

## Hawthorne's Artistry: A Technical Study of *The Scarlet Letter*

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### **Abstract:**

Novelists employ several techniques in order to enrich the meaning and style of their work. Style is the novelists choice of words and phrases and how the novelist arranges these words and phrases in sentences and paragraphs. Style allows the author to shape his work in such a way as to make the reader read the work with interest and enthusiasm. This paper highlights the artistry employed by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*. The author has extensively adopted motifs, allegory metaphors, colour schemes and even symbolic names, such devices have been richly adopted so as to enhance the tone and language of the novel.

**Key Words:** Techniques, Symbols, Allegory, Ambiguity, Irony.

The English novelist Joseph Conrad believed that the style of a novel “must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of a sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music which is the art of arts”. Many novels have two layers of meaning. The first is in the literal plot, the second in a symbolic layer in which images and objects represent abstract ideas and feelings. Using symbols allows authors to express themselves indirectly on delicate or controversial matters.

Symbols may appear to have a clear meaning in one part of the novel and they can have another meaning in another part of the book. In addition to point of view, style and symbolism novelists use many other specific techniques in their works. Two of the most important are imagery and irony. A novelist must draw from all the resources of the arts, then only his work could have the bright hues of painting, the solidity of a sculpture and the rhythm and harmony of music.

Hawthorne has proved himself as an excellent artist. His first expression has sound significant place in *The Scarlet Letter*, his first and greatest long story. He has exhibited a complete command over the subject and details in the text. *The Scarlet Letter* is generally considered to be the first symbolic American novel. He employs symbolism, metaphor, motifs, ambiguity, allegory and colour schemes. He also uses structural devices and takes great care to even make the names of his characters symbolic. The symbols that Hawthorne has used in the novel are the prison, the scaffold, pearl, the rose bush, the forest, the sunshine, the brook, the scarlet letter and the meteor.

*The Scarlet Letter* commences with the scene of a large crowd waiting before the prison door to witness the public disgrace of Hester Prynne. It is the prison door that separates Hester from the crowd.

Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass plot, much overgrown with burdock, pigweed, apple peru and such unsightly vegetation which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had. The early borne the black flower of the civilized society, a prison. (48)

The prison is used by Hawthorne to show isolation Hester is isolated from the society and is alienated from them. The dark atmosphere of the prison symbolizes the darkness that Hester has to face throughout her lifetime. The prison is also used to picturise crime, its consequence punishment literally, Hester is the only one who serves a sentence in prison but both Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth are found to be imprisoned in their own prisons.

The Scaffold is a technical device used to symbolize punishment, public disgrace and isolation from the society. It is also a symbolic replication of God's Judgement Day. There are three scaffold scenes in the novel, each telling us exactly what will follow next. The exposure, faced by the people on the scaffold is emphasized and it is indeed a painful experience at the beginning of the novel.

The severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful. Meagre, indeed and cold was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for from such by – standers, at the scaffold. (50)

As the story enters the second phase, the scaffold is seen to have become the only way of escape from the mental torment suffered by Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester is free from mental agony and has been branded Adulteress because she has already mounted the scaffold. But her paramour, Dimmesdale is found to be standing on the scaffold under the cover of night because of the prick of his conscience caused by his concealed guilt

-----ye that have loved me! That have deemed me holy!-behold me here, the one sinner of the world! At last-at last! – I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood; here with thus woman. (267)

He feels at ease when he stands on it. The feeling of having revealed his crime gives a worthwhile relief to the minister.

The scaffold is again seen towards the end of the novel. The minister finds his secret lover and child in front of the scaffold and in a moment's ecstasy mounts it and makes a clear revelation of his crime in broad daylight. The scaffold is the place where Dimmesdale breathes his last after admitting his sin. The brave confession made on the scaffold by the minister finally gives him peace.

Pearl, the daughter of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne is also considered to be a symbol as she is the embodiment of the scarlet letter. She is the punishment for her mother's sin. It is evidently seen that pearl is a treasure to her mother. "She is my happiness – she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Punished me too!..." (115) Pearl's innocent nature is compared and illustrated as a wild rose, a bird, etc., as both are symbols of freedom and love. Pearl is a self-contained symbol, as she possesses the qualities to provoke the adult characters in the novel.

The rose bush found in the beginning of the novel is a constant reminder of salvation and hope to the prisoners. It is seen to have survived all odds and is found to be in full bloom.

A wild rose-bush, covered in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. (48)

Hawthorne is of the opinion that the red rose offers its fragrance and its fragile beauty to the prisoner who goes in and out the prison.

Pearl also closely resembles the wild red rose. She is pretty and as innocent as the rose. Pearl is made to believe that she is plucked from the wild rosebush. In general the rose signifies beauty in the midst of thorns. "The child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door"... (114). Hawthorne also describes overgrown vegetation of weeds around the prison. The weeds symbolize how corrupt the civilization really is. The positive symbol he points out is the wild rose bush.

The forest is considered to be a symbol of nature in its true beauty. The forest is seen in a dark and gloomy atmosphere.

The trees impending over it had flung down great branches, from time to time which choked up the current and compelled it to form eddies and black depths at some points; while, in its swiftest and liveliest passages, there appeared a channel way of pebbles and brown sparkling sand. (195)

The darkness in the forest symbolizes Hester's dull and colourless life. The sunshine through the forest is also taken to have a significant meaning. "Overhead was a gray expanse of cloud. Slightly stirred, however, by a breeze; so that a gleam of flickering sunshine might now and then be seen at its solitary play along the path"...(192)

The sunshine through the forest lights up the area where pearl plays, and shuns Hester as if it is unwilling to pollute its purity. The author has taken care to bring to light that the hiding of the sunlight is only due to the presence of iniquity.

As soon as the symbol of shame is removed from Hester's bosom sunlight embraces her sombre, moody figure. Generally the sunshine symbolizes purity. The light that illuminates the forest is also symbolic, as it is narrow and irregular. Hawthorne describes the path to be "Straggled" and "hemmed so narrowly"... (156). This suggests that the path is unpredictable and one could always stray off and be lost.

The Brook that flows through the forest is a symbol of freedom, innocence and unknown mystery.

All the giant trees and boulders granite seemed intent on making a mystery of the course of this small brook... continually, indeed, as it stole onward, the streamlet kept up a babble, kind, quiet, soothing, but melancholy, like the voice of a young child that was spending its infancy without playfulness and knew not how to be merry among sad acquaintance and events to sombre hue. (195)

It's beginning is unknown and so is its destination. The journey of the brook goes on its own way constantly babbling in a kind, quiet, soothing yet melancholic tone, like an infant. Pearl talks to the brook and says "O brook! O foolish and tiresome little brook!..."(195). Pearl again resembles the brook as she is also bound to travel in an undefined path that is unpredicted and mysterious.

The chief symbol of the novel is the Scarlet letter 'A'. It defines Hester Prynne as an adulteress. The heroine is branded by the puritan society with the letter 'A' on her bosom. Her fellow sinner, Arthur Dimmesdale brands himself with the letter "A" and conceals it with his garment. Arthur Dimmesdale frequently covers his bosom with his hand as if to conceal something. This gesture symbolizes the minister's attempt to cover his part of sinfulness and to escape public exposure.

In the beginning of the story the letter 'A' is meant to be a badge of shame, but as the novel progresses the letter 'A' becomes powerful it gradually changes as time passes. Originally intended to mark 'Hester as an adulterous, the 'A' eventually comes to stand for 'Able'. "Many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter 'A' by its original signification. They said that it meant 'Able'; "So strong was Hester Prynne with a woman's strength..." (167) Finally it becomes indeterminate, because the people who come to watch the election day pageant think it indicates a person of importance. Pearl is once again symbolized to be the living scarlet Letter as she is the constant remainder of Dimmesdale's sin. "There stood the Minister, with his hand over his heart and Hester glimmering on her bosom and little Pearl; herself a symbol and the connecting link between those two..." (159)

The meteor in chapter twelve is seen to trace a giant letter 'A' in the night sky. The meteor too gets interpreted in various ways. The minister who sees it first feels the giant letter indicates that he should also wear the scarlet letter on his bosom like Hester. "A great red letter in the sky; the letter A, which we interpret to stand for Angel. For, as our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night"....(164). The meteor is interpreted by the rest of community as a sign from heaven indicating the entry of Governor Winthrop, and his acknowledgement as an 'Angel'. But Angel is an awkward reading of the symbol. Hence the symbol is to take the meaning the beholder wants to attribute.

Roger chilling worth's mishappen body reflects the evil in his soul, which builds up as the novel progresses. The ex-husband of Hester is a hunchback and has drooping shoulders, his physical appearance closely resembles the 'Evil one', the Devil.

The colour scheme used in the novel are also symbolic. The dark and dull colours indicate gloom, guilt, sorrow and agony. The heroine of the story wears dark clothes, which indicate her pain and grief, but she is very keen to dress up her child in bright coloured garments, as she doesn't want her sorrow and dull life to affect the child. The red colour of the letters 'A' indicates the fierceness and wildness of the crime committed by the wrong doers. Hawthorne uses light and darkness to bring out the true nature of each character. Darkness represents a world of evil that remains hidden while the brightness of day means truth that is exposed.

Irony and ambiguity are used to bring perfection to the novel. Hester's strength and Dimmesdale's weakness are an ironical juxtaposition. Hester is extraordinary strong and active unlike the timid and nervous Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is portrayed as the pastor and Hester as his parishner. Dimmesdale is supposed to be the protector and guide of Hester, but he deliberately commits adultery with her.

Another ironical situation is when Dimmesdale's congregation cares for him both physically and spiritually. When he is obliged to care for his congregation. Similarly Roger chilling worth who is supposed to be a friendly physician remains to be the minister's enemy.

He ruins Dimmesdale's peace and torments him mentally and finally drives his soul from all peace and harmony.

He now dug into the poor clergy man's heart like a miner searching for gold; or rather, like a sexton delving into a grave, possibly in quest of a jewel that had been buried on the dead man's bosom, but likely to find nothing save morality and corruption. (133)

The last conversation between the minister and the physician is also highly ironical.

Ambiguity is another effective technical device adopted in the novel. The letter 'A' takes various meanings. The letter 'A' means Adultery in the beginning of the novel, but in the course of the story it undergoes various changes, and is understood as Able, Admirable, Angel and finally Angel of Mercy. The letter which first causes disgrace and humiliation finally brings grace, compassion and respect to the bearer.

The death of the Minister, Arthur Dimmesdale is also ambiguous. Even after the revelation of his concealed sin, people tend to understand it in a different way. Ironically, the people of Boston do not believe Dimmesdale's protestations of sin-fullness. When he confess,

The judgment of God is on me answered the conscience-stricken priest. It is too mighty for me to struggle with! "Heaven would show Mercy", rejoined Hester, "hadst Thou but the strength to take advantage of it. Be thou strong for me! Answered he Advise me what to do. (207)

He is misunderstood to merely express personal guilt. When he realizes that he not bale to convince the people into believing that he is the sinner, he is driven into a state of bewilderment.

God's eye beheld it! The angels were forever pointing at it! The Devil know it well, and fretted it continually with the touch of his burning finger! But he hid it cunningly from men, and walked among you with the mien of a spirit; mournful, because so pure in a sinful world and sad, because he missed his heavenly kindred!. (267)

The people are of the opinion that his confession is a symbolic act, while others believe it as an example of divine judgement.

The *Scarlet Letter* can also be classified as an allegorical novel. It is a struggle between Good and Evil. The names in this novel can be interpreted allegorically Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale are constantly under the direct or indirect torment of Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth is old and inhuman. As his name suggests, he brings a chill to his victims. He is associated with cold bloodedness and with violation of a human heart. Prynne rhymes with 'sin'; while Dimmesdale suggests 'dimmer' which shows weakness, indeterminacy, lack of insight, lack of will and courage. Pearl evokes a greater meaning such as of great price and value.

Hawthorne strikes a strong moral lesson through his story. The novel contains powerful symbolic and psychological aspects of the effects of sin, guilt, pride and secrecy. Every single feature in the story has contributed to the moral value. The use of the image of a path as a metaphor is highly appreciable. The author's constant use of a road that is undefined and narrow shows how rigid and orthodox puritan belief is. People who tend to stray away from the prescribed or defined path are punished severely according to their religious belief. It is this moral code that makes them adopt such stringent punishments on Hester.

The title of the story bears a metaphorical phrase. *The Scarlet Letter* refers to a piece of cloth, which Hester Prynne, the accused is bound to wear. This cloth is decoratively embroidered to form the letter'.

That scarlet letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of spell taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself. (54)

Motifs and symbols add further meaning, dignity and colour to the story. The motifs in the novel are recurring structures, contrasts or literary devices that help to develop the story. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the town and the surrounding forest represent opposite behaviour. The town represents civilization, while the forest is a place where society's rules do not apply. The meeting of the lovers in secret in the forest shows the freedom that is not available in the town.

The emphasis given to the alteration of sunlight and darkness also shows daylight exposing an individual's activity and making him or her vulnerable to punishment. Night on the other hand conceals and enables activity is that would not be possible or tolerated during the day, as for instance, Dimmesdale's encounter with Hester and pearl on the scaffold at night. Night is the time when inner nature manifests itself and during day interior is once again hidden from public view, and secrets remain as secret within.

The techniques Hawthorne employs in *The Scarlet Letter* remain unmatched. The constant picturization of the Scarlet Letter 'A' in different phases with different meanings throughout the novel enhances and reveals the true meaning of the letter 'A'. Hawthorne has



done a great deal of strenuous work by exploiting each and every feature in the story thereby making *The Scarlet Letter* his master piece.

Thus Hawthorne has proved himself as an experimenter and a conscious artist through his skilful manipulation of the various devices he has adopted to narrate his tale effectively. *The Scarlet Letter* is the best in its artistic design and construction. The wit, irony, ambiguity and the pictorial elements in Hawthorne's writing make his work heavier and effective. The quality of his writing is also greatly enhanced.

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