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

Structure

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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 Chillongworth’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, if 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 tableaus, 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 atmospheric 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 wen 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](image)

*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
dull red light. Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point,
burning duskyly 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 Karanaov 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, Woodrock and even11 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
no1 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.

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

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

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

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

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

### 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**


Spilles Robbert E. *The Literary History of the United States*.


### 4.9 ANSWER TO EXERCISES

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