

AN ESSAY ON *THE SCARLET LETTER*

By TADATOSHI SAITO*

I. A scarlet letter and *The Scarlet Letter*

According to "The Custom-House," an essay introductory to *The Scarlet Letter, a Romance* (1850), the story of Hester Prynne is based on the manuscripts of one Jonathan Pue, Hawthorne's predecessor in the office of a surveyor at the Custom-House in Salem. Hawthorne says that he has found, along with Mr. Surveyor Pue's manuscripts, a piece 'of fine red cloth, much worn and faded' which has the shape of the capital letter A.

Needless to say, the discovery of Mr. Pue's manuscripts and the scarlet letter is Hawthorne's fiction, and his remark—'The original papers, together with the scarlet letter itself,—a most curious relic,—are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them.'¹—is one of those techniques a novelist often uses to give his story authenticity.

Now, Hawthorne gained much of his knowledge of colonial Massachusetts from *Annals of Salem from its First Settlement* (1827) by Joseph B. Felt. In it is recorded, among other items, the following for May 5, 1694: 'Among such laws, passed this session, were two against Adultery and Polygamy. Those guilty of the first crime, were to sit an hour on the gallows, with ropes about their necks,—be severely whipt not above 40 stripes; and forever after wear a capital A, two inches long, cut out of cloth colored differently from their clothes, and sewed on the arms or back parts of their garments so as always to be seen when they were about.'²

Hawthorne's imagination seems to have been stimulated by these records since his early years. This is testified by one of his early short stories, "Endicott and the Red Cross" (1837), in which appears 'a young woman, with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown, in the eyes of the world and her own children.'³ Hawthorne had a strong sympathy and compassion for a victim of the cruelty of Puritanism, who was forced to wear as punishment for adultery the letter A (not necessarily 'scarlet') on the arms or back parts of his or her clothes.

These humane feelings of Hawthorne's were the creative energy which produced *The Scarlet Letter*, and the following passage from "The Custom-House" testifies how strong they were; '...it (the scarlet letter) strangely interested me. My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. 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

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¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* ("The Custom-House") (Centenary Edition) pp. 32-33.

² Cited in the notes by Larzer Ziff in The Library of Literature edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 30

³ N. Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales* ("Endicott and the Red Cross") (Everyman's Library) p. 321.

mind.... I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me,—the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word,—it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor.⁴

It is true that Hawthorne's conception of his masterpiece is allegorical in so far as it is originated from the symbol A, but his imagination has evoked a living person who suffered under the burden of the stigma. Hawthorne sympathized with the suffering of Hester Prynne and felt it, so to speak, as his own—as the pain of his own breast being burnt by red-hot iron.

This shows, among other things, that Hawthorne the romancer is at his most 'novelist-like' in *The Scarlet Letter, a Romance*. The deep meaning of the symbol A subtly communicated itself to Hawthorne's sensibilities, but evaded the analysis of his mind. It is clear that *The Scarlet Letter* is the product, not of his intellect but of his heart.

Our next problem is to clarify the reason why the victim of the cruelty of Puritanism as a character in Hawthorne's work had to be a woman. It could have been a man as well. The first answer to this question that occurs to us is that Hawthorne may have taken a hint for his romance from the story of a woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). The letter A is 'scarlet,' because 'scarlet' can show the intensity of human passion best of all colors, and it is the color of sin. [As to the fact that 'scarlet' is the color of sin, refer to the following passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah; 'Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as *scarlet*, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.' (Isaiah 1:18) (Italics mine)]

And according to *The Yellow Ruff and The Scarlet Letter* (1955) by Alfred S. Reid, the fictitious setting that the adulteress gives birth to a girl baby in the prison while her lawful husband tries to revenge himself on the man who has cuckolded him is modelled on the famous Overbury case in England.

The reason why Hawthorne has old Chillingworth (who is too old to be the husband of a young woman) appear as the husband of young Hester may be that Hawthorne seeks one of the causes of Hester's sin in their unnatural marriage. Hester comes over to the new continent from England ahead of Chillingworth. Alone in the strange land, she may well feel lonely and fall in love with a handsome young man, although he is the man of God.

Chillingworth is a physician and has a diabolical knowledge of herbs. This is clearly suggested to Hawthorne by the fact that Sir Thomas Overbury was poisoned to death.

The most artistic and most praiseworthy of the devices in the story of Hester Prynne is that Hawthorne has chosen as Hester's lover a clergyman, the pastor who has to lead her spiritually as one of his parishioners. This may be the expression of the sceptic Hawthorne's distrust of clergymen in general, but our conjecture is that he intended to describe the suffering of a human soul on a large scale. Dimmesdale who has committed adultery suffers all the more because he is a servant of God. Man can be godlike and beastly at the same time. This is one of the mysteries of human nature which Hawthorne has disclosed in his greatest romance.

Dimmesdale is Hester's pastor, and so it is his duty to exhort her to name her lover in the presence of a big crowd. This is quite an ironical device, because Dimmesdale himself

⁴ N. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* ("The Custom-House") (Centenary Edition) pp. 31-32.

proves to be Hester's lover. Our curiosity as to who is her lover is satisfied when Chillingworth succeeds in finding out the man who has wronged him. The plot of *The Scarlet Letter* is truly ingenious.

[By the way, the story of a woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11) does not mention her lover, because the scribes and the Pharisees have brought in the woman alone just to test Jesus, hoping to frame a charge against him. But Hawthorne has conjured up both the adulteress and her lover, and makes them suffer from the sin of adultery as 'the revealed sin' and as 'the hidden sin' respectively, and tries to probe the influences which the sin of adultery exerts on them physically, spiritually, and morally. It may be said that *The Scarlet Letter* is a novelistic extension of the Bible story.]

Finally we have to consider the appearance of Pearl who is the scarlet letter itself. Pearl makes her appearance in the story of Hester Prynne, for one thing, as an evidence for Hester's illegal love, but this 'natural' child is the most 'unnatural' of all the characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne has called her 'Pearl,' because he wanted to sanctify Hester's love with Dimmesdale and compare it to the pearl of great price in the parable of Jesus Christ. Pearl, the innocent child of the sinful souls, is their salvation. Hawthorne may have intended to throw a light of hope, though faint, into the somber world of *The Scarlet Letter*, but this is the limit of Hawthorne the romancer who was unable to describe the dark side of humanity in its terribleness.

II. *The Scarlet Letter* as a Novel

Yvor Winters has written in his essay, "Maule's Curse or Hawthorne and the Problem of Allegory," which tries to examine the merit of the allegorical way of perception Hawthorne inherited as the legacy of Puritanism; 'Of Hawthorne's three most important long works—*The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Marble Faun*—the first is pure allegory, and the other two are impure novels, or novels with unassimilated allegorical elements.'⁵ From this view of his that *The Scarlet Letter* is 'pure allegory,' Winters draws the following conclusion; 'Hester represents the repentant sinner, Dimmesdale the half-repentant sinner, and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner.'⁶ Frankly speaking, this conclusion of Winters' is wide of the mark and unconvincing. His insistence that *The Scarlet Letter* is 'pure allegory' is a dogmatism, and, as can be expected, this is what Richard Chase has criticized.

According to Chase, *The Scarlet Letter* is 'not pure allegory but a novel with (generally speaking) beautifully assimilated allegorical elements.'⁷ In the fourth chapter of *The American Novel and its Tradition* ("Hawthorne and the Limits of Romance"), Chase tries to 'make the mysterious connections between the rather simple elements of the book (*The Scarlet Letter*) and what is thought and felt about them' but his attempt is not entirely successful, because he views *The Scarlet Letter* as a romance which has failed to be a novel, not as a romance aspiring to be a novel. His conclusion is that 'it is clear, then, that although Hawthorne was a superb writer of romance and a considerable novelist from any point of

⁵ Harold Beaver (ed.), *American Critical Essays*, pp. 143-144.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

⁷ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, p. 75.

view, he was aware that his romances, as he himself insisted on calling them, proceeded in part from his failure to take a place among the great novelists.⁸

Now, if the 'romance-ness' of a prose work is just a pretext for covering the unnaturalness of its fictitious settings or the strangeness of its actions, the 'romance-ness' of this sort should be excluded from it by all means. The 'romance-ness' of Hawthorne's works is essentially one of his artistic devices to reveal 'the truth of human heart.' In his romances Hawthorne has chosen to reveal the universal through abstraction. But a novelist was living in Hawthorne the romancer, and he was eager 'to open an intercourse with the world.' This is well testified by "The Custom-House," an essay introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*.

"The Custom-House" is, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, a fiction describing the birth of Hawthorne's greatest romance, but it is also a written confession of a novelist who has been unsuccessful in writing a novel. In it Hawthorne grieves over his failure as a novelist as follows ;

It is my belief, however, that, had I attempted a different order of composition, my faculties would not have been found so pointless and inefficacious. I might, for instance, have contented myself with writing out the narratives of a veteran shipmaster, one of the Inspectors, whom I should be most ungrateful not to mention ; since scarcely a day passed that he did not stir me to laughter and admiration by his marvellous gifts as a story-teller. Could I have preserved the picturesque force of his style, and the humorous coloring which nature taught him how to throw over his descriptions, the result, I honestly believe, would have been something new in literature. Or I might readily have found a more serious task. It was a folly, with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me, to attempt to fling myself back into another age ; or to insist on creating the semblance of a world out of airy matter, when, at every moment, the impalpable beauty of my soap-bubble was broken by the rude contact of some actual circumstance. The wiser effort would have been, to diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of today, and thus to make it a bright transparency ; to spiritualize the burden that began to weigh so heavily ; to seek, resolutely, the true and indestructible value that lay hidden in the petty and wearisome incidents, and ordinary characters, with which I was now conversant. The fault was mine. The page of life that was spread out before me seemed dull and commonplace, only because I had not fathomed its deeper import. A better book than I shall ever write was there ; leaf after leaf presenting itself to me, just as it was written out by the reality of the flitting hour, and vanishing as fast as written, only because my brain wanted the insight and my hand the cunning to transcribe it. At some future day, it may be, I shall remember a few scattered fragments and broken paragraphs, and write them down, and find the letters turn to gold upon the page.⁹

What is very interesting here is that "The Custom-House" in which Hawthorne grieves over his failure as a novelist is a fine piece of fiction—a novel. It is a very good novel, because it is sustained by Hawthorne's interest in the actual. And his interest in the actual is what has evoked a living person who suffered under the burden of the stigma—the scarlet letter. As we all know, a writer's interest in the actual is what makes his work a novel.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁹ N. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* ("The Custom-House") (Centenary Edition) p. 37.

Hawthorne's interest in the actual we find in "The Custom-House" is what helps to make *The Scarlet Letter* the most novelistic of all Hawthorne's romances.

Why, then, has Hawthorne called *The Scarlet Letter* 'a Romance'? By calling his work 'a Romance,' did he 'claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel'?'¹⁰

Let us remember here the fact that all that Hawthorne had produced by the time when he published *The Scarlet Letter* were short stories and sketches except for his premature novel, *Fanshawe* (1828). Hawthorne himself was not satisfied with this fact, and he made up his mind to write at least one novel when he moved into the Old Manse with his newly-wedded wife in 1842.

...I took shame to myself for having been so long a writer of idle stories, and ventured to hope that wisdom would descend upon me with the falling leaves of the avenue, and that I should light upon an intellectual treasure in the Old Manse well worth those hoards of long-hidden gold which people seek for in moss-grown houses. Profound treatises of morality; a layman's unprofessional, and therefore unprejudiced, view of religion; histories ...bright with picture, gleaming over a depth of philosophic thought,—these were the works that might fitly have flowed from such a retirement. In the humblest event, I resolved at least to achieve a novel that should evolve some deep lesson, and should possess physical substance enough to stand alone.¹¹

In spite of this determination of his, what he could publish in 1846 after his three years of stay in the Old Manse were only some short stories contained in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846).

Hawthorne had to write down at the end of his introductory essay, "The Old Manse," as follows;

The treasure of intellectual gold which I hoped to find in our secluded dwelling had never come to light. No profound treatise of ethics, no philosophic history, no novel even, that could stand unsupported on its edges. All that I had to show, as a man of letters, were these few tales and essays, which had blossomed out like flowers in the calm summer of my heart and mind.¹²

When Zachary Taylor, a Whig, was elected to be the 12th President of the United States in 1849, Hawthorne, who was a sympathizer with the Democrats, lost his job as the surveyor at the Custom-House in Salem. Mainly because he had to support his family, Hawthorne started to write a fiction, which was to be *The Scarlet Letter*, probably in September that year. At first Hawthorne conceived it as a short story to be included in the collection of short stories he had intended to compile. This is testified by the following strange passage in "The Custom-House"; 'Some of the briefer articles, which contribute to make up the volume, have likewise been written since my involuntary withdrawal from the toils and honors of public life, and the remainder are gleaned from annuals and magazines, of such antique date that they have gone round the circle, and come back to novelty again.' And Hawthorne

¹⁰ Cf. "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables* (*The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*) p. 243.

¹¹ N. Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Vol. I, p. 8-9.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

comments on this passage as follows; "At the time of writing this article, the author intended to publish, along with "The Scarlet Letter," several shorter tales and sketches. These it has been thought advisable to defer."¹³

The Scarlet Letter is what we see now, because the publisher of Hawthorne's work urged him to make "The Scarlet Letter" longer. ("The Custom-House" may have been written to make "The Scarlet Letter" longer as well as to counter-balance to some extent the darkness of the world of *The Scarlet Letter*.) And Hawthorne's publisher brought out *The Scarlet Letter* as a single volume much against the author's will. Hawthorne seems to have had no time to reread his manuscripts. It may be that Hawthorne called *The Scarlet Letter* 'a Romance,' because he could not feel confident of the success of his work.

But why should our author lack confidence in the success of his masterpiece? As we have observed in the preceding chapter, the subject of *The Scarlet Letter* was what Hawthorne had been considering for at least twenty years. He had a considerable knowledge of the Boston of the 17th century, and had many historical facts at his command. He might have insisted that he had written, not a romance but a historical novel in *The Scarlet Letter*.

As is well known, Hawthorne has left some notes which might have served to create the principal characters in *The Scarlet Letter*.

The life of a woman, who, by the old colony law, was condemned always to wear the letter A, sewed on her garment, in token of her having committed adultery.

To symbolize moral or spiritual disease by disease of the body; thus, when a person committed any sin, it might cause a sore to appear on the body; this to be wrought out.

A story of the effects of revenge, in diabolizing him who indulges in it.

Pearl—the English of Margaret—a pretty name for a girl in a story.¹⁴

It is true, therefore, that Hawthorne conceived, to some extent, *The Scarlet Letter* as an allegory, but he has represented the tragedy of Hester Prynne as one that could and did happen in the Boston of the 17th century. So it is not right to say that Hawthorne conceived *The Scarlet Letter* primarily as a fantastic allegory.

It might be argued that the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* testifies to its 'romance-ness.' Now, the plot includes, among other events, the following;

1. In the crowd staring at Hester at the scaffold, there appears her husband, who has just been released from the custody by American Indians, and recognizes her.
2. Chillingworth is put into the very prison where Hester is confined, and meets her as a doctor.
3. Dimmesdale, who is Hester's lover, has to exhort her to identify her lover.
4. When Hester calls on the Governor Bellingham at his house to ask him not to take Pearl from her, she meets there Dimmesdale and Chillingworth who have been invited together as the Governor's guests.
5. Dimmesdale, Hester's lover, and Chillingworth, her husband, come into close contact

¹³ *The Scarlet Letter* ("The Custom-House").(Centenary Edition), p. 43.

¹⁴ Cf. Malcolm Cowley (ed.), *The Portable Hawthorne*, pp. 547-572.

- with each other as pastor and believer, and as patient and doctor, and try to identify each other.
6. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth live together in a widow's house, for the sake of the former's health.
 7. Chillingworth, who is trying to find the cause of Dimmesdale's disease, one day opens the bosom of the clothing of the patient who has fallen asleep over a book, and finds something on his chest, presumably a scarlet letter.
 8. On Saturday night seven years after Hester was made to stand on the scaffold, Dimmesdale ascends on the same scaffold with Hester and Pearl. Chillingworth sees them together. There appears in the sky a huge scarlet letter made by a shooting star.
 9. When Hester and Dimmesdale make a plan to flee to the old continent, Chillingworth becomes aware of it and thwarts it.
 10. Having attained the honor of delivering an Election Sermon, Dimmesdale confesses his sin and dies in the arms of Hester.

Some of these events are so unnatural—Hawthorne seems to depend too much on the strange coincidence of events—that they ought to be excluded from a novel which 'aims at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience,'¹⁵ but they are artistic devices which form an underplot novelistic enough to hold the reader's interest.

What well testifies to the fact that *The Scarlet Letter* is a work of romance aspiring to be a novel, is its fidelity to historical facts. Hawthorne's major source is Caleb Hopkins Snow's *A History of Boston* (1825) and he is said to have followed faithfully Snow's 'detailed street-by-street and house-by-house description' of the Boston of 1650.¹⁶ The Governor and pastors who appear as characters in *The Scarlet Letter* under their real names are said to be lifelike. It is not ascertained whether there lived a pastor called Dimmesdale, but there existed a woman called Hester who was condemned to wear the letter A. As we have said above, the tragedy of Hester Prynne is described as one that could and did happen in the Boston of the 17th century. Hawthorne views it as a debasement of human dignity, criticizes the cruelty of Puritanism, and shows a strong sympathy with Hester's suffering. This is not a romancer's attitude but a novelist's.

Philip Rahv says in his *Image and Idea* (1949) that '*The Scarlet Letter*...is the most truly novelistic of Hawthorne's romances. Its concrete historical setting gives it greater density of material and sharpness of outline; and largely because of this gain in reality, Hester Prynne is the least symbolically overlaid and distorted of the four heroines...'¹⁷

The Scarlet Letter, a tale of human frailty and sorrow as the author calls it,¹⁸ can be read with good reason as a kind of historical novel.

¹⁵ Cf. "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables* (*The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*), p. 243.

¹⁶ Cf. "Introduction" to *The Scarlet Letter* (Centenary Edition), p. xxvi.

¹⁷ Philip Rahv, *Image and Idea*, p. 40.

¹⁸ *The Scarlet Letter* (Centenary Edition) p. 48.