
UNIT 2 THE SCARLET LETTER: CHARACTERIZATION

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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

