

Hawthorne's Allegorical Techniques in *The Scarlet Letter*

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RESUMEN

Este artículo, "Técnicas alegóricas en la obra *La Letra Escarlata* de Nathaniel Hawthorne," trata de exponer las técnicas alegóricas usadas por Hawthorne en su obra, con especial énfasis en las referencias hechas a un entorno exterior a la línea de acción de la novela. También presenta la relación que esta obra tiene con la influencia del Puritanismo en la creación de un personaje literario distintivamente americano.

Palabras Claves

Puritanismo, alegoría, naturaleza, Escrituras

ABSTRACT

This paper is a discussion of allegorical techniques used by Hawthorne, with special emphasis on his evocation of areas of reference outside the novel's sequential plot of action. It is also concerned with the impact of Puritanism upon the shaping of a distinctly American character.

Key words

Puritanism, Allegory, Nature, Scripture

Allegory is an initiation into the magic of words; a magic, grounded in the polysemous quality of words, that enables the artist to "supercharge" his literature with resonances that defy paraphrase or the static, one-to-one correspondences that mark personification. In secular allegory, the author comments upon the text. Much to the chagrin of allegorical critics, an implicit allegoresis is contained within the literal flow of narrative. Allegory appears in various forms and is not peculiar to any single genre, but is always somewhat transformed by the idiosyncracies of the cultural matrix within which it is produced. Unlike the vertical transferal of meaning implicit in symbol and metaphor, and, for that matter, Scriptural allegory, full-fledged secular allegory achieves its allos, its "saying other," by weaving a web of allusions horizontally. Thus, the under-meaning is revealed, through punning and allusion, in the literal text. What is needed for this method is an area, or areas, of reference distinct from the sequential focus of the narrative. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* does all this, putting

him in an elite group of artists, Dante, Spenser, Conrad, Pynchon, who have mastered the elusive techniques that constitute that rare mode of expression known as allegory.

Edgar Allan Poe once openly castigated Hawthorne for his use of allegory, asserting (most probably correctly) that Hawthorne's artistry would be lost on the public readership. While both authors succeeded in illuminating the archetypal mind/body dichotomy that haunts the American psyche, Poe was evidently more motivated by the pecuniary remunerations to be garnered from effective marketing practices. As a voracious reader of historical works, religious histories, tracts, and sermons, Hawthorne attained a ponderous knowledge of America's cultural heritage. Inspired by Spenser (Hawthorne named his daughter Una), Hawthorne possessed the body of knowledge (areas of reference) and the aesthetic example with which to attempt an epic appraisal of the "great" new civilization that America was becoming during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

Hawthorne also had personal interests in the history of the Puritan "errand into the wilderness"; one of his ancestors had accompanied the first wave of New England settlers; one of his uncles had been an unforgiving judge during the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692. In any case, Hawthorne knew that his message, his vision of America, would not be fully apprehended by the reading public. He addresses this fact in the opening paragraph of *The Custom House*, his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*:

the truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and life-mates. (CHA)

While perhaps hinting that he will employ an enigmatic mode of discourse, Hawthorne is also establishing an autobiographical present (Salem, 1849) from which he will narrate his fictional tale. *The Custom House* comments upon Hawthorne's tale of Puritan gloom, and vice versa: the officers of the Custom House, described as never more than shadows or bodily appetites, are the inheritors of the Puritan legacy:

a row of venerable figures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs, which were tipped on their hind legs back against the wall. Oftentimes, they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking together in voices between speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labor, or any thing else but their own independent exertions. These old gentlemen—seated like Matthew, at the receipt of custom, but not very likely to be summoned thence, like him, for apostolic errands—were the Custom House officers.(7)

Outside the Custom House flew the American flag, "but with the thirteen stripes turned vertically, instead of horizontally" (5); a hint from Hawthorne, perhaps, that America's methods of interpretation are somehow lacking, for in Puritan New England, "religion and law were almost identical" (*SL*, 37). It was St. Paul who told the Corinthians that "the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life" (2 *Cor.* 3:6), but the Puritans brought a brand of Old Testament theology to bear upon the "sins" committed by their brethren — "sins" that defined the "weakness" of the human condition. The Puritan fathers were as wrathful and vindictive as the God that held sway in the Bible, invoking Leviticus in order to exterminate adulterers and barnyard buggers alike. Early leaders, such as the Puritan John Winthrop and the Pilgrim William Bradford, hoping to lead the "chosen people" toward apotheosis in the "New World garden," felt it imperative to suppress human nature, at whatever cost. Vertical transfers of meaning, derived from Scriptural authority, were the foundation stones of the fledgling nation. The letter killed. In looking back from *The Scarlet Letter* to *The Custom House* sketch, it would appear that, despite St. Paul, the spirit was among the list of casualties:

They seemed to have flung away all the golden grain of practical wisdom, which they had enjoyed so many opportunities of harvesting, and most carefully to have stored their memories with the husks. (*CH*, 14)

Hawthorne reminds us of Augustine's distinction between the kernel and husk, using the allusion to characterize the hollow wastes of the Custom House; but the evocation resonates horizontally as well, as an indictment of the system that dehumanizes Hester and Chillingworth, and sends Arthur Dimmesdale down a path toward lunacy and death. Allegory instructs its readers in how the allegory should be read — this is Hawthorne's instruction to the reader. He has taken the husk, "this rag of scarlet cloth" (25), and made it resonate across the centuries — along the way, plumbing the depths of the American character.

The Custom-House is often mentioned in respect to Hawthorne's conception of *Romance*, yet his own appraisal of the effect of the moon shining through his window seems to illuminate the allegorist's use of words:

all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect...whatever, in a word, had been used or played with, during the day, is now invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness, though still almost as vividly present as by daylight. Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. (*CH*, 28)

A bit further in *The Custom-House* Hawthorne continues to explain his intentions, the intentions of the allegorist "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"(CH,29). Through wordplay and allusions to distinct areas of reference Hawthorne conjoins the temporal and the cosmic, horizontally, across the literal plane of the narrative. An example of this horizontal resonance can be observed in Hawthorne's appraisal of his Custom-House cronies, specifically those who are ejected—as Hawthorne himself was—after coming to expect "to lean on the mighty arm of the Republic":

Conscious of his own infirmity, —that his tempered steel and elasticity are lost, —he for ever afterwards looks wistfully about him in quest of support external to himself. His pervading and continual hope—a hallucination, which, in the face of all discouragement, and making light of impossibilities, haunts him while he lives, and, I fancy, like the convulsive throes of the cholera, torments him for a brief space after death—is, that, finally, and in no long time, by some happy coincidence of circumstance, he shall be restored to office. this faith, more than any thing else, steals the pith and availability out of whatever enterprise he may dream of undertaking. Why should he toil and moil, and be at so much trouble to pick himself up out of the mud, when, in a little while hence, the strong arm of his Uncle will raise and support him? Why should he work for a living here, or go dig gold in California, when he is so soon to be made happy, at monthly intervals, with a little pile of glittering coin out of his Uncle's pocket? It is sadly curious to observe how slight a taste of office suffices to infect a poor fellow with this singular disease. (CH,30)

This passage finds resonance in the plight of Arthur Dimmesdale. Change the Custom-House to Dimmesdale's parish, and Uncle Sam to God, and you have a glimpse of the minister's situation as seen from Hawthorne's vantage point, "each imbuing itself with the nature of the other"(28). Thus Hawthorne is able to comment on *The Custom-House* by showing how the Puritan minister's faith in the literal letter of his God had left its residue in the Custom-House of 1849 Salem. For Dimmesdale, "it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework"(85).

Elizabethan England is alluded too, and referred to directly, a number of times throughout the text. Since the plot unfolds in America, and Elizabethan England is never emphatically elaborated upon, I see it functioning as one area of reference. In 1632 William Prynne had his ears cut off for printing an attack upon the Elizabethan theatre that had allegedly defamed Charles 1 and his Queen. A few years later Prynne had his forehead

branded for similar unfavorable acts. In 1642 the Puritans successfully closed down the Elizabethan theatre. This is the same year Hester Prynne walked through the prison door of Hawthorne's fiction. The Separatists who settled New England saw themselves as the new lost tribe of Israel, the chosen people of God escaping the Babylonian captivity that they equated with the pomp and ceremony that still lingered in England. Henry VIII had cut the ties to Rome, but during his daughter's reign the conflict between Catholics and Protestants was still unresolved. Hester's scarlet letter undoubtedly conjures up the image of the Scarlet Whore of Babylon, simultaneously resonating against the Puritan's conception of their oppression in England. From Hawthorne's vantage point the symbol stands for the literal letter of Puritan law. The significance of the scarlet letter has been explored by scores of critics; in this discussion of allegorical techniques I merely wish to emphasize its ability to evoke multiple areas of reference outside the sequential plot of action.

Nature is another area of reference. "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A" (39). It is significant that this is the first mention of Hester's "badge of shame" and that the word "red" is used to describe the letter. For the remainder of the novel the letter is always referred to as scarlet. This first reference to the letter as "red" connects it to the image of the "wild rose bush" (35) that grew outside the prison door, an image connoting nature, beauty, and love. Maureen Quilligan, in her *The Language of Allegory*, rightly asserts the important function of the rosebush as a "Threshold" text, its natural beauty in polarity with the morbid nature of the cemetery and prison that stand beside it — "the black flower of civilized society" (35) — though she does not explicitly state its connection to the reader's first glimpse of the letter of "fine red cloth." Thus, our first view of the letter is imbued with these positive qualities of the rose.

Further complicating this matter is Hawthorne's folkloric assertion that the rosebush "had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson, as she entered the prison door" (36). The Puritans never regarded Hutchinson as a saint; on the contrary, they accused her of having had sex with the devil before she was banished from the bosom of the Puritan community. The mention of Anne Hutchinson fits the temporal plot of events, but the adjective "sainted" comes from the narrator, creating a momentary, temporal disjunction/conjunction, as well as a judgemental intrusion from the somewhat less than oppressive Salem of 1849. In any case, the resonance is tremendous: Is Hester really meant to be like Anne Hutchinson? If so, is she "sainted" or a "stranger"? Or is she a licentious, Papist wench? Is she the Scarlet Whore of Babylon? An American beauty rose? The Virgin Mary?

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might

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... something which should remind him, indeed, only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. (41)

Though qualified, the image remains. The answer to all these questions is, of course, a not so unequivocal "no." She is Hester, Hawthorne's fictional heroine. There is no static, one-to-one correspondence to link her unequivocally to any of these areas of reference. But, as areas invoked by the allegorist, they lend a cosmic aura to Hester's temporal ministrations and ignominy throughout the novel.

The *Bible* figures prominently as an area of reference, or Pretext, to borrow from Quilligan's terminology. It is directly mentioned in spots, but it is also through allusion that Hawthorne effects his allegorical resonances. The ill-fated love of Dimmesdale for his parishioner does not correspond statically to the story of the Fall in Genesis, but a strong resonance surely exists. Indeed, "the infant was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden; worthy to have been left there, to be the plaything of the angels, after the world's first parents were driven out"(62). In the next paragraph, when Hawthorne the narrator asserts that "a great law had been broken," the reader may be inclined to envision the Lord commanding "No" in a pre-lapsarian Eden, yet its immediate context seems to be natural law, as the particular passage goes on to examine the "disorderly nature" peculiar to Pearl, and evidently a consequence of her illicit engendering. The other alternative is, of course, the law against adultery, which alludes to the Books of Moses; yet as this scriptural authority was the "legal document" used by the Puritans, the reference invokes temporal Puritan strictures as well.

The story of Hester and Arthur is a story about sex, death, and a seeking for God. As such, it invokes, as an area of reference, the patriarchal anti-feminist doctrines that inform the Christian version of the creation myth. It is because of Eve that Man knows death; indeed, it is Eve's transgression that necessitates the crucifixion of Christ. Elizabethan scholar James Calderwood, in his *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*, asserts that the "church-sanctioned avoidance of intercourse derives ultimately from Eve's weakness in the Garden"(53), and goes on to incriminate the rest of our Western tradition when he says "it goes without saying that from Eve to Pandora on down through Delilah, Cressida, and Duessa, women have released evil into the world or tempted men away from their heroic destinies"(53). Arthur is surely tempted from his heroic destiny (his one moment of unrestrained passion is the catalyst that sparks the destruction of his intellect), and when in the forest he shouts at Hester "Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!"(132), the anti-feminist tradition hovers about the phrasing. In the context of the plot Arthur is

merely responding to Hester's acknowledgement of her one untruth: she had concealed the identity of her husband, Chillingworth, who has become the minister's confidante/torturer. Though Arthur is but a pitiful preacher unable to strike a healthy balance between body and soul, Hawthorne's allegorical employment of areas of reference has charged the literal plane of the narrative, and through the polysemous nature of his wordplay, Angus Fletcher's "cosmic verbal echoing" resounds.

The epic question involves striking a balance between mind and body—achieving self-consciousness; learning how to live in the world. On one level, Hawthorne's allegory is aimed at examining the origins of what would eventually become the United States of America. The story of the Puritans' settling of the New World began with grand and pious aspirations which yielded almost immediately to a nightmare of racial genocide, extreme repression and insecurity. The "hideous and desolate wilderness" that William Bradford saw upon reaching America's shores provoked the beginning of a national character wherein, contrary to human nature, the Puritan intellect strove to annihilate the passions. The early Puritans saw the land as the dwelling place of the devil; the native Americans as agents of that demonic force. They felt that, in the name of God, the native population had to be eradicated, exorcised, destroyed. Racial genocide, alluded to in a reference to the armor worn by Governor Bellingham in his attacks upon the Pequots (73), was perpetrated under the guise of Divine Providence, the then unnamed manifest destiny that enabled the Puritans to engage in wholesale slaughter of a native population without tarnishing their devout conscience. Calvinist doctrine hovers about the narrative in the fabric of the ministers' "Geneva cloaks," a fabric woven of innate depravity and unconditional election. Saints and strangers. This led to duplicity, outward appearances veiling the workings of the soul's "dark forest": did "impure thoughts" spring from the human heart or had they been dropped like germs of evil by the devil?

Humankind is in nature yet unlike that nature because of its reasoning intellect. We seek to transcend nature—this is Arthur Dimmesdale's seeking for God. Conversely, Pearl, reared outside the confines of the stern Puritan village, is depicted as being one with nature, and viewed by the Puritans as "elvish" and therefore unnatural, the by-product of a heretical union. Hawthorne imbues the character of Pearl with the qualities of a bird—she is integrated with that nature that so terrorized the Puritan mind. She is also, significantly, referred to constantly throughout the text as Hester's "sole treasure," a punning display of wordplay used by Hawthorne to charge the narrative flow and further an elucidation of his thematic concerns. The child is the outward sign of Hester's passion; Hester cannot, therefore, conceal or repress what is so overtly manifest. Dimmesdale, without this culturally disdained baggage, is able to conceal and repress his

passion, albeit unsuccessfully, and at the expense of his own soul.

Arthur came to America, "bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forest land"(48). Evidently, his "vast power of self-restraint"(48) was not enough to keep him from a self-induced physical deterioration and martyr-like death. He could not reconcile the natural facet of his human nature with the stubborn, literal-mindedness of Puritan mores. His repression and duplicity become apparent during the first of the three scaffold scenes, where, quite ironically as it turns out, he is exhorted by his fellow leaders to try and get Hester to name her guilty paramour. From the balcony above he addresses the exposed "sinner," telling Hester, "thou seest the accountability under which I labor"(48). Dimmesdale's duplicity is nowhere more evident. "If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow sinner and fellow sufferer!"(48) Here Arthur is "saying other"; he is saying "please Hester, do not expose me now!" Hester's human nature, not unlike the rosebush outside the prison door, is capable of kindness and sympathy; the literal interpretations of Scriptural Authority have not usurped Hester's autonomy as a thinking and feeling human being. Had she been less autonomous, there would have been no story to tell; her sympathy allows the plot to unfold, enabling the reader to watch Dimmesdale's degeneration beneath the weight of unnatural Christian doctrine. After Hester's refusal to accomodate her judges, the jailer suggests that he "should take in hand to drive Satan out of her with stripes"(51). There is no pity, no New Testament forgiveness, only the desire to destroy that which is "other." Just after this episode Hester is, we are told, in "no reasonable state of mind"(51), and with this adjective Hawthorne successfully continues to illuminate the mind/body dichotomy that so plagued the Puritan experiment in the New World.

The appearance of Roger Chillingworth, Hester's cuckolded husband, adds flavor to the stew:

I,—a man of thought,—the book-worm of great libraries,—a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge,—what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own! Misshapen from my birth-hour, how could I delude myself with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity....(52-3)

This "hungry dream of knowledge" is Chillingworth's attempt to transcend nature, to "veil physical deformity with intellectual gifts." The Puritan intellect, aware of mortality and fearful of death, uncertain of salvation, represses the passionate and suppresses the physical, looking not in the direction of the natural, and hence, bestial woman, but rather in the direction of the celestial, of which reason is that last vestige of the prelapsarian ideal. The reader can grasp the misguided nature of the

physician's intellect in the phrase that likens the gleaming of his eyes to the fire "that darted from Bunyan's awful doorway in the hill-side" (89); for in the area of reference alluded to—in this case *Pilgrim's Progress*—the journey towards salvation and damnation lies along the same path.

When Chillingworth is further depicted as having been "an eminent Doctor of Physic, from a German University" (83), his character becomes charged with a Faustian undertone. And, sure enough, his obsessive thirst for knowledge beyond the mortal sphere, at the expense of his humanity, signals his demise. Yet Chillingworth is not one of the Puritans; Hawthorne's portrayal of the physician aligns him with the Indians (he had been their captive, and had learned their secrets), with the sailors and desperadoes, and, above all, with Satan. Chillingworth embodies the attributes of the "other." He is a "stranger," yet he is also, literally, a jealous husband whose "intellectual cultivation" (85) dehumanizes him: he becomes the demonic agent of vindictiveness and revenge, while successfully eluding any static, one-to-one correspondences.

While Hester is aware of Chillingworth's demonic intent, Arthur is fascinated by the physician's intellectual cultivation. Arthur's instincts have been suppressed along with his repressed passions. For Arthur, "it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework" (85). Confined, indeed. Arthur is imprisoned by his faith; his head had subjugated his heart: this intellectual striving within the uncertainty of Puritan dogma is what accounts for Hawthorne's depiction of Arthur as the minister "in a maze." Without a healthy balance between the head and the heart, Arthur is a lost soul, unable to come to terms with his corporeal existence—unable to come to terms with reality. The adjective "grave" shadows Chillingworth throughout the text. He looks after the minister with a "grave smile," seeking to illuminate the minister's "strong animal nature" (89) that has been repressed. Chillingworth seeks to unravel this mystery of the "human passions" (89) as if it were no more than "the figures of a geometrical problem" (89). He turns to his intellect in seeking his diabolical revenge; Arthur relies upon his intellect in seeking for God: in this sense, the earlier allusion to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* becomes significant, as salvation or damnation lies along the same path: Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are seeking for different things along the same path—in this case, it is the path of the intellect.

Chillingworth recognizes in Arthur "a strange sympathy betwixt body and soul" (95). "Were it only for the art's sake, I must search this matter to the bottom!" (95) The "art's sake" seems to belie the actual intention of the allegorist, while the pun of Dimmesdale's first name (in diminutive form) further charges the "matter" as being Dimmesdale's own physical nature, which hearkens back to Chillingworth's role as the minister's physician. This is one example of the conjunctive punning that illuminates the thematic

concerns of the text. Another is the mention, by the narrator, that Arthur's "intellectual gifts" were exhausted by "the prick and anguish of his daily life" (97). Thinking of another allegory, *Spenser's* "Gentle knight...pricking on the plaine" (FQ, 1:1.1), the initiated reader of allegory might here be inclined to see that it is indeed Arthur's "prick" that has set his intellect on the path toward lunacy and death. Again, however, this multivocal signifier defies any one-to-one correspondence, though the echo should linger in the mind of the reader. Similarly, Dimmesdale's fasts and vigils, undertaken "to purify the body and render it the fitter medium for celestial illumination" (100), underscore the mind/body dichotomy, while simultaneously echoing the Elizabethan area of reference, for the practice is alluded to as "being in accordance with the old, corrupted faith of Rome" (99). The same holds true for the minister's self-flagellation, undertaken in the secrecy of his closet, "in order to keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp" (83).

Hawthorne links Chillingworth's scientific inquiry "into the human frame" (82) to Dimmesdale's intellectual inquiry into the secrets of salvation: both shatter the delicate balance between body and soul necessary to live in the world. For Hawthorne, these abusers of the intellect "lost the spiritual view of existence" (82); a loss that signals areas of reference beyond the temporal actions, be they Faustian, Edenic, or nineteenth-century Industrial America.

The America of 1840 witnessed an economic boom the likes of which the world had never known. Hawthorne heard the locomotive whistle disrupting the stillness of Sleepy Hollow in 1844 and, unlike Whitman, he was disillusioned by the advent of gross industrialism. Yet it was this reality that was to transform America into the new "great civilization" and in his antipathy, Hawthorne looked back to the Founders of the New World to try and illuminate the paradoxical progress that had such deleterious effects upon America's national character. It is this vision that enabled Hawthorne to infuse epic qualities into his allegory; finally coming to realize that, unlike Odysseus and Aeneas, who had cast off their old identities in order to live in the world, the Puritans had brought all their cultural baggage along with them. For Hawthorne, the head had usurped the heart; the American character had been irreparably damaged by the letter of Puritan law — America had not learned how to live in the New World.

Hester understood Arthur's weakness. He was being groomed for a position of power and control, at the expense of his human nature. He could have been a king, but his sword was stuck in stone. Hester tells Arthur that "these iron men...have kept thy better part in bondage too long already!" (134) These iron men used the words of Scripture to keep their flocks in bondage while they seized control of the land and the government. In Puritan history Governor Winthrop was the paradoxically secular/

religious leader, using religion to ensure civil obedience:

...concerning liberty, I observe a great mistake in the country about that. There is a twofold liberty, natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal. The first is common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man, as he now stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to evil as well as to good. This liberty is incompatible and inconsistent with authority, and cannot endure the least restraint of the most just authority. The exercise and maintaining of this liberty makes men grow more evil, and in time to be worse than brute beasts... Even so, brethren, it will be between you and your magistrates. If you stand for your natural corrupt liberties, and will do what is good in your own eyes, you will not endure the least weight of authority, but will murmur and oppose, and be always striving to shake off that yoke; but if you will be satisfied to enjoy such civil and lawful liberties, such as Christ allows you, then will you quietly and cheerfully submit unto that authority which is set over you, in all the administrations of it, for your good. Wherein, if we fail at any time, we hope we shall be willing (by God's assistance) to hearken to good advice from any of you, or in any other way of God; so shall your liberties be preserved, in upholding the honor and power of authority amongst you. (Winthrop, *Journals*, 48-9)

It is significant structurally that Hawthorne's allegory finds its center in the scaffold scene of Chapter 12, a scene that coincides with the death of the venerable governor. Arthur, the Puritan "divine," has finally lost control: his pyrrhic ascent of the scaffold at midnight is the action of a desperate man. Significantly, it is here that the literal letter of Puritan law is adulterated into multiplicity: for at the moment of Arthur's midnight confession (and Winthrop's death), the "sky revealed an immense letter A—marked out in lines of dull red light" (107). The narrator tells us that it was but a meteoric disturbance, an act of nature without human significance. But for Arthur, his troubled intellect turned to rank egotism, the letter is spelling his shame to the cosmos, a divine concomitant to his ascent of the scaffold. Does the letter stand for "Arthur"? Or perhaps Adultery (Hester is there beside him)? Coming as it does at the exact moment of the governor's expiration, other folk determine that the sign signifies "Angel," in accordance with Winthrop's passage to the celestial realm. For our purposes here, the point Hawthorne's allegory makes is that the Puritan's univocal, literal symbol has become multivocal.

Arthur has lost control, and his meeting in the forest with Hester is curiously akin to the standard epic descent to the underworld, where heroes go in order to gain knowledge that will enable them to live in the world:

The road...was no other than a footpath. It straggled onward into the mystery of the primeval forest...that it was like the first encounter, in the world beyond the grave....(125)

Hester has conformed to the letter of the law outwardly, and though she is almost dehumanized by her acceptance of the role her society has thrust upon her, in the forest she regains the beautiful balance of her human nature:

The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom! By another impulse, she took off the cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features...her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour...Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illuminated by higher truth....(138)

Arthur is seemingly reborn; his passion aroused, through Hester's love it seems he will garner the strength to live like a healthy human being in the world:

I seem to have flung myself down—sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened—down upon these forest leaves, and to have risen up all made anew....(137)

But Hawthorne, instructing us how to read, as good allegorists invariably do, charges the scene with the faintest glimmer of a Classical area of reference; and when Hester tells Arthur "let us not look back"(137), the tragic consequences of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice reverberate within this American forest. With their pact to fly from the oppression of Puritan Salem made, the ill-fated lovers leave the forest, with "Arthur in advance," and when "he threw a backward glance"(145), the attentive reader of allegory can only acknowledge the foreboding gloom that this mythic area of reference lends to the scene.

It is not a stricture from above, however, it is Arthur's failure to extricate himself from the confines of his theology that separates him from his natural wife and child. Their planned escape is foiled, not as it seems, by the intervention of Chillingworth, but rather by the resurfacing of Arthur's unflagging intellect and pride: it is his privilege to "preach the Election Sermon," an honor within the culture that Arthur just cannot forego. He aspires to eminence within the community where he languishes. The cost is his humanity.

No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself,

and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true. (146)

These two faces, that of the mortal lover and that of the intellectual seeker of God, succeed in pulling Arthur apart. It is significant that Hawthorne divulges these facts before Arthur "climbed the ascent"(146) (Out of his passionate "underworld" and into his intellectual prison) and returned to Salem.

Before writing the Election sermon Arthur, always depicted as gaunt, emaciated and tremulous, "ate with ravenous appetite"(152). The adjective seems minor, yet in the conjunctive use of wordplay it forebodes the gloomy outcome of the minister's predicament. Dimmesdale's brief spark of passion evaporates in the tumult of the Puritan processional: "the spiritual element took up the feeble frame, and carried it along, unconscious of the burden, and converting it to spirit like itself"(161). Enveloped by the community, Arthur is seen in his truest element by Hester, who is significantly apart from the Puritan show of solidarity:

And was this the man? She hardly knew him now! He, moving proudly past, enveloped, as it were, in the rich music, with the procession of majestic and venerable fathers; he, unattainable in his worldly position, and still more so in that far vista of his unsympathizing thoughts, through which she now beheld him! (162)

Arthur's sermon is the climax of his duplicitous existence. He converts the guilt in his loathesome, tormented soul into "words of flame" so that all can be touched and inspired by the falsity of his outward show of piety: it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord. (168)

This display is contrasted by Hawthorne with the Indian "strangers" who look upon Hester's badge of shame and think that she "must needs be a personage of high dignity among her people"(167).

In Dimmesdale's "triumphant ignominy" on the scaffold at the end of the novel, prefigured by his earlier midnight rehearsal, he forsakes his human responsibility toward the woman who loves him and the child he sired, opting instead to pull a wrathful God down upon him in a macabre embrace that once and for all shatters the shards of an intellect unable to live "clothed in the garments of mortality"(97). His choice still reverberates in the collective unconscious of the national character, as it did in the dulled and windy spaces of mind that Hawthorne observed slumbering in the Custom-House in Salem in 1849. It is Hawthorne's allegorical technique (the epic qualities serving as one of the many important areas of reference) that makes this story of Hester and Arthur an enduring legacy of a national character fractured by the literal-mindedness of Calvinist doctrine.

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