
PURITAN IMAGERY IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S
"THE SCARLET LETTER"

Hawthorne initially speaks in "The Custom-House - Introductory to The Scarlet Letter" of his earliest paternal ancestor in America William Hathorne as one who "had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil"; but the ensuing rhetoric emphasizes William's and his son John's negatives while consistently attributing positives to those whom they opposed. Hawthorne includes several ironic examples of Christian imagery and diction in this contrast; and the novel itself, in spite of considerable ambiguity, frequently reinforces these images.¹

Hawthorne's reference to specific Salem ancestors appears in conjunction with what he terms a "moral quality" in his affectionate ties to the city. What he knows of the first of his American Hathornes, for example, "haunts" him. He explains by labeling William Hathorne "a bitter persecutor," whose "hard severity toward a woman of [the Quakers'] sect . . . will last longer, it is to be feared, than any record of his better deeds, although these were many.

The patriarch of the family's second American generation, Magistrate John Hathorne, receives an even more unfavorable assessment from his descendant. The judge, having inherited "the persecuting spirit, . . . made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him." The application of the term martyrdom to the victims intensifies the indictment against the Salem Witch Trials leader.² With martyrdom travels the imagery baggage of early Christians' being torn apart by lions for refusing to deny their faith in Christ. Such enshrinement for the twenty who were executed in Salem in 1692 also bears grim irony: John Hathorne, having acted in the service of what he evidently believed to be God's will, rather than earning any kind of reverence or gratitude for his actions from novelist Nathaniel, is himself charged with performing evil against martyrs, thus in fact serving the very force he aspired to oppose and betraying the very faith he sought to champion.

Hawthorne goes on to say he does not know whether William and John ever asked "pardon of Heaven for their cruelties" or whether they are instead paying for them "in another state of being," which is to say -- as residents in

¹ Harris, Kenneth Marc. *Hypocrisy and Self-Deception in Hawthorne's Fiction*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988.

² Salinger, Sharon V. *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.

hell.³ Had they, in other words, taken the traditional steps of Christian salvation by confessing their sins, praying to be redeemed from them by the Grace of Jesus Christ, and correcting the error of their ways? And if not, as seems probable since they presumably thought they were in the right, were they undergoing the eternal torment

in the Scriptures for unrepentant sinners? Whether Hawthorne himself fully subscribed to these beliefs, expected that a significant portion of his readers did, or simply found it irresistible to apply the Puritans' own theology as a judgment upon them, there can be no doubt that he introduces *The Scarlet Letter* with words that have the cumulative effect of damning Puritanism.

To paraphrase, Hawthorne asks God to recognize that, even if his ancestors were too blinded by their zeal to see their own wickedness, Hawthorne himself acknowledges their wrongs and expresses remorse for them; and, having done so, he beseeches the Lord to free him and his family forevermore from any further consequences of the Puritan Hawthornes' faults.⁴

In the transition which follows, Hawthorne imagines his ancestors' likely disapproval of him as "an idler," "A writer of story-books!," and a "degenerate fellow." The extent to which such probable rejection amuses more than troubles the author is evident in his trivializing the Salem business world where the Puritan work ethic appears to have atrophied. Indeed, he even rejoices at the loss of his job at the far-from-bustling Salem Custom House, specifically because it permitted him to move forward enthusiastically with penning *The Scarlet Letter*.⁵

The opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* describes Boston's Puritan prison where adulteress Hester Prynne is held with her illegitimate child of three months, Pearl. At one side of the prison's door is a wild rosebush with full June blooms, "which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner . . . in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind . . ." unlike, as the unspoken conclusion might go, the un-Natural, pitiless, mean inhabitants. There is a legend, moreover, that the plant "had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson. . . ." If the famous expulsion victim of one of the Puritans' most notorious examples of intolerance is indeed sainted -- a model Christian, a sufferer for the Faith, and certainly among the saved --

³ Miller, Edwin Haviland (1991). *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

⁴ Person, Leland S. "Bibliographical Essay: Hawthorne and History", collected in *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Oxford University Press, 2001: 187

⁵ Mellow, James R (1980). *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

according to Hawthorne, then evidently her cruel tormenters could very well lodge with the early Hawthornes in Hades.⁶

When Hester Prynne is put on display for public humiliation in the following chapter, Hawthorne again turns to Christian imagery that champions the adulteress and portrays the jeering townsfolk as genuine sinners. He supposes a Roman Catholic "would have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity" Hester and Pearl, in other words, are likened to Mary and Jesus, the Holy Virgin and the Savior. The Boston mob's scorn consequently comes to resemble the worst possible sacrilege.⁷

The third chapter depicts Hester performing her own sort of acts of salvation. Refusing to identify her lover, she declares, "would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!" Her love, therefore, not unlike that of Jesus Christ, seeks to save by means of self-sacrifice. "Adultery or no adultery - is this not the Christian message that the pettiness and persecutions of Puritanism evidently missed?" Hawthorne seems to ask.⁸

In the fifth chapter, Hawthorne has Hester reflect upon the wisdom of remaining in Boston, "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 of the result of martyrdom"; and he characterizes her magnanimous response to those who scorn her by noting that "She was patient, -- a martyr indeed" While she may have fallen through a sin of passion, therefore, she imagines herself to hold the key to her own redemption by means of enduring like a martyr and performing good works like a saint in the midst of a cruel and unforgiving community. If the Calvinist Puritans, who subscribed to the Doctrine of the Elect, had any inkling of Hester's notion that her own actions could serve to affect her salvation, they would undoubtedly have rebuked her even more harshly.⁹

The sixth chapter provides a rare example of explicit reinforcement for Hawthorne's condemnation of Puritanism in the introduction to the novel. After describing the Puritan children's cruel treatment of Hester's daughter Pearl when she is no more than three.

When the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale speaks passionately in the eighth chapter of the "quality of awful sacredness in the relations between [Hester and Pearl]" and the "blessing" which the child is for the parent, he manages to

⁶ Miller, Edwin Haviland (1991). *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

⁷ Buell, Lawrence, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 2006.

⁸ Haas, Irvin. *Historic Homes of American Authors*. Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991.

⁹ Mellow, James R (1980). *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

prevent their maliciously proposed separation. Two chapters later, it becomes clear that this eloquent advocate is in fact Hester's lover, Pearl's father. Ironically termed "The saint on earth!" in the eleventh chapter, this paragon of the Puritan community, is selected by Hawthorne not only to expose the theocracy's fallacious premises but also to suffer their cruel consequences pathetically.¹⁰

When the focus returns to Hester in Chapter Thirteen, the gradually more favorable public attitude toward her is attributed to "the blameless purity of her life" throughout her years of repentance. The scarlet letter itself is even said to have "the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom," imparting "to the wearer a kind of sacredness," enabling "her to walk securely amid all peril." The adulteress is like a chaste nun? The "A" for adultery resembles the emblem of the Crucifixion? The early Hawthornes would surely have spun in their graves if they could learn of Nathaniel Hawthorne's outrageously ironic analogies.¹¹

William and John Hawthorne would undoubtedly have viewed Pearl as more a product of the sinful world of the flesh than any rarefied one of the spirit, and they would probably classify any religious influence that Hester might potentially possess as nothing more than that of a satanic cult. Clearly, their descendant differs sharply with them.¹²

When Hester and Arthur meet in the forest in Chapter Seventeen, alone together for what is evidently the first time in seven years, she confesses to having deceived him by hiding the fact that his tormenter Roger Chillingworth is her husband. After his initial shock at this revelation, Arthur observes that:

"That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so."¹³

Hester responds with perhaps the most effective example of Christian imagery in the novel: "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other! Hast thou forgotten it?" Their union in lovemaking, in other words, in spite of the fact of adultery, was like a sanctification.¹⁴

If the straightjacket of rigid Puritanism had sought to confine such love, it had clearly failed. Seven years of outward conformity with Puritan precepts had not eradicated Hester's and Arthur's love for each other, as both characters recognize when they agree to turn their backs on the community and ironically sail eastward across the Atlantic in search of freedom.

¹⁰ 10- Wineapple, Brenda. "Nathaniel Hawthorne 1804-1864: A Brief Biography", collected in *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Larry J. Reynolds, editor. Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹¹ Salinger, Sharon V. *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.

¹² Buell, Lawrence, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 2006.

¹³ Hawthorne, Nathaniel (1950). *The Scarlet Letter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Buell, Lawrence, ed. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 2006.

In the next chapter, "A Flood of Sunshine," Arthur rejoices at the prospect of life with Hester and imagines himself to have experienced a kind of resurrection when he exclaims,

"O Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself - sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened - down upon these forest-leaves, and to have risen up all made anew, and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been merciful. This is already the better life! Why did we not find it sooner?"¹⁵

Having failed to secure "the better life" sooner, however, Arthur is quickly consumed by his hypocrisy. At the apex of Puritan society as the preacher of the Election Day sermon, ironically delivered on the day preceding his scheduled departure with Hester, he finds himself in the midst of holiday festivities he is unable to appreciate fully. Hawthorne interjects the observation that America itself has lost the capacity for such "gaiety" as a result of the shame incurred by the next generation of Puritans who "wore the darkest shade of Puritanism [the Salem Witch Trials] and so darkened the national visage with it, that all the subsequent years have not yet sufficed to clear it up."¹⁶

Time had also failed to remove Arthur's shame as he reveals when, with his dying breaths, he bares his chest on the scaffold of the pillory to show all those assembled his own scarlet letter that he had kept so long hidden. His death leaves Hester alone with Pearl. Years later the daughter has evidently attained her mother's dream of a happy family life in an enlightened Europe. Hester, however, has chosen to resume her scarlet-lettered existence in the narrow society of Boston.

The penultimate paragraph of the novel notes that Hester's scarlet letter eventually "became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too." Accepting her lowly status with grace and humility, Hester had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!¹⁷

Having compared Hester to the Madonna, a saint, martyr, nun, and angel, did Hawthorne believe this final disclaimer necessary in case any reader were to take his imagery too literally? Is he suggesting that angel, apostle of the coming revelation, and sacred love, terms Hester acknowledges could never really apply to her, might be appropriate for the adult Pearl? Surely we would know more if

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ed. A.N. Kaul. Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966.

only the author had given us an upbeat sequel to *The Scarlet Letter*!

Certainly, Hawthorne's fiction raises many questions and often keeps readers guessing his true purposes. A consideration of the images from Christianity, which he applies to victims of Puritanism, however, clearly establishes his endorsement of love, tolerance, and mercy and confirms his opposition to any rigid dogmatism that fails to appreciate the supremacy of those values.¹⁸

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Պուրիտանական պատկերները Նաթանիել Հաթորնի «Կարմիր տառը» վեպում Նաթանիել Հաթորնի (Nathaniel Hawthorne) «Կարմիր տառը» վեպը պարզաբանում է 17-րդ դարում Քոստոնուս ամերիկյան հասարակության մեջ հարաբերությունների, կրոնական, հասարակության, օրենքի եւ պատժամիջոցների որոշակի ասպեկտները: Կանանց եւ տղամարդկանց միջեւ հարաբերությունները եղել են խիստ աահմանափակ եւ հենց այս հանգամանքը հանրության մոտ աններելի մեղք էր դարձնում անօրինական հարաբերությունները: Կրոնը գերիշխում էր կյանքի բոլոր ասպարեզներում, կյանքի բոլոր հարցերում մարդիկ կախված էին քահանաներից և այդ հասարակության մեջ կանխորոշված ճակատագրի նկատմամբ համոզմունքը համարվում էր կյանքի նախնական սկզբունքներից մեկը: Հասարակական կարգապահությունն ու պատժամիջոցները ցանկացած անձին գերծ էին պահում հանցագործություն կամ ոճրագործության հավասար ծանր համարվող մեղք գործելուց: Այս հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է Նաթանիել Հաթորնի (Nathaniel Hawthorne) «Կարմիր տառը» վեպում պուրիտանական գաղափարախոսության սկզբունքները:

¹⁸ Wineapple, Brenda. "Nathaniel Hawthorne 1804-1864: A Brief Biography", collected in *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Larry J. Reynolds, editor. Oxford University Press, 2001.