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TECHNIQUE OF THE NOVEL SERIES: I

The Scarlet Letter: The Power of Ambiguity

Fred H. Marcus

This is the first in a series of articles designed as a kind of refresher course in the technique of the novel. The remaining articles in the series will appear in the next three issues. In this article, Dr. Marcus, a professor of English at the Los Angeles State College, treats the structure and themes of Hawthorne's great work.

If a novel has any meaning at all, it must have meaning to a reader. If a novel has any structure, it must have structure for a reader. To teach a novel, then, requires a reader who is asked to assess his responses. If the evaluative process is rigorous and effective, the stock responses and irrelevant associations deplored by I. A. Richards are rooted out. If the reader is also a student of novels, he seize on other people's responses as a further means of shaping and enlarging his own. Fresh from other readers' perceptions and theories, he comes anew to the novel, eager and available for an enhanced literary experience. Whatever his responses may be, he tests them against the particulars of the work itself.

What follows here is one reader's responses to a complex novel. Where others have pointed prior lantern lights, conventional acknowledgment credits such illumination as shed light—light for a particular reader.

One fundamental assumption is consciously operative throughout this article. Valuable critical tools will be cited but the emphasis is never on the tools—but the text. The reader must return to the text for his insights, his perceptions, his awareness, his theories, his responses. Let us turn then to the study of the novel, to the study of a particular novel, to the study of details which help comprise a specific novel. Above all else let us turn mostly to an explication of text, a rigorous procedure designed to make literary responses both full and fruitful.

What is a novel? This innocent-looking question too often elicits fixed criteria or a rigid classification. In countering one critic's injunction about the way fiction "should" be written, Henry James retorted:

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable, and such as can only suffer from being marked out or fenced in by prescription. . . . The critic who over the close texture of a finished work shall pretend a geography of items will
mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. There is an old-fashioned distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incident which must have cost many a smile to the intending fabulist who was keen about his work. It appears to me as little to the point as the equally celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance—to answer as little to any reality.¹

In Aspects of the Novel E. M. Forster responds to the question, “What Is a Novel?” He quotes the famous definition that a novel is “...une fiction en prose d’une certaine étendue” and extends the definition to any “fictitious prose work over 50,000 words.” Forster continues, quite seriously, to illustrate the dangers inherent in rigid classification by challenging his audience to find an alternative definition, which will include The Pilgrim’s Progress, Marius the Epicurean, The Adventures of a Younger Son, The Magic Flute, The Journey of the Plague, Zuleika Dobson, Rasselas, Ulysses, and Green Mansions² or to explain their exclusion.

Assuming the wide scope of 50,000 plus words accorded to the novel, the question shifts from “what is a novel” to “what can a novel accomplish” and implied within the question is a comparison between the novel form and shorter fiction. Critics usually assume, implicitly or explicitly, the opportunity in the novel for greater complexity of plot, more extensive use of incident, fuller and more complex characterization, and wider geographical scope. Certainly the possibility exists for more extensive delineation of more characters and more comprehensive philosophical breadth. Moral values, social systems and institutions, natural phenomena, the relationship between internal and external events: all or any of these may be more fully explored in the larger canvas of the novelist.

Gardner and Dunlap, in The Forms of Fiction, make several useful observations about organization and structure of the novel. Noting the complexity and variety of novels, and the diversity of organizational patterns, they focus on one kind of structure in longer fiction. Linear novels tend to emphasize the “consecutive actions of a single character.” Theme in such a novel emerges from the actions of and change in the central character. More complex is the interrupted-linear novel, which, as its name implies, does not pursue a single faithful narrative line but allows the novelist to interrupt his story to focus upon another character. Thus, two sets of incidents can be juxtaposed, each shedding light or contrast upon the other. A third novel structure is the multilinear where several “plots which bear on a single theme are juxtaposed, often by shifts in point of view from episode to episode or chapter to chapter.” In this still more complexly structured form, relationships among characters as well as their diverse value systems help to shape theme. Where “numerous settings function symbolically,” Gardner and Dunlap indicate the term, architectonic.³ Modern criticism also emphasizes “point of view” or the ways in which the novelist permits his readers to view the events and the novelist’s attitudes—if revealed—toward the incidents.

Let us now examine The Scarlet Letter in the light of the brief descriptions above. While the novel deals with four major characters, even unto assigning separate chapters to each of them, it contains essentially one narrative or

plot. However, the complexity of character interrelationship suggests the more complex form. Certainly, symbolic settings color the novel. The scenes include the marketplace, dominated by the raised scaffold, at the beginning, in the middle, and again at the end of the novel. Other symbolic sets include the prison, governor's hall, Chillingworth's laboratory, the seashore, and the forest. Indeed, one critic has noted that the chapters assigned to Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth are largely narrative and psychological rather than dramatic (in the sense of acting upon) while the rest of the novel lends itself to a five-act structure. Still another critic focuses on four sections in the novel, seeking the initiator of the action in each section. From this point of view, the Puritan community becomes a major "actor" initiating the original action in the novel and starting the necessary isolation out of which reactions flow.

In his "Introduction" to The Scarlet Letter, Harry Levin writes:

We speak of a book as a classic when it has gained a place for itself in our culture, and has consequently become a part of our educational experience. But the term conveys further meanings implying precision of style, formality of structure, and, above all, concern for the basic principles that animate and regulate human behavior. Evaluated by these criteria, the list of unquestioned American classics is not a lengthy one. Often, with oblique regard for the alphabet, it is headed by The Scarlet Letter. Since "style" implies not only narrative and descriptive detail but also the language, the use of symbols, and tone of the novel, any textual study of The Scarlet Letter must touch upon Hawthorne's artistry in these areas. If "structure" encompasses the juxtaposition of scenes, deliberate ambiguities and antitheses in the novel, the relating of inner emotional states to external (physical) manifestations, and the devices for communicating thematic philosophical views, then these matters also merit detailed explication. Certainly, Levin's high regard for the "basic principles that animate and regulate human behavior" confirms his acceptance of psychological reality as a meaningful part of the novelist's world. In The Scarlet Letter such psychological insights into character reach a very high level and deserve critical assessment.

Significant Symbols

Since theme and form are inextricably linked in any novel, the study of Hawthorne's structure offers a valuable entry into The Scarlet Letter. While the novel has encouraged a diversity of critical observations, several statements about structural elements seem most immediately pertinent. The Scarlet Letter, beginning with the ubiquitous A itself, is permeated with symbolic content. In Hawthorne, the Artist Leland Schubert observes:

... He never tells us in so many words what the "A" stands for; but there is no doubt in our minds. It is referred to first in chapter two as "the mark," "a certain token," and finally as "the letter A." Then it is called, in capital letters, "the SCARLET LETTER." Then it is "the red letter," "the scarlet letter," "the ignominious letter," "the letter A," and again "the scarlet letter." Nine times in the first chapter in which it appears, chapter two, it is mentioned. Nearly a hundred and fifty times throughout the book does Hawthorne, in one way or another, refer to this symbol. Sixty percent of the times he calls it by its full name, "the scarlet

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letter.” At other times it is “the embroidered letter,” or “the ignominious brand,” or “the fatal symbol,” or anyone of a number of other names. It appears on the average of more than once every two pages. We are never allowed to forget it... Interestingly, the frequency of its use is divided almost equally between the first and second halves of the novel. ... Hawthorne uses his symbol with great care, putting it where it is most needed, and making it possibly the most dominating symbol in all literature.7

Nor has Hawthorne confined his symbols to the scarlet letter. In his opening chapter he ironically describes the “founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project,” allotting a piece of ground to serve as a prison, here characterized as “the black flower of civilized society.” Since Hawthorne’s symbols frequently appear in contrast, it is interesting to note that:

on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rosebush, 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.

We have, then, not only the rosebush of Nature but the black flower of man, an effective contrast. Hawthorne underlines his symbolism at the close of the first chapter by suggesting that a wild rose may serve to “symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.”

In the second chapter we encounter another highly significant symbol, one designed to recur twice more at strategic moments—at the exact center of the novel at its most climatic moment, and again at the end, in its most dramatic scene. The specific symbol is the scaffold and once again, in an ironic pattern, Hawthorne conjoins contrasting symbols:

Hester Prynne... came to a sort of scaffold, at the western extremity of the marketplace. It stood nearly beneath the eaves of Boston’s earliest church, and appeared to be a fixture there.

Upon this scaffold we see Hester and Pearl. It is the beginning of the novel; in the glare of daylight the Puritans—men with bearded physiognomies and broad-shouldered women—stare at and speak about Hester and her child. In chapter twelve, “The Minister’s Vigil,” Dimmesdale ascends the scaffold and shrieks into the dark night. While he is joined by Hester and Pearl, the minister reveals that he cannot join them on the platform by daylight. Thus at mid-novel, we have Dimmesdale cowering, torn between his wish for renunciation of his hidden sin (and the public repudiation involved) and a lack of courage needed to take the step. The novel ends (chapter 23) with Dimmesdale once more upon the scaffold, with Hester and Pearl beside him, in the full easing of public confession. Ironically, the night-hidden Dimmesdale of mid-novel represents the minister at almost lowest ebb, when he is most tortured and tormented. It is in public confession that he approaches regeneration and redemption. Thus, Hawthorne combines symbol, theme, and structure.

While Hester’s scarlet letter serves as a recurring symbol, Arthur Dimmesdale has a parallel symbol in the form of a gesture. When Hester refuses to name Pearl’s earthly father, Dimmesdale is pictured as leaning over the balcony “... with his hand upon his heart.”

7Leland Schubert, Hawthorne, the Artist (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944),
Later, "... he was often observed, on any slight alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain." Hawthorne constantly repeats the symbolic gesture. For, "... it had now become a constant habit, rather than a casual gesture, to press his hand over his heart. ..." The familiar gesture prompts little Pearl to ask, "Mother!—Mother!—Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"

Hawthorne adds an element of antithesis even as he links Hester's scarlet letter to Dimmesdale's symbolic gesture. Hester's symbol is a public one; Dimmesdale's scarlet letter is hidden. Nor does Hawthorne's contrast end here. Hester, stared at by the curious, "... could scarcely refrain, yet always did refrain, from covering the symbol with her hand."

The novelist's symbols extend beyond Hester and Dimmesdale. The opening chapter of the novel conjoins "... the black flower of civilized society, a prison" with the appropriate vegetation, "... burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru." Roger Chillingworth gathers herbs with "a dark flabby leaf." The symbolism is made more explicit by Chillingworth's statement:

I found them (the herbs) growing on a grave, which bore no tombstone, nor other memorial of the dead man, save these ugly weeds that have taken upon themselves to keep him in remembrance. They grew out of his heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried with him, and which he had done better to confess during his lifetime.

Not only the symbols but the analogy is clear. Hawthorne continues to link Chillingworth with the unwholesome and malignant. Hester gazes at him as he stoops to grub up a root:

She wondered what sort of herbs they were, which the old man was so sedulous to gather. Would not the earth, quickened to an evil purpose by the sympathy of his eye, greet him with poisonous shrubs. ...? Would he not suddenly sink into the earth, leaving a barren and blasted spot, where, in due course of time, would be seen deadly nightshade, dogwood, henbane, and whatever else of vegetable wickedness the climate could produce, all flourishing, with hidden luxuriance?

Contrasting with the malignancy of nature allied to Chillingworth is nature allied to Pearl. She is a child of nature whose play letter A, made of eel-grass, is described as "freshly green." Even in the black and dense primeval forest whose flickering sunshine is "feebly sportive" Pearl catches the sunshine that eludes Hester. Symbolism in Pearl contains an allegorical element; the child is Nature incarnate, as she is the scarlet letter incarnate. She is also an elf-child, a demon offspring, a lovely and immortal flower, and the symbol of humanity that saves Hester from human isolation. To the extent that Pearl is Nature, an allegorical pattern may be pursued. Within this pattern Dimmesdale symbolizes Religion, Roger Chillingworth is Science, and Hester Prynne might be construed as Art (capital A). Pursuing the pattern further, we find Art and Science incompatible, and Science and Religion at war.

Nature of Ambiguities

While further allegorical implications might be pursued, Hawthorne's ambiguities permeate the novel suggesting that absolutes of allegory be evaluated with caution. Hawthorne, like a twentieth century psychologist, permits his paradoxes in The Scarlet Letter to point to a pluralism more complex than allegory allows.

The opening chapter stresses an immediate paradox. "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia ..." have found it essential to commence their
Utopian vigil with a cemetery and a prison. Paradoxes continue.

Little Pearl, the daughter of Hester and Dimmesdale’s illicit and sinful passion, is described as “. . . that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion.” Moreover, while man “had marked this woman’s sin by a scarlet letter . . . God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child . . .” Out of sin comes innocence and loveliness. But, Hawthorne continues, “She (Hester) knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its results would be for good.” Might the real result of sin be Hester’s lack of faith? The idea echoes the theme of “Young Goodman Brown.” Hawthorne accepts a hierarchy of sins (pluralism) and the sin of passion is less destructive than loss of faith or the unpardonable sin of violating a human heart, the sin of surrendering oneself from the great electric chain of being.

Sometimes, Hawthorne’s ambiguity rests on parenthetical additions to observations made by his characters. For example, Hester sometimes beheld in Pearl a face, fiend-like, full of smiling malice, yet bearing the semblance of features that she had known full well, though seldom with a smile, and never with malice in them. It was as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just peeped forth in mockery.

Hawthorne precedes this description with the observation that “women in solitude, and with troubled hearts, are pestered with unaccountable delusions.” Similarly, when Dimmesdale persuades Governor Bellingham to let Hester keep her Pearl, and uses the argument that the child will keep her mother from “blacker depths of sin,” Mistress Hibbins invites Hester to the forest. After Hester declines the invitation, Hawthorne concludes the chapter, “Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan’s snare,” but precedes this statement with the ambiguous “. . . if we suppose this interview betwixt Mistress Hibbins and Hester Prynne to be authentic and not a parable—”

Hawthorne mixes irony with ambiguity when he enlarges upon the symbol of the scarlet letter:

The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helplessness was found in her, —so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.

To “Able” we might add “. . . angel and apostle of the coming revelation.” Certainly, Hester contains elements of the multiple A symbols. Turning to Dimmesdale we find that he too wears a scarlet letter. Hawthorne explains his physical letter in three ways, prefaced by “Some affirmed. . . . Others contended. . . . Others again . . . whispered. . . .” Subsequently, Hawthorne concludes, “The reader may choose among these theories.” Following the alternative theories, Hawthorne proposes a significant alternative, prefaced by a familiar type of statement, “. . . 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, more than on a new born infant’s.” In this last alternative the “certain persons” explain the minister’s death as a parable. Hawthorne concludes:

Without disputing a truth so momentous, we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale’s story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man’s friends—and especially a clergyman’s—will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs,
clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the dust.

The omniscient author, taking this ironic tone, thereby reinforces the existence of a scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's breast. If Hawthorne is establishing one myth here, he is simultaneously demolishing a myth-making process, especially where a clergyman is concerned.

Hawthorne qua Psychologist

While The Scarlet Letter was described by Hawthorne himself as a romance where "the Actual and the Imaginary may meet," Harry Levin points out, very acutely, that:

... the quasi-historical setting allows him to question certain moralistic assumptions with a freedom and a candor which he could not have applied to a nineteenth-century subject. It is not the least of the book's achievements that, in the very epoch of genteel femininity, when America outdid Victorian England in the strictness of its taboos, Hawthorne's treatment of a triangle was hardly less of a challenge than D. H. Lawrence's.

It is necessary to add that Hawthorne is far less interested in the adultery itself than in the effects of sin upon the characters themselves. The public guilt of Hester produces a dangerous alienation between Hester and humanity. Without Pearl as her link to human beings, Hester would have moved closer to Mistress Hibbins and her Satanic revels. Hawthorne describes Pearl as "... a born outcast of the infantile world." He adds, "Mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society." It is Hawthorne qua psychologist who acutely senses those elements in the nature of Hester Prynne and those different elements in the nature of the Puritans that turns Hester toward humanity:

It might be, too, —and doubtless it was so, although she hid the secret from herself, and grew pale whenever it struggled out of her heart, like a serpent from its hole, —it might be that another feeling kept her within the scene and pathway that had been so fatal. There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in an union that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution. Over and over again, the tempter of souls had thrust this idea upon Hester's contemplation, and laughed at the passionate and desperate joy with which she seized, and then strove to cast it from her. She barely looked the idea in the face, and hastened to bar it in its dungeon. What she compelled herself to believe,—what, finally, she reasoned upon, as her motive for continuing a resident of New England,—was half a truth, and half a self-delusion. Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom.

As for the Puritans Hawthorne describes their "sable simplicity" which nonetheless erupts in public ceremonies in "... a sombre, but yet a studied magnificence." Hester's needle work, her art, "was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead." Thus, Hester's rationalizing combined with the Puritan modes of dress to make Hester's penance possible. But Hawthorne adds an ironic note; out of Hester's punishment and estrangement comes a greater danger. Liberated in one sense from the community, Hester "assumed a freedom
of speculation. . . . In her lonesome cottage, by the sea-shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England. . . .” While we perceive speculation as dangerous from a Puritan point of view, Hawthorne, in the role of omniscient author, comments:

It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action.

Treatment of Dimmesdale

It is worth speculating, in the light of this insight, on the Puritan view of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, as well as Hester. The Puritans punished Hester, hoping ironically to “save” her but forcing upon her the isolation leading to more serious alienation and also the possible sin of pride and bold speculation. She moves closer to the position of Chillingworth, and farther from a womanly position of warmth. The Puritans sense the allegiance of Chillingworth and Satan but do not recognize the utter depths of his depravity, not his liaison with evil but his intellectual pride that will not leave punishment to God; he moves toward the unpardonable sin of severing himself from humanity. In this respect he acts very much like Ethan Brand. To the conventional Puritan he might have even been approved as rooting out hidden sin. In Dimmesdale we have the irony of the guilty minister serving as the symbol of saintliness. On the day following the minister’s vigil on the scaffold, he preached a discourse which was held to be the richest and the most powerful, and the most replete with heavenly influences, that had ever proceeded from his lips. Souls, it is said, more souls than one, were brought to the truth by the efficacy of that sermon. . . .

In the change that occurs in Pearl, Hawthorne reveals one of his most basic themes, a theme permeating the novel and his short stories, the theme of human isolation being destructive. In the chapter devoted to Pearl, he observes:

the hostile feelings with which the child regarded all these offspring of her own heart and mind. She never created a friend, but seemed always to be sowing broadcast the dragon's teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle.

Then, in the climactic scene of the minister's vigil on the scaffold Hawthorne brings Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl together:

The minister felt for the child's other hand, and took it. The moment that he did so, there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through all his veins, as if the mother and the child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. The three formed an electric chain.

But the moment does not persist. Dimmesdale’s fears cannot survive the coming of daylight and he returns to concealment and isolation. In the chapter, “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter,” Hawthorne dispels the sins of concealment and isolation. When the minister, in the open light of day, calls Hester and Pearl to stand beside him on the scaffold, an almost magical result ensues:

Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as the tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, not for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it.

The power of love in contrast to isolation also appears in The Scarlet Letter in another form. Hawthorne views the Puritans in two ways, as hu-
man beings directly and in their institutional harshness. Speaking in the omniscient author voice, he notes, "It is to the credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates." With this assumption stated Hawthorne continues:

The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people. . . . Individuals in private life, meanwhile, had quite forgiven Hester for her fraility; nay, more, they had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her many good deeds since.

Even Dimmesdale's forgiveness of Hester's sin of concealment (not telling him about her relationship to Chillingworth) takes on a relativistic tone:

We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart.

F. O. Matthiessen observes that Hester and Dimmesdale are distinguished from the wronged husband in accordance with the theological doctrine that excessive love for things which should take only a second place in the affections, though leading to the sin of lust, is less grave than love distorted, love turned from God and from his creatures, into self-consuming envy and vengeful pride.8

Treatment of Chillingworth

Hawthorne's treatment of Roger Chillingworth is much more severe than his treatment of Hester or the minister. Yet even here, ambiguities and paradoxes persist. With appropriate symbolism the old man is described as "withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun." Yet Chillingworth was the wronged husband; he had been, throughout life, "calm in temperament, kindly, though not of warm affections, but ever, and in all his relations with the world, a pure and upright man." Hawthorne half suggests that Chillingworth's drive for vengeance has an element of "necessity," not a Puritan theological necessity but an artistic act succeeding act with a kind of dramatic inevitability.

When Hester asks Chillingworth if he has enticed her into a bond "that will prove the ruin" of her soul, he answers, "Not thy soul. No, not thine." Ambiguity exists in the remark. From the old man's view, he anticipates finding the guilty party; the reader recognizes the oncoming self-destruction. At the same time the remark heightens the tension in the novel and enhances the story-teller's effectiveness. Almost the same device to increase tension is used when Chillingworth in the recognition chapter remarks, in a heightening of the dread, "... he will be known!—he will be known!—he will be known!"

Hawthorne exploits the changes in Chillingworth to pursue a recurrent theme, the idea that inner states of being are reflected in outer manifestations. Thus, Hester's recollection of her husband as she stands upon the scaffold includes his slight physical deformity and his "pale, thin, scholar-like visage. . . ."

The foreshadowing accomplished, Hawthorne immediately underlines the idea:

He was small in stature, with a furrowed visage, which, as yet, could hardly be termed aged. There was a remarkable intelligence in his features, as of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens.

Hawthorne then enhances his story with a dramatic conclusion in chapter

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ten. Roger Chillingworth thrusts aside the minister's vestment:

With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms toward the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom.

Hawthorne concludes his description of Chillingworth in the last chapter of the novel:

Nothing was more remarkable than the change which took place, almost immediately after Mr. Dimmesdale's death, in the appearance and demeanor of the old man known as Roger Chillingworth. All his strength and energy— all his vital and intellectual force— seemed at once to desert him. . . .

His death occurs within the year. Hawthorne correlates the moral and spiritual degradation with the physical deterioration. He uses essentially the same device in a more spectacular way earlier in the novel when he introduces the "great red letter in the sky"—the letter "A" which some believed stood for Angel. Here, the novelist combines ambiguity, symbolism, and storytelling. However, this is the scene that prompts Henry James, in his biography of Hawthorne, to protest:

. . . imaginative, impressive, poetic; but when almost immediately afterwards, the author goes on to say 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," we feel that he goes too far, and is in danger of crossing the line that separates the sublime from its intimate neighbour. We are tempted to say that this is not moral tragedy, but physical comedy.9

On the level of conscious symbolism, the scene is highly significant. The minister's wild shriek attracts attention— from Governor Bellingham and from Mistress Hibbins. If the governor represents secular authority and Mistress Hibbins suggests a link to diabolical authority, here are symbolic opportunities for Dimmesdale to break from his concealment. Moments later Reverend John Wilson, the symbol of spiritual authority, also passes Dimmesdale. The minister aligns himself with none of them. He remains isolated. It is only with Hester and Pearl that he can feel any unity. But that unity is frustrated by cowardice.

The novel ends on a somber and gloomy note. Hester and Dimmesdale share one escutcheon, sable, relieved only by one glowing point of light, gules. Hawthorne has, of course, foreshadowed the end in his opening chapter. The wild rosebush's flower symbolizes a "sweet moral blossom" designed to "relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." And a rich and complex tale it is!

9Henry James, Hawthorne (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901).