ingrained in the work. Then we shall examine certain features special to the work: the historical setting, the “feminist” angle and the theme of adultery. We see which major novels of the Nineteenth Century have similar

The reading list at the end contains suggestions for further reading. By the time you finish reading this unit, you should have looked at *The Scarlet Letter* from every important angle and you should be familiar with both the “content” and the “form” of the novel. We hope that you will read similar works on your own in future.

4.2 THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

The Scarlet Letter is a meticulously constructed novel with a neat organisation. To begin with the major parts of the novel, we can discern two basic principles of division: the scaffold scenes as the dividing lines and the division based on the nature of the interaction among the characters and the agents of the action.

The novel is built around the scaffold in the sense that the chapters two, twelve and twenty three, in which Hester, Dimmesdale and both along with Pearl respectively mount it, constitute the turning points in the story. The twelfth chapter assumes great significance also because it clearly separates the first part of the novel from the second. Before that neither Chillingworth nor the reader is certain that Pearl is the child of Dimmesdale. As the scaffold is located in the market place of Boston, Hester standing there undoubtedly gets the maximum share of social ignominy. In contrast, the last three chapters culminate in Dimmesdale’s triumph over Chillingworth. These two clusters of chapters are separated from the rest of the novel not only by their locale but also by their function. In contrast, chapters four to eight after Hester’s interview with Chillingworth in the prison, deal with Pearl and Hester and describe the latter’s struggle in the community. The chapters nine, ten and eleven show Chillingworth winning the Minister’s confidence and unearthing the secret of his guilty heart. Chapters thirteen, fourteen and fifteen deal again with Hester and Pearl, revealing the former’s improved condition within the community and within herself. Even her crucial meeting with Chillingworth’s does not greatly shift the focus from her and her child. Chapters sixteen to twenty show the partial reunion of Hester and Dimmesdale and their attempt to counter Chillingworth’s plans. This leads to the market place scenes culminating in Dimmesdale’s confession followed by the last chapter which is like an epilogue. Thus Hawthorne forms clusters of chapters between the “scaffold chapters”, and at the beginning and the end leads through the chapters on the market place to the scaffold.

According to the other scheme, which John C. Gerbet mentions, the novel can be broadly - divided into four parts. In the first part (Chapters I to VII) the community, in addition to the four principal characters is responsible for the action. Chillingworth takes over in the second part, (Chapters IX

to XII), Hester becomes the prime mover in the third part (Chapters XIII to XX) and finally Dimmesdale assumes responsibility for the action in the remaining chapters (XXI to XXN). Within each part also there is a “natural division” between “cause and effect,” between material concerned predominantly with “the activating agent” and the material focused on “the person or persons acted upon”.

In the first part, it is beyond the reach of the characters to create the social situation which is the necessary prerequisite to the spiritual drama that later unfolds in the novel. Hester “indifferent” to the reaction of the crowd, is not mindful of the popular scorn; Dimmesdale is scared of what his flock may think if the secret of Pearl’s parentage is revealed; Chillingworth has arrived too recently on the scene to make any impact on their thought. Hence the community determines the social situation and imposes isolation upon Hester. The transition from the first to the second part is affected by the suggestion of Reverend Wilson “to leave the mystery (of Pearl’s father) as we find it, unless Providence reveals it of its own accord.” (pp 131-132). This effectively removes the community as the agent of Hester’s shame and ignominy.

The second part culminates in the scaffold scene where Hester and Pearl join him on the platform and enable the novelist to shift to Hester as the activating agent in the next part. The transition is effected as Hester comprehends the consequences of her vow to Chillingworth and assumes responsibility for the terrible physical condition of Dimmesdale.

In the first three chapters (XIII to XV) of the next part, each begins with the recent past of one principal character - respectively Hester, Chillingworth, and Pearl. In the fateful meeting that Hester has with Dimmesdale in Chapter 17, Hester appears stronger than him, partly because her moral and philosophical speculation has reduced her share of guilt with which Dimmesdale is simply weighed down she plans that he should escape the consequences of their act of adultery. The fourth part shows the almost inevitable failure of her plan. The part shows how Hester in despair after the discovery of her scheme to Chillingworth, finally sees the point of his public explanation. Chapters XXI and XXII lead up to the revelation of his past by Dimmesdale in chapter XXIII and the last chapter simply records the events that flowed from his confession.

The twenty four chapters of the novel have also been compared to the twenty four books of Homer’s epic. The first twelve lead “upward and downward,” the concluding twelve to the heart and salvation at least for Dimmesdale. In the middle chapters, Chillingworth appears to be victorious. Till half way, Pearl also appears a source of considerable anxiety; she is seen as uncontrolled, chaotic, tempestuous and so on. However, in the second half of the novel, everything is reversed. Chillingworth steadily declines in power and Pearl is now seen in a better light. Although she appears disciplined for a time, the novel now dwells upon her potential intelligence. The genuine solution to the “dark problem” - Dimmesdale’s confession in public - untangles the skein for the major characters and brings the story to a natural conclusion.

This “epic” format of twenty four units involves three “epic” quests. Dimmesdale’s search for salvation finally culminates in his public confession and brings the novel to a fitting climax. Chillingworth has a more deliberate quest for the soul of Dimmesdale which he wants to bring to perdition. This quest which damns him in the process ends appropriately in destruction. The search of Pearl - rather unconscious - is for her father. Although Hester says, “My child must seek a heavenly father,” she unexpectedly finds her earthly father on the scaffold.

4.3 THE RELEVANCE OF “THE CUSTOM HOUSE”

An important problem related to the structure of the novel is the relevance of the “Custom House” chapter which at the first glance seems like a digression, something extraneous to the main story of the play. This section which is like the introduction to the main story is apparently motivated by “a desire to put myself in my true position as editor” (p.6) .After describing his days in the Salem House, he denounces the cruelty of his first two ancestors in judging the “Devils” and “Witches” and the “non/puritanical” persons rather + harshly. Thus the novel looks like an atonement on the part of a descendant of two harsh judges of deviants like Hester, but it also becomes a plea for taking a tolerant and compassionate view of the transgressions of characters like her. Even the description of the many employees of the custom department has a point. Thus the Collector, who has, an inner life, is a better person than the Inspector who is much more alive physically but seems to lack the faculty of reflection. The novelist pleads for a union of reverie with action.

Hawthorne also prepares us in this section for the main story by describing the Scarlet letter which “had been wrought, as was easy to perceive, with wonderful skill of needle work” (p.37). Then he comments on the authenticity of the story and the possibility of his having taken any liberty with it. He has “recorded by the old surveyor’s pen, a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair” (pp38-39). The fact of the surveyor having written it provides us with another guarantor, and at the same time, it introduces the possibility of distortion as the surveyor Poe had “made up his narrative” ‘ from the “oral testimony” of “aged persons, alive” in his “time” (p.39). He also candidly confesses, “I have allowed myself as to such points nearly or altogether sd.ch license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline” (p.40).

Hawthorne comes back to the “Custom House” in the Conclusion as he refers to Poe and his successors. “Mr. Surveyor Poe, who made investigations a century later, believed- and one of his recent successors in office, moreover faithfully believes, - that Pearl was not only alive, but married and happy” (p.298). He also refers to “a manuscript of old date”(p.295) thus returning us to the Custom House section. Thus in several ways, the “Custom House” is linked to the body of the novel.

4.4 THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND POINT OF VIEW

In the above discussion of the Custom House chapter, we have already seen that the novelist has, in a manner of speaking two narrators - Surveyor Poe has narrated his story based on the accounts of those who know the characters in the story and the “editor” has filled in the outline of that story with his own creative imagination and moral vision. We have also seen that this means, on the one hand, that two individuals serve as guarantors of truth and at the same time both are likely to introduce subjective distortions. He says, “the main facts of that story are authorized and authenticated by the document of Mr. Surveyor Poe” (p.39). As this strengthens our belief in the veracity of the story, a statement like the following reminds us of the limitations of the narrator, “Some other name, which the narrator of the story had now forgotten.”

The main narrator sorts out the problem of making the magical and the marvelous credible by simply stating that the extraordinary events were witnessed by a few persons, and thus he maintains a somewhat special facade. Thus he says, “We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter - marked out in lines of dull red light.” (p. 176). The truth of the letter is, however, corroborated by saying that Sexton also mentioned that the letter ‘A’ was seen in the night. Similarly we are told that when Dimmesdale made his public confession, “most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a *scarlet letter*” (p.293).

The narrator also reminds the readers of his existence and his function. Thus talking of the mood of the minister after his meeting Hester in the forest, the narrator says, “We hesitate to reveal. Nevertheless, - to hold nothing back from the reader, ..” (p.245). In the same paragraph, he says, “We have had, and may still have, worse things to tell of him.” (pp 245-46). These statements, by interposing the narrator between the reader and the character, distance the reader from the figures in the story. They also make us aware that the narrator is another person at our level and not omniscient in a God-like way. Of course, as someone not involved in the action, he has no personal reason to distort the story to justify certain people or their actions, but he as a human being has his own limitations.

The novelist aims at a fine combination of the dramatic and the descriptive in his technique of narration. He often tries to build up to the climatic moments of drama. The three scenes on the scaffold are fine examples of it. The first and the last of these scenes are like spectacles with the entire population thronging the place in the middle one the meteor flashing across the sky provides the drama they can easily see as tableaux, each one strikingly visualized.

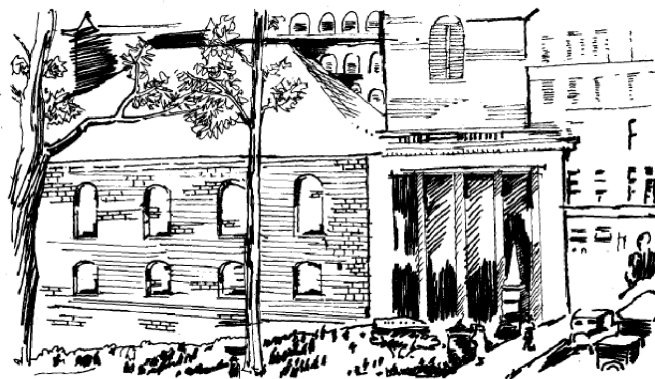
4.5 THE GENRE OF *THE SCARLET LETTER*

A recurrent question in the criticism of early 19th century American fiction in general and *The Scarlet Letter* in particular has been its understanding

as a novel or it being simply a “romance”? Our answer should begin with reference to Hawthorne’s own conception of the terms “novel” and “romance. According to Hawthorne’s preface to the *House of Seven Gables*, the locale of a territory somewhere between the real world and fairy land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet and each imbue itself with the nature of the other”. Distinguishing between different traits of novels and romances, he states “The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former-while, as a work of art must rigidly subject itself to laws and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may serve aside from the truth of the human heart-has fairly a right to present the truth under Circumstances to a great extent of the writer’s own choosing or creation. If he thinks fit also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadow of the picture”

If we apply Hawthorne’s own distinction to *The Scarlet Letter*, the work is likely to be seen more as a romance and less as a novel. Thus, the society described in the work lacks the breadth and the depth of humanity which characterize a typical novel. There are only w e n named characters in *The Scarlet Letter* and compared with a work like *Pride and Prejudice* or *David Copperfield* or *Vanity Fair* which marked the acme of the Early 19th century British Social novel, Hawthorne’s society looks thin and unreal.

In fact, the “territory” described in the work is a meeting place of “the Actual and the Imaginary”. Not only in the dark and mysterious forest but also in the settlement at Boston itself, many imaginary events occur. The appearance of the scarlet letter “A” on the “heart” of Dimmesdale, the flashing of the meteoric-”A” in the sky when the minister appears on the scaffold, the red light that comes out of Chillingworth’s eyes, the witchcraft of Mistress Hibbins are all unreal events. The story clearly deviates from “the probable and ordinary course-of-human event” The death of Dimmesdale after his confession on the scaffold is also not very “probable” although it is possible. The “atmospherical medium” also is so managed that the world presented seems to differ from the common world of day-to-day life.



**The grave of Hester Prynne
King’s chapel graveyard, Boston**

However, Hawthorne prevents the story from becoming considerably unreal by mentioning the marvelous events not directly but indirectly as

seen by several people or by a specific character. Thus Dimmesdale reading the letter A in the meteor is seen as compelled by his diseased imagination to behold the latter there: “We impute it therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter - the letter A, - marked out in lines of dull red light. Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil of cloud; but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it; or at least, with so little definiteness, that another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it (p 176-77). The appearance of the letter however, is a given wider currency as the sexton also mentions “the portent that was seen last night? – a great red letter in the sky the letter A” (p. 180). This may have negated the earlier statement about Dimmesdale, but it falls into place, once we remember the narrator’s comment before the remarks on the Minister that “nothing was more common in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances ... as so many revelations from a supernatural source”. (p. 175) Again talking of what appeared on Dimmesdale’s breast, the novelist writes, “Most of the Spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a *SCARLET LETTER* - the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne imprinted in the flesh” (p. 293) Hawthorne, however, immediately qualifies the statement by saying, “It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast” (p. 294). Nevertheless the dominant effect of the work is of a combination of the real and the unreal. The book, however, is informed by minuteness of psychological analysis of the major characters. Hawthorne requires even a romance to adhere strictly to “the truth of the human heart,” but in this work he is not content merely with this. His scrutiny of the mind of his chief characters can match in its details examination and in its fidelity to until, even profound psychological novels like Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karanazov* or D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*.

We should also remember that Hawthorne has given us a definition of romance which can subsume several works that we have generally regarded as novels. Thus Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* or Melville’s *Billy Budd* or Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* or even Sir Walter Scot’s *Ivanhoe* may then have to be classified as “romance”. So if we take a broader view of the possibilities and range of the novel as a genre, we have to place *The Scarlet Letter* midway between novel and romance. That explains why in the earlier units we have often called the work a “novel”.

4.6 SPECIAL FEATURES OF *THE SCARLET LETTER* AND OTHER SIMILAR NOVELS

Like many novels of the Romantic period in England. America. Russia and France, *The Scarlet Letter* has a historical setting. Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Alexander Dumas’ *Three Musketeers*, Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, *The Talisman*, *Woodsrock* and even *The Heart of Midlothian*, Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter* novels were all set in the recent or distant past. However, Hawthorne used the backdrop of history not simply to create a fictional counterpart of “costume drama” or describe

spectacular and marvelous effects, but to probe deep into the minds of major characters who represented different strands in this community from the past Here Hugo is the great contemporary he resembles most among his predecessors and contemporaries of the Romantic Period. Melville’s *Billy Budd* which explores the minds of three Naval characters during the era of Admiral Nelson can within limits be placed in the same line.

The Scarlet Letter is the only great American “novel” of its time that puts a woman at the centre of the stage. In the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper or Edgar Allan Poe or Herman Melville or later in the novels of Mark Twain, the major characters are invariably) men. In fact, both the masterpieces of Melville - *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd* - are entirely without women characters. *The Scarlet Letter* moreover not only present the predicament of Hester, but it also questions the validity of the status the society has assigned to women In the unit on Hawthorne’s vision, we observed that he is a critic of the social attitude towards women. Hester can be seen as an early Feminist. The strength and the courage with which she faces social censure and rises about it and her great endurance which far exceeds Dimmesdale’s, indicates Hawthorne’s recognition of the fact that the Patriarchal society is unjustified in regarding a woman as a weakling or as some sort of a clinging vine. The other great Nineteenth Century American novel about a woman - Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* probes deep into the psyche of Isabel Archer but it does not question the validity of the position a society accords to women which *The Scarlet Letter* does both implicitly and explicitly.

The Scarlet Letter as a novel about adultery resembles several great Nineteenth century novels in particular Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* - which focus on the extramarital affairs of a wife. These are also novels which explore the minds of the character **unlike a work like** Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* which looks at adultery from the outside. What is remarkable about *The Scarlet Letter*, however, is that, as pointed out earlier, it is concerned with the after-effects of adultery and not the deed itself

Thus Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* shows distinct individuality in his handling of a historical setting, in his presentation of the predicament of a woman in a patriarchal society and in his treatment of the motif of the adulterous wife.

Exercise I

- 1. Examine the three pillory scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*.

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- 2. What is the relevance of “The Custom House” section in the novel?

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3. On what basis can you divide the novel into several parts? Justify your answer.

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4. Write a note on the “epic” elements in the structure of *The Scarlet Letter*.

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5. How does *The Scarlet Letter* combine descriptive’ and dramatic” scenes?

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6. What is the relationship between Surveyor Poe’s manuscript and the personalized narrator?

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7. Is *The Scarlet Letter* a “pure” novel, or is it a romance? Justify your answer.

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8. What are the special features of *The Scarlet Letter* as a fictional work?

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have seen that

- The chapters two, twelve and twenty three in which some characters mount the scaffold mark the turning points in the story.

The novel can be divided into four parts. In the first the community and the four principal characters are the active agents: in the second, it is chillingworth; in the third, Hester; finally, in the fourth, Dimmesdale.

The twenty four chapters mark the rise and fall in the fortunes of the main characters

The novel has three epic quests

“The Custom House” introduces the narrator and the main story.

Surveyor Poe’s manuscript and the personalized narrator with his conversational tone modulate the relation between the story and the reader

The novel has several “dramatic scenes” although it is predominantly “descriptive”.

- *The Scarlet Letter* has elements of both a novel and a romance.
- Hawthorne has used a historical setting mainly as a backdrop to analyse the minds of his characters.
- Elements of a feminist viewpoint are visible in the presentation of the predicament of Hester.
- The writer is concerned not with adultery per se but with its consequences.
- Given you a set of questions which can be answered on the basis of your reading of the novel and the six units in this Block.
- Suggested a few critical books which should provide you further insights into *The Scarlet Letter*.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

We have used the following edition of the novel and all the page numbers cited in the units refer to it. Nathaniel Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. John C. Gerber. New York. The Modern Library 1950

Criticism

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4.9 ANSWER TO EXERCISES

Please refer to the discussion in the Unit and write down your answers briefly in your own words.