

The Elements of Romance in "The Scarlet Letter" **By Nathaniel Hawthorne**

RuchiraKhullar
*Asso.Prof.,
Dept. of English,
Govt. College Faridabad, Haryana
Research Scholar,
OPJS University,
Churru, Rajasthan*

Abstract

Since the publication of The Scarlet Letter, in 1850 the book has been subjected to various interpretations. It has been interpreted as criticism of Puritanism, a propaganda of Calvinism, a document of nineteenth century perfectionism, and an allegorical study of sin and symbolism, a tale of crime and punishment, a tragedy of love, and a case study of the theme of sin, isolation and regeneration.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

RuchiraKhullar,

*The Elements of Romance in
"The Scarlet Letter"*
By Nathaniel Hawthorne,

Notions 2018,
Vol. IX, No. 4,
pp. 44-54,

Article No.7

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=5005](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=5005)

Introduction

All such interpretations, whatsoever, give weight to and gather force from Hawthorne's admittance that *The Scarlet Letter* is a "romance". When we say that *The Scarlet Letter* is a "romance", we do expect from the book something more than a mere story or a social realism essentially expected of a traditional novel. In his essay "Novel vs. Romance", Richard Chase distinguishes between the novel and the romance thus:

Doubtless the main difference between the novel and the romance is in the way in which they view reality. The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes a group of people and sets them going about the business of life. We come to see these people in ... explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past. Character is more important than action and plot ... the events that occur will usually be plausible.²

According to Chase the romance is antithetical to the novel:

By contrast the romance feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be free in a romance than in a novel... The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or to the past... In American romances it will not matter much what class people come from, and where the novelist would arouse our interest in a character by exploring his origin, the romancer will probably do so by enveloping it in mystery. Character itself becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems merely to be a function of the plot. The plot we may expect to be highly colored. Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic plausibility.³

Chase's implication is that both the novel and the romance, though fictional, view reality but indifferent ways. That the novel is a product of "fancy" while the romance is a product of "imagination". As he says: "The romance is of loftier origin than the novel. It approximates the poem".⁴ To look at it is a novel, but its thematic concerns are poetic.

From the foregoing quotations of Chase we can precisely conclude that the romance is a kind of novel in which the author concentrates on the inner aspects of plot and character; that he is interested more in the 'intrinsic' value of a story than in its 'extrinsic' realism; that he is more interested in delineating an 'idea' than in social reality. It is a kind of an intricate novel of ideas which looks like a 'novel' but reads like a 'poem'. The romance is a novel that describes, to quote Hawthorne' "a neutral

territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the actual and the imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us" ("The Custom-House", Bradley, p.31).

If we read *The Scarlet Letter*, with the above criteria of the novel and the romance in our mind, we are tempted to call this book "A Romance", and there should be no problem for us to probe it as such.

The very opening chapter – "The Custom-House" – of the novel reveals that the story of Hester Prynne is going to be a romance. When the author-narrator discovers the "mysterious package" and in it a certain affair of a fine red cloth, embroidered on it the scarlet letter 'A', three inches and a quarter in length, belonging to a remote past, his eyes get fastened themselves to this letter. He thinks: "Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind" (Bradley, p. 28). When he places the cloth of the scarlet letter on his breast, he experiences the "burning heat as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron" (Bradley, p.28). When he reads the hints about Hester Prynne's connection with this letter, he decides to write her story. So long as the book tells Hester Prynne's story it is a novel, but when the writer tends to decode the meaning of the scarlet letter 'A' the romance element so dominates that the 'novel' element is eclipsed, and *The Scarlet Letter* slips from the grip of the aspects of the "novel" and enters the vaster realm of the fictional genre called the "romance".

The Scarlet Letter is a romance also in that its author deals with the seventeenth century Calvinistic notion of sin and its effect on human personality. Although Hawthorne himself was a Puritan, he differed widely with his forefathers on questions concerning punishment to the sinners. The book is a vehement denunciation of Puritan morality of the seventeenth century which denied to man the gratification of the legitimate urges and devitalised life by inflicting on him harsher modes of punishment.

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* presents before us three sinners – Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth. Each of the three sinners represents a separate case of sin; Hester is an open sinner, Dimmesdale is a secret sinner and Roger Chillingworth is an unpardonable sinner. Each one of these sinners is first isolated from the society on the committal of the sin, then alienated and ultimately regenerated. In the case of Hester Prynne, the open sinner, regeneration takes place by her secret confession within herself that impels her to do service to

the suffering humanity. This accounts for her regeneration. In the case of Arthur Dimmesdale, the secret sinner, regeneration takes place by open confession in public. And in the case of Roger Chillingworth, the unpardonable sinner, regeneration does not take place by his own effort but on account of Dimmesdale's last prayer to God for grant of forgiveness to him. So, when we concentrate on the problem of sin that dominates the book we forget the story element of *The Scarlet Letter* and find ourselves caught in a serious psychological problem that grips us all. The psychological impact of the subject of sin on the mind of the readers makes the book a psychological romance.

The Scarlet Letter is a romance also in that Hawthorne has made an extensive use of symbolism in the book. "The Custom-House" essay tells us that the mystic symbol 'A' comes first and the story of Hester Prynne comes later; in fact this story has been told with a view to decoding various meanings of the *Scarlet Letter* 'A'. Hawthorne repeats this symbol several times in the novel, and it dominates the scene, the narrative and the character. Its impact on the reader is so deep and intense that in the course of his reading of the novel he gets interested more in locating the reference of the Letter "A" and decoding its symbolic meaning than in reading the story. This also clinches that *The Scarlet Letter* is a romance.

In the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne largely draws from actual persons, places and incidents pertaining to the seventeenth century Boston. Yet the book is not a historical romance in the usual sense of the term; for there are many inductions of the 'marvellous' or the imaginary into the tale. Some of these marvelous references are; the appearance of the Scarlet Letter 'A' in the fire place of Hester (p. 73), in her mirror (p.79), in the sky (p. 112), on the flesh of Dimmesdale (p. 102). Another marvelous incident is Pearl's observation that the sunlight is running away from Hester; yet another 'marvel' we see in Chillingworth's semblance with the Devil.

Moreover, like any lover of supernaturalism, Hawthorne has taken a great interest in the use of odd numbers in *The Scarlet Letter*. Coleridge does so to create the effect of supernaturalism. The size of the Scarlet Letter 'A' is three inches and a quarter; the infant Pearl is first of all shown as *three* months old; the number of women who adversely criticise Hester in the market place is *five*; Hester is brought on the scaffold after *three* years and then *seven* years; the span between the sin and its confession is seven years. All these odd number – three, five, seven – used at various places in the novel give us an impression of the supernatural. All these marvelous incidents and supernatural references do pull the 'novel' up into the realm of 'romance'.

The twentieth century American critic, Yvor Winters calls *The Scarlet Letter* a "romance" largely because Hawthorne sharply deals in it with the emotional and mental reactions of the character. The characters of *The Scarlet Letter* lose their solid state and become abstractions⁵. Herbert Gorman does not call them characters at all but merely symbolic figures of certain Christian virtues and vices used by Hawthorne to convey his ardent theme of sin and punishment.⁶

Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* for its chiefly dealing with the "inner" meanings of persons, places and things is a romance. With the writing of this book Hawthorne has elevated the status of the imaginative writing called the romance. Charles Feidelson, Jr. rightly says that:

Hawthorne was anxious not merely to draw the literary distinction between the novel and the romance, and to enter apologies for the latter, but also, and more fundamentally, to fix the status of the romance in an almost metaphysical sense".⁷ Since the book ardently deals with human psychology in the garb of the theme of sin, it offers a psychoanalytical study of the human mind. And in this functional sense *The Scarlet Letter* is a psychological 'romance'.

We have by now see that in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne deals with the central theme of sin by adopting a matchless technique – by motivating the reader in "The Custom-House", to bear with him through his symbolism; in order to lend weight to his symbolism he follows the mode of 'romance'. But the astonishing truth is that in this scheme of technique, *The Scarlet Letter* automatically acquires a structural beauty of high excellence having the characteristics of a novel in dramatic structure. *The Scarlet Letter* for its romantic qualities and architectonic beauties has been hailed in critical circles as "a perfect novel". Henry James, A. Bears, John Macy, Mark Van Doren and others have variously hailed the structure of the novel as "a perfect structure". Henry James traces in it: "A charm found in an artist's work".⁸ Leland Schubert examines in detail the artistic merits of the work, the structure of the plot-pattern, and the rhythm and the balance in terms of 'form' and 'content'. Macy traces in it "a perfect novel" and C.H. Grabo admires its "highly selective art". A Bears has discovered it as "an intensely conceived, the most thoroughly, fused and logically developed" work.

Leland Schubert in his book "*Hawthorne, the Artist*" makes a detailed study of the technical perfection of *The Scarlet Letter*. Schubert asserts:

Hawthorne has come to the absolute geometric composition in *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel introduces an introduction in the beginning of the tale and the conclusion at the end. The main plot, depicting the plight of the heroine and her

psychological conflicts has been placed within this framework... The introduction is cluefully linked with the plot by its reference to *The Scarlet Letter*, yet it is separate from the main story. In the similar manner the conclusion is also separate from the main plot, yet it has been connected with the introduction by its references to the old manuscripts and the Surveyor Pue alluded to the introduction.⁹

What Schubert means is that in this novel Hawthorne has followed a perfect technique of the plot. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the end is a natural consequence of the beginning. In this sense the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* stands true to Aristotle's requirements of an ideal tragic plot, and as such it places *The Scarlet Letter* with the genre of drams called 'tragedy'.

Malcolm Cowley also substantiates Schubert's view when he compares the book with a five-act tragedy. According to Cowley Chapter I stands for the 'Prologue' of the tragedy and Chapter XXIV for its 'Epilogue'. The main Acts have been divided by Cowley like this – Act I: Chapters II to VIII; Act II: Chapters IX to XII; Act III: Chapters XIII to XVI; Act IV: Chapters XVII to XX; Act V: Chapters XXI to XXIV.¹⁰ Even Edward Dawson has suggested his division of the novel into the four Acts of a drama.¹¹ Whatever be its Act division it does not matter much, but a critical perusal of the novel certainly gives us the experience of watching something that is architectonically perfect.

Even if *The Scarlet Letter* is to be read as a novel only, we find in it a systematic organisation of the chapters and the episodes. The whole novel of twenty-four chapters can be divided into two parts by the twelfth chapter which falls exactly in the middle. The first three and the last three belong to the different group – the chapters depicting the events which centre round the Market-Place. The first three chapters delineate Hester's sin and her disgrace while the last three depict the advancement of the plot in Dimmesdale's victory over Chillingworth. The remaining chapters are also systematically arranged. The Chapters IV, V, VI, VII and VIII which dwell on Hester's conflict with the community fall in one group, and the Chapters XVI, XVII, XVIII and XX which deal with Hester's union with Dimmesdale, fall in the second group. Both these groups are in direct correspondence with each other. The Chapters IX and XI fall into a different section which reveals Chillingworth's effort to unravel the secret of Dimmesdale's heart. This section corresponds with the part including Chapters XIII, XIV and XV, showing Hester and Pearl and throwing light on Hester's improved condition. All these chapters have been unified by Hawthorne by certain recurring symbols and what Schubert calls "rhythmic motif".¹² The chief "rhythmic motif" used in the novel to unify incidents and characters in the

symbol, the scarlet letter 'A'. It has been variously named as "the red letter", "the scarlet letter", "the ignominious letter", "the letter 'A'". It has been mentioned nine times in the first chapter, while nearly a hundred and fifty times throughout the book. About sixty percent of the time Hawthorne calls by the full name: "The Scarlet Letter". It appears on an average more than once on every two pages. Thus the reference of the scarlet letter here and there in the book is a device that supplies unity to the plot, incidents, characters, thought, and the narrative technique of the writer.

Another "rhythmic motif" used in *The Scarlet Letter* is the horror of loneliness which reveals the conditions of the tormented soul. Both Hester and Dimmesdale suffer from their sense of guilt and each falls a victim to the horror and inflictions of the soul. In fact, the novelist has delineated in this novel an allegory of sin in terms of head and heart. In all there are three sinners in the novel, each representing a separate case of sin but taken together, all the three stand for the Cosmic view of sin. Perhaps, all the sinners of the world can be discussed under three heads – the open sinners, the secret sinners, and the unpardonable sinners, and all these cases of sin are represented in this novel through the three major characters. Hester represents the case of an open sinner who is isolated, alienated and regenerated through secret confession. Arthur Dimmesdale is a secret sinner who is isolated and alienated both within and without but regenerated by means of open confession. Roger Chillingworth represents the case of an unpardonable sinner who is isolated, alienated and regenerated only after his death on account of Dimmesdale's prayer. Throughout the novel, the theme of sin, isolation and regeneration is developed in a systematic manner. And it is this theme of sin, isolation and regeneration that provides unity to the content and the structure of the plot of *The Scarlet Letter*.

'Pearl' is also used as a unifying force in *The Scarlet Letter*. She walks with Hester like her shadow and is a living symbol of Hester's sin and guilt. With her elf-like qualities Pearl has been associated with the demoniac spirit. In the chapters X, XI, XII and XIX these qualities of the girl have been recurrently mentioned. She is called: "little imp", "naughty-elf", "the little baggage" with a witchcraft in her. All these epithets made about Pearl here and there help the novelist to remind the characters of their sin and guilt.

Another "rhythmic motif" of the novel is shown in Chillingworth's sense of revenge and Dimmesdale's sense of guilt. The old doctor is shown right from the beginning till the end walking and strutting like the Devil himself, always on the lookout for an opportunity to prey upon his victims. The story really begins with

Chillingworth's resolution in the second chapter to prey upon Hester's lover, and the story ends with his effort to dissuade Dimmesdale from confessing. The novelist also gives us a peep into the psychology of Arthur Dimmesdale who is revered publicly but curses himself and flogs himself to show his guilt in privacy. Chillingworth's revenge motif and Dimmesdale's guilt, which go side by side, are also the factors that grant unity to the plot of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Thus we can say that *The Scarlet Letter* is the most exquisite specimen of a perfect novel having a unified plot and structure, fed by interconnected incidents and situations and symbolic devices – all in their total sum giving the impression of what Aristotle demanded of a perfect plot – of a “complete living man”.

To his art, and in which reference has been made to his thematic patterns which find their expression in both content and form of *The Scarlet Letter*, shows that through the epic tale of “frailty and sorrow” of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne has established himself as a top rung novelist of America and a classic interpreter of human life and its psyche. At its simplest level *The Scarlet Letter* treats the effects of the sin of adultery on the revered Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne (the adulterers), Pearl (their child), and Roger Chillingworth (Hester's cuckolded husband). But apart from this level the novel deals with other themes: the paradoxical relationship between good and evil or specifically, between passion and moral growth (Ernest Sandeen); the conflict between individual and society (Lewis); variations on the Christian process of sin, isolation and regeneration (Kaul); loss of position in the great chain of being (Matthews); the tragic irreconcilability of conflicting moral viewpoints (Gross); and the harshness of Puritanism (Woodberry). But all these various themes emanate from Hawthorne's central concern of sin and punishment.

A critical consideration of the major characters of *The Scarlet Letter* discloses more of the ambiguities and complexities in the novel. Hester has been called on the one hand ‘a saint’ (Munger), on the other ‘a female Faustus’ (Stein). She is very essence of paradox – passionate yet controlled, isolated by the community yet devoted to serving it, unrepentant in the traditional sense yet hopeful of leading immortal life with her lover. A free thinker, a moral speculator, and, therefore, a kind of transcendentalist, Hester certainly is, but while one scholar (Sherman) sees this as an implied criticism on Puritanism another (Carpenter) sees it as a criticism of transcendentalism. In the imagery that describes her, Hester is also ambiguous, being likened with both flowers and weeds (Waggoner).

Another controversial character is the hero of the novel, Arthur Dimmesdale, Scholars concur that he embodies hypocrisy but they argue over his ultimate fate

which Hawthorne leaves open to speculation. Some would have him saved (Van Doren); others damned him (Davidson). One (Abel) thinks that Hawthorne rescues Dimmesdale with a well timed death. In him we may find failure of hypocritical notions of Puritanism, and yet their success by repentance and confession.

As for Pearl, there is also diversity of opinion over her portrayal. In creating her, Hawthorne relied upon close observation of his daughter, Una.¹³ The result was curiously mixed – a real yet unreal child, a child which Trollope says is “the elf like for even a romance”. While the Puritans would have called her *natural* – a term they used for pagans – she should be considered innocent rather than sinful, for, according to the psychology of Hawthorne’s days she inherited Hester’s sin, as Hawthorne says in “The Custom House”, he inherited his ancestor’s sin,¹⁴ but not the guilt. Pearl’s function in the novel is important in that though she comes from sinful parents, she paradoxically leads the parents out of sin and, therefore, she is certainly a Biblical Pearl of great price¹⁵ in the novel. If Pearl qualifies as the kind of good angel, then Chillingworth, the least ambiguous of the characters, qualifies as a bad angel. Her is comparable not only to Mephistopheles but also to Doctor Faustus seeking forbidden knowledge as he attempts to discover Dimmesdale’s secret guilt. Yet something good may also be said about him: his earlier life had been “studious, thoughtful, quiet” and rather benevolent, so that like Milton’s Satan he represents less the essence of evil than the loss of goodness. And paradoxically, out of his moral degeneration comes an opportunity for moral progress when he bequeaths his property to Pearl by way of his Will.

Through these ambiguous characters Hawthorne’s general terminology that emerges includes words like ‘sin’, ‘pride’, ‘isolation’, ‘alienation’, ‘repentance’, ‘confession’ and even ‘regeneration’. And all these words time and again within the text of the novel draw our attention to the author’s basic thematic concern of man’s committal of sin and its effect on him in particular and society at large.

In order to convey this central thematic concern Hawthorne dexterously adopts the mode of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. The chief symbol, the embroidered letter ‘A’ worn by Hester is paralleled throughout, with the result that Hester herself, Dimmesdale and Pearl becomes its living embodiments. With this symbolism Hawthorne mixes a hint of the supernatural, suggesting that the letter ‘A’ seared on Dimmesdale’s chest is of necromantic origin and that another letter ‘A’, a kind of portent, appears emblazoned in the midnight sky, signifying the sin in the cosmic plan. In addition to these transcendental symbols connected with the letter ‘A’ we come across certain personal symbols like the wild rose-bush. The forest is both a

personal and transcendental symbol. It stands for escape freedom, unlimited possibility – all that can be associated with the American dream. It also stands for evil, witchcraft a six resort, a place that arouses what Lawrence would call it “Blood-consciousness”. The treatment of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* is so ambiguous, like the characters, that the more we ponder over the meaning of symbols, the more we find ourselves in a state of consternation. But, certainly symbolism for Hawthorne is a convenient device to help him to pull through his ambiguous theme of sin and its effect on human personality.

We have also seen that in order to make his technique of symbolism effective Hawthorne resorts to the mode of fiction writing called romance. Since he was temperamentally a man of introvert nature caused by his stresses and strains of his formative years, he excels in writing this novel in the form of a romance – “A neutral 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. Ghosts might enter here without affrighting us” (“The Custom-House”, Bradley, p.31).

Thus, we conclude that in *The Scarlet Letter*, depiction of ambiguities of characters is facilitated by the technique of symbolism; the technique of symbolism is perfected by the mode of romance, and in this scheme of things *The Scarlet Letter*, automatically acquires a perfect symmetry of structure. One may divide the novel into four Acts or five Acts of a play as critics like Dawson and Cowley have done, dividing the Acts by the scaffold scenes but the novel remains dramatic with an organic plot. Even if the division of the novel is to be made in terms of novel writing, its plot does not at any place shed its organic unity. It has all the requirements of a perfect novel with a beginning, a middle, and an end, the end being the natural consequence of the beginning.

References

- ¹ The original title of this novel was *The Scarlet Letter. A Romance*, see, SL (Bradley), p. 3.
- ² Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1962, p.12.
- ³ Ibid, p.13.
- ⁴ Ibid, p.16.
- ⁵ See: Yvor Winters, *In Defence of Reason*, Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1947.
- ⁶ See: Herbert Gorman, *Hawthorne A Study in Solitude*, N.Y. : Doran: 1927.

- ⁷ Charles Feidelson Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973, p.7.
- ⁸ See: Henry James, *Hawthorne*, (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. **87-92**. James's critical biography of Hawthorne is printed by some editors as an introductory to Hawthorne in their edition of *The Scarlet Letter*. One such edition is by Prof. A.G. George, *The Scarlet Letter* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964). The present reference appears on p.70 of George's edition.
- ⁹ Leland Schubert, *Hawthorne, the Artist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p.**142**.
- ¹⁰ See Malcolm Cowley, "Five Acts of *The Scarlet Letter*", reprinted in *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*, ed. by Charles Shapiro (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1958).
- ¹¹ For Dawson's division of *The Scarlet Letter* into four Acts of a drama, see Charles Ryskamp, "The New England Sources of *The Scarlet Letter*" printed in *SL* (Bradley ed.) pp.**208-09**.
- ¹² *Ibid*, p.**209**.
- ¹³ See "Notebooks: Pearl and Una" under, 'Background and Sources' *SL* (Bradley ed.) pp.**192-194**.
- ¹⁴ See *SL* (Bradley ed.) p.**11**.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.**67**.