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

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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is a seriously distorted Puritan, and the settlement is distorted in this manner” because “Puritan religion has been replaced by nineteenth century sentimental piety.”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.

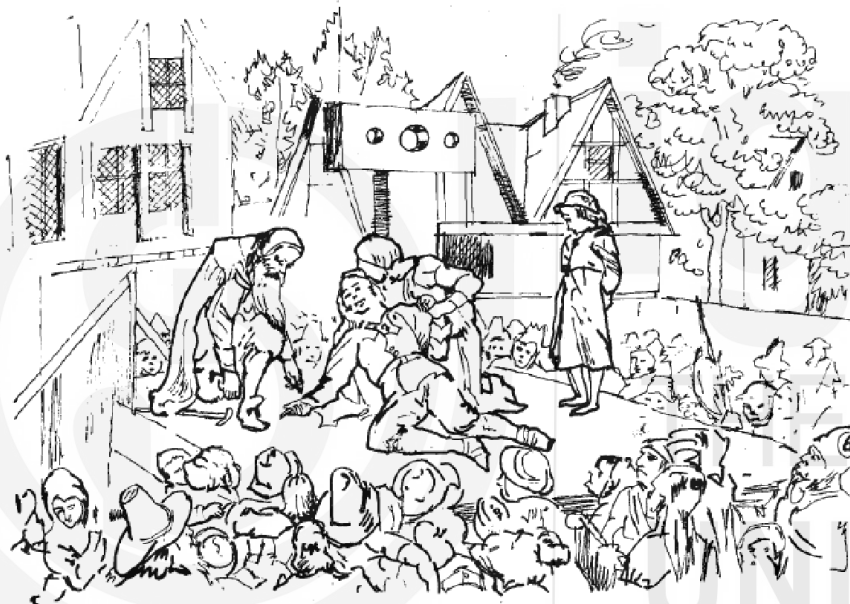
3.3 THE ORGANIC AND THE MECHANICAL

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.231). 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 to 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