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The Scarlet Letter

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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THE SCARLET LETTER

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Introduction and Notes by
HENRY CLARIDGE
University of Kent at Canterbury

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1850, when the first edition of *The Scarlet Letter* was published, Hawthorne was known as a writer of tales, many of them having appeared in magazines and gift annuals, though three volumes of his tales saw publication in the decade before the novel[1] appeared: a revised edition of *Twice-Told Tales* was published in 1842 (and elicited Edgar Allan Poe's famous review in *Graham's Magazine* for April 1842), *The Celestial Rail-Road* followed in 1843 and *Mosses from an Old Manse* was published in 1846. These volumes brought Hawthorne

1 *The Scarlet Letter* was not Hawthorne's first novel, though to all intents and purposes we have come to regard it as such. *Fanshawe: A Tale*, a novel written after his graduation from Bowdoin College in Maine, was published anonymously and at his own expense in 1828, but in subsequent years he sought to suppress the work by calling in and destroying all remaining copies – perhaps because its account of the scholar/artist Fanshawe's reclusiveness and purposelessness reflected badly on both Hawthorne's education, and, by extension, himself, perhaps because it was also a commercial failure.

some literary notoriety, but like so many other American writers of his day he suffered from the absence of an international copyright law that would extend to American writers those advantages enjoyed by their European (especially English) contemporaries, for the American writer could not compete on his own soil with cheap editions of Scott and Dickens or reap adequate rewards from home sales in a country in which the business of publication was still in its infancy and where communications to outlying frontier towns and villages meant that sales were largely confined to a few metropolitan areas.

The genesis of *The Scarlet Letter* is, in the broad sense, to be found in the tales and sketches Hawthorne had written over some thirteen years before he began work on the novel, for the tales are the record of how he sought to understand the New England past that shaped so much of his character and his sense of his country's mission in the world: he was of Puritan descent, had immersed himself in the early records of Puritan America, and could trace his paternal line back to William Hathorne (Hawthorne was to add the w to the name), an influential figure in the administration of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and to William's son, John Hathorne who was a prosecutor during the Salem witch trials of 1692 (he is the Judge Hathorne of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible).* In the narrower sense, the genesis is to be found in a series of entries in his notebooks and journals that reveal just how frequently his story had exercised his imagination. In an entry for 1845 he speculates about what life would be like for a 'woman, who, by the old colony law, was condemned always to wear the letter A, sewed on her garment, in token of her having committed adultery'. In an earlier story, 'Endicott and the Red Cross' (1837), his brief portrait of Puritan New England under the governorship (1628–1630) of John Endecott (1589–1665), Hawthorne describes a

> young woman, with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown, in the eyes of all the world and her own children. And even her own children knew what that initial signified. Sporting with her infamy, the lost and desperate creature had embroidered the fatal token in scarlet cloth, with golden thread and the nicest art of needlework; so that the capital A might have been thought to mean Admirable, or anything rather than Adulteress.

Another notebook entry, from 1841, intimates a story that would 'symbolise moral or spiritual disease by disease of the body; – thus, when a person committed any sin, it might cause a sore to appear on

the body; – this to be wrought out'; and in an entry for 1844 he writes that 'the Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love or reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into its dark depths, not with hope or purpose of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity, – content that it should be wicked in whatever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out. Would not this, in other words, be the separation of the intellect from the heart?' These notebook entries adumbrate a story but, more strikingly, they also adumbrate what the story might signify, what meaning – understood here in the moral sense – might attach to the events depicted. They are not technical remarks in the sense of their establishing a position from which the story might be told, the angles from which it might be 'seen', the control of tone and voice and the structural problems that would necessarily arise in the story's execution. But they do point to Hawthorne's understanding that, despite its apparent simplicity, his story might in the telling take on more complex and ambiguous features, for the idea that 'the capital A might have been thought to mean Admirable, or anything rather than Adulteress' registers a multiplicity of interpretations of its possible meaning, and, especially, Hawthorne's expectation that the letter will ultimately assume significations not intended by Hester's judges: 'The Scarlet Letter', we are told towards the conclusion of Chapter 13, 'had not done its office.'[2] But these notebook entries also attest to the importance in Hawthorne's mind of matters of morality, of what constitutes moral behaviour, and of how moral questions govern much of what we say, and do, in both the private and public spheres. While we read the novel in an age of moral relativism where contemporary literary criticism has taught us to be sceptical of the capacity of art to offer insights into how we should conduct our lives, we should not forget that, for Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* is a moral tale, the significance of which can be rationally paraphrased and tested against experience. The wild rose-bush that Hawthorne isolates for our attention at the end of the opening chapter is invested with moral purpose for:

> Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the

2 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Wordsworth Editions, Ware 1992, p. 124. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and are given in parentheses after the quotation.

> reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolise some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow. [p. 36]

In the concluding chapter Hawthorne returns to this moral purpose when he writes that, 'Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence: – "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" ' (p. 194). But this seems curiously unsatisfactory as a response to the moral significance of the flower from the rose-bush, for not only does it isolate a moral imperative whose singularity is at odds with the novel's more complex and equivocating enactment of moral experience, it also seems at odds with the very details of the story itself, since Chillingworth is quick to seize upon those traits in Dimmesdale's behaviour from which he infers the pastor's 'worst'. (Hester can suffer from no such problem: her very pregnancy reveals her 'worst' to the world!) Nevertheless as we close the book Hawthorne invites us to take something more from it than its mere story. He wants – as all great novelists have wanted – to both entertain and edify.

II

The Scarlet Letter is a tale of adultery, or, more accurately, of its consequences. It shares a theme, therefore, with the novels of many of Hawthorne's major European contemporaries. But Hawthorne didn't write an American *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*. He has done much to cloud the moral drama that surrounds Hester's and Dimmesdale's illicit passion: the word 'adultery' is never used in the novel (though the significance of the embroidered A on Hester's bosom has rarely eluded even the most naïve reader), Hester's husband, Chillingworth (it is an assumed name), is presumed dead, and the act itself is distanced in time from much of the action of the novel by some seven years. Thus Pearl is an infant in the second chapter, 'The Market-Place', but by the sixth chapter, 'Pearl', she is 'big enough to run about . . . ' and by the twelfth chapter, 'The Minister's Vigil', the time has moved forward to 1649 and she is seven years old. Moreover, when the lovers are finally alone after, in effect, seven years of separation, they offer us little evidence that they are lovers – they hardly touch one another, never kiss, and embrace only (and ironically) when Hester tells the minister that Chillingworth ' "was my

husband!" ' (p. 145) – the past tense of the verb may cause us to pause – and is met by his accusations of the ' "horrible ugliness of this exposure of a sick and guilty heart to the very eye that would gloat over it!" ' (pp. 145–6), her response being to throw her arms around him and press his head against her bosom, 'little caring though his cheek rested on the scarlet letter' (p. 145), a scene that is repeated at the moment of revelation in the penultimate chapter when Hester again holds Dimmesdale's head against her bosom. Hawthorne's reluctance to treat an adult sexual relationship in anything like the way in which we expect such relationships to be conducted has frequently been imputed to a Protestant, especially Puritanical, distaste for its enactment in imaginative art that disabled the American novel in its formative years (and it's not exclusively American, as some commentators have implied, for the English novel of the same period evinces similar evidence of the novelist's rectitude over sexual matters). This argument, though historically persuasive, misrepresents the novelist's concerns, for Hawthorne's 'displacement' of the act in time (in an influential argument the critic Leslie A. Fiedler suggests that it becomes almost 'prehistoric'[3]) enables him to generalise upon the nature of the sin committed, so much so that it becomes sin in the abstract (if we can accept such a formulation) and the interest now lies in how the sin is to be punished, how society responds to it, and how, indeed, those who committed it and the one who 'seeks it out' are affected by it. It's unprofitable to ask whether Hawthorne thought adultery a sin (no doubt he did); what is important is the interpretation put upon it by those who punish Hester and whether the sin is excusable, by which I mean whether the novel itself gives us any grounds for thinking that what Hester and Dimmesdale have done has moral justification.

The answer to the second question is, of course, that it does. In Chapter 17, the wonderfully titled 'The Pastor and His Parishioner', reminding us of the social and religious relationship between the minister and a member of his community (though not of his congregation), Hester says to Dimmesdale, ' "What we did, had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?" ' (p. 146). While Hawthorne doesn't speak these words we feel that they carry the force of his authorial endorsement. Indeed, we might pause to reflect on whether we could expect Hester to say what she says, for she is in many respects conventionally Puritan, accepting the

3 Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Dell Publishing Ltd, New York 1966, p. 223

theocratic judgements of her community largely without question (Hawthorne, we remember, tells us that she 'knew that her deed had been evil' [p. 67], and only in her luxuriant embroidering of the letter A and her adorning of Pearl in gorgeous robes made from 'the richest tissues that could be procured' [p. 68] does she openly assert some resistance to Puritan authority, a case of pride coming after the fall), and we might wonder how someone conventionally Puritan could speak of adulterous passion as a consecrated act, something given over to a sacred or venerated purpose. Here the thematic conflict between public and private spheres of moral understanding is made transparent, as, moreover, is Hawthorne's attitude to the punishment imposed on Hester for her transgression. She is, in effect, being asked to play a symbolic, perhaps more precisely an allegorical, role, for in her is embodied the sin of adultery and her enforced wearing of the A in public functions as an instrument by which the Puritan community seeks to maintain itself against any threats to its social and moral orthodoxy. That Hawthorne sees such orthodoxy as unjustified and morally questionable is apparent from his attitude to the society he depicts. His opening remarks insist on us the intolerance and repressiveness of Puritan New England. The new world seems preternaturally old and tenebrous, the wooden jail from which Hester Prynne is to issue is already marked with 'weather-stains and other indications of age which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front' and the town beadle when he comes forward with Hester in Chapter 2, 'The Market-Place', represents 'the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law . . . ', a phrase that insistently reinforces 'that early severity of the Puritan character' of which Hawthorne had spoken earlier in the chapter. Such remarks (and there are many others of a similar kind in the novel) allow readers no freedom with respect to *their* attitudes to the world Hawthorne depicts, and for all the vitality, passion and colour that is embodied in both Hester herself and her attire we recognise that the 'consecration' of which she speaks is unlikely ever to be endorsed by the community which enacts her punishment. The tragedy (it is more Dimmesdale's than Hester's) is a consequence of this incommensurability of the private and public spheres, for Hester's independence and her pride (which some critics have seen as comparable to that of Antigone), her belief that she and Dimmesdale have in some sense 'triumphed', precipitates Chillingworth's inquisitiveness and with it the whole arsenal of methods by which the Puritan magistracy hopes to bring the private into the public world and thus to control the workings of the inner life.

Tragedies, of course, conventionally have villains, and the villain of *The Scarlet Letter* is Roger Chillingworth, the wronged husband, who from his first appearance in the novel is described in demonic terms. It is Chillingworth's 'sin', a less forgivable one, that stands in stark contrast to that of Hester and Dimmesdale. When Hester speaks to Dimmesdale of 'consecration' it is in response to his ' "We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart" ' (p. 146). We are reminded of that notebook entry, to which I referred above, where Hawthorne writes of the 'Unpardonable Sin' and of how 'it might consist in a want of love and reverence for the human soul . . . ' Elsewhere in his notebooks, in an entry for 17 November 1847, this same thought takes shape as a 'story of the effects of revenge, in diabolizing him who indulges in it'. In the short story 'Ethan Brand', published in the same year as his novel, Ethan searches the world over for the Unpardonable Sin only to find it (as is so characteristic of Hawthorne's deliberations on such a matter) in his own breast. Ethan's sin thus becomes one of cold, intellectual arrogance, the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, and he comes to discover that the victim of the pursuit is the pursuer. There is in this tale something of the nineteenth-century writer's distrust of the claims of scientific enquiry played out as a kind of Faustian allegory. Chillingworth possesses many of the same features as Ethan Brand: his science is that of homoeopathic medicine and he has learned his methods, he tells Hester, from ' "a people well versed in the kindly properties of simples . . . " ' (p. 54), though Hawthorne is eager to stress the scholar-like qualities of Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale, initially, is fascinated by 'the company of the man of science, in whom he recognised an intellectual cultivation of no moderate depth or scope . . . ' (pp. 91–2). This is that 'separation of the intellect from the heart' to which Hawthorne adverted in his notebook entry in 1844. But, arguably, something more than 'separation' is at stake here, for the kind of knowledge Chillingworth seeks amounts to possession of another's innermost thoughts and feelings, a possession that will 'yield' Dimmesdale to him intellectually in much the same way that his possession of Hester – ' "And so, Hester, I drew thee into my heart, into its in innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there!" ' (p. 56) – by marriage 'yielded' her to him sexually. The coldness and sterility of Chillingworth's pursuit of Dimmesdale's secret sin are juxtaposed with Hester's warmth and fertility, and this device of Hawthorne's bespeaks

an affective comparison between the claims of Science and Art that is characteristic of romantic art. Chillingworth's calculating inquisitiveness consigns him to impermanence and decay (indeed, his very physical form insists this on us), whilst Hester's sin, provocatively wrought out in the embellishments of the letter A that shine through the shadows at the end of the novel, is a type of aesthetic transcendence and an affirmation of something that lies outside the ravages of time.

III

Though *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the past, it is, as Harry Levin in *The Power of Blackness* points out, 'the only romance of Hawthorne's in which the past is not a problem'.[4] By this Levin means to say that this is no historical novel in the sense in which we might conventionally understand it; Hawthorne's New England is imaginatively rendered more for effects of romantic distance and picturesqueness than for historical veracity. The historicising is sparing (the text demands little historical annotation) and 'The Custom-House' sketch does much to clear the contextual ground for what follows (though it was composed after completion of the novel). There is no attempt to depict the historical setting of New England in the 1640s in the same way, for example, as James Fenimore Cooper depicts the conflict of the French and Indian War of 1757 in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Hawthorne's novel is a romance, not an exercise in historical reconstruction, the interest and pleasure of which would reside, in part, in our discoveries about a world that we recognise from the history books. If we want to learn about seventeenth-century New England we can read Cotton Mather. But, this said, beyond the four main characters – Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl – more or less all the other characters are historical personages – notably Governor Bellingham, John Eliot, Mistress Hibbins and the Reverend Mr Wilson. Because Hawthorne can expect his reader's familiarity with these historical figures he can sketch them lightly, and this goes some way to explaining the remarkable economy of his novel for he can turn his attention away from the regionalism and local colour entailed in historical recreation and towards the inward psychologising that really interests him. This economy is also apparent in the novel's construction. Much of the physical action of the story takes place before the novel begins and thus what we read is characterised by a unity of dramatic intention and

4. Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*, Vintage Books, New York 1958, p. 78

singularity of conception that was, in many ways, new to the novel in English. Everything is organised around the working out of the consequences of concealment, and the great crises, or climaxes, of the plot are played out on the same stage of the scaffold: Hester with Pearl in her arms in Chapter 2, 'The Market-Place'; Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale together during the night of Dimmesdale's vigil in Chapter 12, 'The Minister's Vigil'; and the revelation of Dimmesdale's sin in Chapter 23, 'The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter'. Moreover, the twenty-four chapters of the novel unfold through what are, in effect, five acts of classical tragedy: Act 1 culminating with Hester's promise to Chillingworth at the end of Chapter 4, 'The Interview', that she will keep his identity a secret; Act 2 with Chillingworth's 'ecstasy' of recognition in chapter 10, 'The Leech and His Patient', as he lays his hand on Dimmesdale's bosom and opens his vestment (what he sees on Dimmesdale's chest remains one of the novel's central ambiguities and equivocations); Act 3 with the scaffold scene in 'The Minister's Vigil', Chapter 12, that closes the first half of the novel; Act 4 with Hester's casting off of the scarlet letter and Pearl's insistence that she take it up again and pin it to her breast (' "Now thou art my mother indeed! and I am thy little Pearl!" ') (p. 159) in Chapter 19, 'The Child at the Brook-Side'; and Act 5 with the single scene in the market-place that occupies Chapters 21 through 23, in which Dimmesdale's guilt is revealed to the community at the moment of his death and Chillingworth concedes that he (Dimmesdale) ' "hast escaped me!" ' (p. 191). This almost classical structure (Hawthorne was as familiar with Racine as he was with Shakespeare) reinforces the inevitability of the action and is itself reinforced by the unity of mood that is consequent upon the scarlet letter's place at the centre of the drama. Hawthorne was a novelist of great scenic and episodic gifts (thus the temptation of some critics to speak of the novel as a series of *tableaux*, picturesque presentations), and nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Scarlet Letter*.

IV

In his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Hawthorne writes:

> When an author calls his work a Romance it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a novel. 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.

His claims for a latitude in respect of both 'fashion and material' manifest themselves in the delicate mingling of the marvellous with the realistic in his fiction. The Romance as he describes it liberates him from the constraints of conventional realism. *The Scarlet Letter* needs this 'freedom' in order to make its inward, psychological and symbolic drama possible. Writing of him in 1879 the English novelist Anthony Trollope remarked that he 'dealt with persons and incidents which were often barely within the bounds of possibility . . . and has determined that his readers should be carried out of their own little mundane ways, and brought into a world of imagination in which their intelligence might be raised, if only for a time, to something higher than the common needs of common life'.[5] As I have suggested above, this play of intelligence to which Trollope adverts is very much, for Hawthorne, a matter of the discriminations of moral life, of how we weigh, and balance against one another, the competing demands of the duties placed on us in the public and private spheres of life. The novel concludes with Hester's belief that 'at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relationship between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness' (p. 197). We don't know from these words whether Hawthorne thinks that Hester's hopes have been realised; perhaps his 'sort of parable, an earthly story with a hellish meaning', as D. H. Lawrence described it, only shows that the 'surer ground' on which the moral life can be built is yet to be realised. The novel concludes, therefore, on a positive note that, for some of its readers, is at odds with its tragic mood of 'dark necessity', as, indeed, it was at odds with the mood of Hawthorne's wife, who, he recalls, 'broke her heart' on hearing him read the final pages 'and went to bed with a grievous headache – which I look upon as a triumphant success!' Nevertheless, *The Scarlet Letter* did bring him commercial and critical success, and the kind of literary fame enjoyed by few of his American contemporaries.

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5 Anthony Trollope, 'The Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne', *North American Review*, CCLXXIV (September 1879), p. 204

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