
UNIT 6 BACKGROUND

Structure

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- 6.1 Introduction
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6.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of the background, both historical and literary that shaped Hawthorne as an author of *The Scarlet Letter*. His life and works would also be examined carefully.

6.1 INTRODUCTION



Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1862; photograph by Mathew B. Brady.

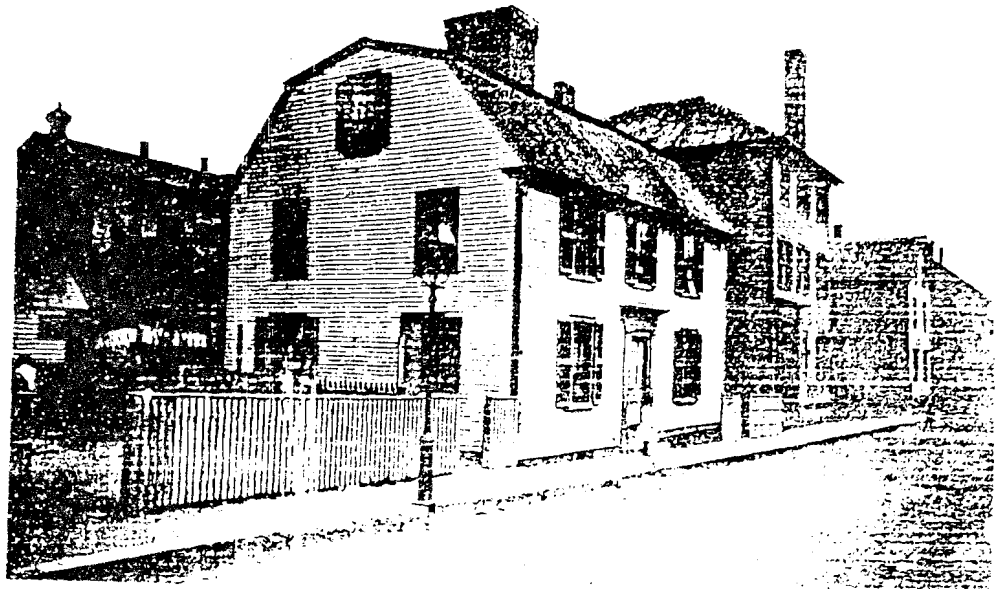
The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) is an American writer who lived in New England where we find the oldest settlements in America. *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is a work in which the writer has described vividly the life of the early settlers in a period known as colonial America. As you will remember in the introduction in Block 1 most of the settlers in New England were Puritans and Dissenters who had been persecuted by the Anglican Church in England. These settlers had, however, come to New England with a belief that they were God's chosen people and it was their sacred mission to set up a Utopia in the new continent full of wilderness and savage native Indians. In the very first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* you will find the following statement: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison". (p.65)

It has also to be noted that the drama of sin and redemption that is unfolded in *The Scarlet Letter* takes place in Boston which was not then a mega city. It was a small settlement of grim-faced, sour and peevish Puritans who couldn't tolerate any dissent or challenge to authority. Life in those days was regarded as a grim battle between good and evil and the people believed that the Black Man, that is Devil was waiting in the forest to trap the souls of unwary people. In colonial New England the people also believed in witches acting as the agents of Devil. You will find in *The Scarlet Letter* an old lady Mistress Hibbins, a witch, who urges Hester Prynne to come to the forest and become a disciple of the Black Man (p.142). Later on Mistress Hibbins was executed as a witch. The fact that she was a sister of Governor Bellingham couldn't save her life. The Puritans in New England were mortally afraid of the witches and the Black Man of the forest. Both Hester Prynne, the fallen woman and Arthur Dimmesdale, the guilty priest had to contend with witches and the Black Man of the forest.

Far from being a Utopia, the life of the Puritans in New England took the shape of a grim battle between good and evil. The protagonist had to save his soul in this struggle.

6.2 HAWTHORNE'S LIFE AND WORKS



Hawthorne's Birthplace, Union Street, Salem.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born at Salem, Massachusetts in a prominent Puritan family that had migrated to New England in the early seventeenth century. His father was a sea-captain and his mother came from an ancient family called the Mannings. He lost his father when he was barely four years old. Consequently, the child spent his early life at the Manning's home. At the age of nine, he became lame for a while and developed a love of solitude mostly spent in reading books. There were plenty of books and Hawthorne loved in particular the works of Spenser, Bunyan and Shakespeare. There is no wonder that allegory and Christian symbolism are so pronounced in *The Scarlet Letter*. The historical romances of Sir Walter Scott also had an impact on Hawthorne and he started reading the annals and old records of New England in order to come to terms with the past.



The Campus at Bowdoin College, ca. 1820.

Hawthorne attended the Bowdoin College in Maine. He made many friends during his college days. One of his friends was Horatio Bridge who later on subsidized the publication of his first collection of stories *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). He also befriended Franklin Pierce who became the 14th President of the U.S.A. and it was through him that Hawthorne managed to get the consulship at Liverpool in England. As a college student Hawthorne had started writing stories but it was only on his return to Salem that he published his first work of fiction *Fanshawe*. It was an anonymous publication at his own expense and he never admitted publicly his authorship of the book.

The keenness of Hawthorne to become a writer is, however, expressed trenchantly in his letter to his mother. He wrote to her, "I do not want to be a doctor and live by men's diseases; nor a minister to live by their sins; nor a lawyer and live by their quarrels. So I don't see that there is anything left for me but to be an author" (Introduction, *The Scarlet Letter*). Hawthorne continued to lead a secluded life at Salem after his graduation and soaked himself in the history of colonial New England. It was the life and thought of the early settlers that preoccupied him most of the time. During summer he travelled to various parts of New England and familiarized himself with contemporary life. He also began writing stories but found it difficult to publish them. Publishers were not keen on publishing stories by an unknown author. He destroyed many of the stories that he wrote. It was, however, in 1837 that he was able to get his first collection of stories published. As mentioned earlier, *Twice-Told Tales* was published with the help of his college friend Horatio Bridge.



Sophia Amelia (Peabody) Hawthorne, 1847

Hawthorne had also fallen in love with Sophia Peabody, the youngest of the famous Peabody sisters of Salem. His marriage brought him happiness--and anxiety as well. It was difficult for him to support his wife and family on the meagre earnings from his writing. He sought a job in the Custom House at Boston from 1839 to '41 and at Salem from 1846 to '49. He also participated in an experiment in communal living at the socialistic settlement of Brook Farm in 1841. He stayed at Brook Farm along with his wife for a while but it didn't really solve his financial problem. The pursuit of a Utopia appeared to him impractical and unrealistic. You can find a sceptical reference to a Utopia in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne returned to Salem and found himself in a difficult situation. He had financial problems, and along with the burden of supporting two daughters he had also to endure his mother's illness and death. He began the writing of *The Scarlet Letter* at a time when he was deeply depressed and heart-broken. There is no wonder that he described it as a hell-fired story embodying all his pent-up emotions.

The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 marked a turning point in Hawthorne's life. He became famous but it didn't bring him a fortune. Herman Melville was so fascinated by the masterpiece of sin and redemption in New England that he dedicated his magnum opus *Moby Dick* to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Henry James made a pioneer study of Hawthorne as a master of American fiction. During his stay at Concord Hawthorne also came in contact with thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau. You know Concord was a famous colony of writers in New England and is associated with the development of Transcendentalism. This school of philosophy laid stress on the divine in Man and in the infinite capacity of Man for bettering his self. Hawthorne was not a Transcendentalist like Emerson and Thoreau and affirmed in the last chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, "we are sinners all alike" (p.310), but some traces of its philosophy could be found in his portrayal of Hester Prynne and Pearl. The romantic, idyllic

scenes inside the forest showing the coming together of Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale remind us of the benign influence of nature in *Thoreau's Walden*.

Background

From 1850 to '53 Hawthorne was at the peak of his creative power. *The House of Seven Gables* was published in 1851 and showed his preoccupation with the past in New England. It is a work that shows the decline of a family that had to bear the curse of witch-hunting. *Blithedale Romance* was published in the next year and was a sarcastic rendering of Hawthorne's experience of living at Brook Farm. *The Life of Franklin Pierce* was published in the same year. It was Hawthorne's contribution to the Presidential Election Campaign. The President appointed Hawthorne the Consul at Liverpool in England. The stay in England gave Hawthorne a chance to imbibe afresh the influence of the mother-country. He also got a chance to stay in Italy and wrote his last major work, *The Marble Faun* (1860) in which the experience of an expatriate American artist in Rome is narrated. On his return to America, Hawthorne settled down in his Concord home. His health deteriorated and he undertook a trip to mountains and sea-shore in the company of his old friend, Franklin Pierce. He died quietly in sleep and was buried in a grave near Concord home. The grave was named Sleepy Hollow.

His unfinished romances were published after his death: *Septimus Fellon* in 1872, *The Dolliver Romance* in 1876, *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret* in 1883 and *The Ancestral Footsteps* in 1883.

6.3 AMERICAN FICTION

Hawthorne described himself as a romancer rather than a novelist. He was, however, an admirer of the realistic novel as developed in England and admired the realism of Anthony Trollope. In the realistic novel, the focus was on the ordinary life of men and women living in a largely settled society. The social and the economic background was described by the novelist comprehensively and the protagonists acted and interacted in such a manner that the conflict was resolved at the end. The realistic novel largely developed in eighteenth century England as a comedy of manners and usually had a happy ending. It embodied the confidence and robust optimism of an Age of Reason and there was, perhaps, no problem in life that couldn't be solved satisfactorily. From Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* we find the great tradition of the realistic novel flourishing.

Apart from the realistic novel as it developed in England, Hawthorne was also influenced by the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott. He wanted to reconstruct the colonial past of New England as authentically as Scott did for Scotland. There was, however, a basic difference between Scott and Hawthorne. While Scott's impulse was to glorify and celebrate the heroism of the protagonists, Hawthorne's attitude towards New England Puritanism was both critical and sarcastic. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne examined trenchantly the myopia, intolerance and cruelty of the Puritans in mid-seventeenth century New England. The major protagonists like Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth are utterly lonely and alienated from the community of early settlers in Boston, the major city of New England.

There is no wonder that the historical romance as developed by Hawthorne ends on a note of gloom and despair. There is no happy resolution of the conflict and the major protagonists live in a dark and cheerless world. Pearl is the only protagonist in the tale who achieves a degree of success and happiness in her pursuit. One can describe *The Scarlet Letter* as a historical romance or a romance-novel in which the extraordinary, the marvellous and the strange experiences are vividly pictured. The use of the supernatural and the mysterious creates a kind of awe and grandeur in the sombre tale. Consequently, the protagonists are more than realistic and lifelike. They are larger than life and seem to embody certain states of mind. If Hester Prynne and Arthur

Dimmesdale represent the repentant sinner, Roger Chillingworth stands for the unrepentant sinner. If Pearl has the touch of a mischievous spirit, Roger Chillingworth degenerates into Devil that is beyond any redemption.

To sum up, Hawthorne is able to create through his dark brooding imagination, "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and the fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (p.53). In other words, as a romancer Hawthorne is able to encompass both the Actual and the Imaginary in his narrative. While the Actual is transformed into something strange and dreamlike, the Imaginary is made concrete and tangible through symbols. There is no wonder that symbols play such a decisive role in *The Scarlet Letter*. To cite an example, the red letter A fixed on the bosom of Hester Prynne becomes a sacred object that sums up the entire life and destiny of a sinful woman in Puritan-dominated New England. It also seems to encompass the myopia, intolerance and cruelty of the Puritan community in colonial America.

With his capacity to encompass both the Actual and the Imaginary, Hawthorne made a definitive contribution to the emergence of a native tradition of American fiction. The romance-novel or historical romance as developed in America was not preoccupied with manners of various groups in a largely settled society and with the achievement of success. It was preoccupied with the struggle of good and evil in the protagonist's soul in a strange continent where wilderness was much larger than settlements. In such an unsettled continent, the protagonists felt utterly alienated and had to endure alone the unfolding drama of sin and redemption. There is no wonder that Hawthorne's imagination is preoccupied with the Black Man of the forest, that is Devil.

6.4 LET US SUM UP

The early Puritan settlers in New England considered themselves as God's chosen people whose mission was to set up a Utopia in the New World. Consequently, their attitude towards dissenters and heretics like Anne Hutchinson was full of righteous anger and intolerance.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in a family of Puritans but he was very critical of the persecution of heretics and dissenters. He was also very keen to become a writer and with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) he became famous all over America.

Inspired by the tradition of realistic novels in England and also the historical romances developed by Sir Walter Scott, Hawthorne established the native tradition of American fiction in which both reality and romance, the ordinary and the marvellous, and the natural and the supernatural are artistically fused. This form of American fiction could be described as a historical romance or a romance-novel in which the Actual and the Imaginary are dovetailed.

6.5 GLOSSARY

Utopia:	A state where all ideal conditions exist.
The scaffold of the pillory:	the wooden structure of the pillory where a sinner was made to stand and exposed to public ridicule in colonial New England
The Black Man of the forest:	Devil who was supposed to live in dark forests and to trap the soul of sinners.

Judgement Day:	the day when God will judge all men.	Background
Retribution of God:	just and stern punishment inflicted by God.	
The Election Sermon:	An important day in colonial New England when the new Governor took charge of his duty. It was a day of celebration and triumph.	
Necromancy:	communicating with dead through magic in order to learn about the future.	
Scorching Stigma:	marks of remorse and intense suffering over the heart of the guilty priest, Arthur Dimmesdale. For Hester Prynne, <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> (A) became the burning stigma. Therefore, she wanted to throw it away when she went to the forest.	

6.6 QUESTIONS

1. How did the Puritans in New England regard themselves? What was their attitude to morals?
2. Why did Nathaniel Hawthorne choose to be a writer?
3. Write a brief note on Transcendentalism.
4. How did Nathaniel Hawthorne's historical romance differ from that of Sir Walter Scott?
5. Do you agree with the view that Hawthorne successfully created "a neutral territory" in his romance, *The Scarlet Letter*?

6.7 SUGGESTED READING

All quotations are from *The Scarlet Letter*. Wordsworth Classics, 1992.

Baym, Nina. *The Scarlet Letter : A Reading*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Chase, Richard. *The American Novel And Its Tradition*. Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1973.

UNIT 7 READING THE TEXT

Structure

7.0	Objective
7.1	Introduction
7.2	The Threshold of the Narrative
7.3	Complications
7.4	A Turning Point
7.5	Temptation in the Forest
7.6	Towards the Climax
7.7	Let Us Sum Up
7.8	Questions
7.9	Suggested Reading

7.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of the unfolding narrative in *The Scarlet Letter*. It has to be noted that the threshold of the narrative shows Hester Prynne, the fallen woman, alone at the scaffold of the pillory in the market in Boston with her infant and the climax shows Arthur Dimmesdale, the guilty priest urging Hester to join him at the same scaffold along with her seven year old daughter Pearl.

Our purpose is to give you an idea of the various stages through which this change comes about.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

After having written two-third of the romance *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne took a pause and wrote an Introduction or a background to the grim tale. It was titled *The Custom-House* and contained satirical portraits of fellow workers at the Salem Custom-House from which he was dismissed. Although he was shocked at his dismissal, it was not an unmitigated evil. It was also a sort of blessing because, freed from the routine of monotonous work and drudgery, he could devote himself completely to writing, his true vocation. The Custom-House also gives us an idea of the low status of a creative writer in colonial New England. Hawthorne evokes the hostile spirit of his Puritan ancestors towards himself in memorable words, "what is he? murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. A writer of story-books?"

What kind of a business in life--what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation--may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler?" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 23).

The Custom-House is also remarkable because it is an affirmation of Hawthorne's credo as a romancer. He uses the image of moonlight in a room in order to convey the peculiar nature of a romancer's imagination. The ordinary tables, chairs and carpets in a familiar room are transformed by moonlight into something strange, dark and mysterious. The mundane and humdrum objects are transformed and made to convey our deeply felt emotions and attitudes. The creativity of a writer does not lie in a photographic reproduction of the surface aspects of humdrum reality but in his capacity

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to penetrate below the surface and bring out obliquely the dark truths lying buried in our consciousness. To cite an example, one could refer to Hawthorne's description of *The Scarlet Letter* that he found in the Custom-House and out of curiosity he put it on his breast--"It seemed to me--the reader may smile, but must not doubt my words--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" (pp.48-49). It has to be noted that the phrase "red-hot iron" is a vivid reflection of the awful intensity of suffering associated with *The Scarlet Letter*. There is no wonder that *The Scarlet Letter* ceases to be a simple letter. It becomes a dark and mysterious symbol of a fallen woman's suffering and redemption in colonial New England.

Some critics are of the view that *The Custom-House* is not organically related to the text of *The Scarlet Letter*. This is, however, not true. We learn from it that Hawthorne was trying to develop a native tradition of American fiction in which the natural and the marvellous are artistically fused. The focus is mostly on the strange, the marvellous and the supernatural but they are woven in such a manner that the authenticity of the narrative is firmly reinforced. The details that are given about the recovery of *The Scarlet Letter*, the manuscript of the Ancient Surveyor Pu and the freedom of the writer to expand imaginatively the outline of the narrative are meant to make us believe in the strange and extraordinary tale. If the romancer is not able to make the reader shed his disbelief and make the tale credible, he fails as a creative writer. Hawthorne's credo as a romancer committed to underlying reality--the truth of the human heart--is very perceptively expressed in these words, "Then, at such an hour, and with the scene before him, if a man sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things and make them look like truth, he need never to write romances" (p.54). In other words, the romance as developed by Hawthorne is not purely imaginary. It creates a strange world in which both reality and romance, the natural and the marvellous, the past and the future are inextricably fused.

7.2 THE THRESHOLD OF THE NARRATIVE

Chapters 1 to 4 constitute the threshold of the narrative and introduce us to three of the main characters of the story. There is Hester Prynne, accused of adultery, who is



Hester Prynne

brought out of the prison and made to stand at the scaffold of the pillory along with her infant. *The Scarlet Letter* A, signifying an adulteress, is fixed on her bosom and the men and women of Boston look down upon her and ridicule her. There is also an old man, a stranger amidst the hostile crowd, who recognizes her as his wife. When Hester goes back to the prison her husband meets her and wants to know who her lover is. Hester is prepared to suffer alone and does not reveal the name of her lover. Her husband admits that he has been unfair to her because an old man like him had married a beautiful young woman. He has, however, not been able to condone her lover because he has hurt the husband and deprived him of manly honour and dignity.

There is also the young priest, Arthur Dimmesdale, who urges Hester to name her lover before the community so that both the sinners can be made to repent together for their sin. When she refuses to do so, the priest cannot help commenting, "Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart!" (p.88). It is through this brief but poignant utterance on the part of the priest that the writer is able to evoke our sympathy for the fallen woman. Standing near the scaffold, Hester is able to recollect her early life in old England, the poverty of her parents, the face of her father and her mother, and lastly her marriage to an old, scholarly man who did not bring her warmth and joy of conjugal life. The focus of the narrative is definitely on the early life and destiny of Hester who is first trapped into a loveless marriage and later on into adultery in a city where she has arrived as an immigrant. There is no one in the alien city to offer her consolation and hope.

These opening chapters locate the story in a specific time and place. The scaffold of the pillory is situated in the market of mid-seventeenth century Boston in New England. Men and women who throng the market are stern Puritans and they regard Hester as the fallen woman. According to the law of the land, a sinner in those days, especially a woman was subjected to the extreme penalty of death. A man who is present near the scaffold tells Hester's husband that the authorities have been kind to her and keeping in mind her youth have inflicted a light punishment on her. There is an unmistakable note of irony in the words that are uttered, "But in their great mercy and tenderness of heart they have doomed mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom" (p.82).

The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses not only incidents and dialogues but symbols and images as well. The action is also followed by commentary and reflection. In the very first chapter Hawthorne mentions that the Puritan Utopia that the early settlers wanted to establish in the New World also made provision for a prison and a cemetery. There is also the rose-bush standing near the gate of the prison. The rose-bush reminds the reader of Ann Hutchinson who was a heretic and for her dissent she was put in the prison. Later on, the church authorities exiled her from New England. What Hawthorne is trying to suggest is that Hester is as much a non-conformist and a radical as Anne Hutchinson was. This idea has been expressed briefly through the phrase "the sainted Ann Hutchinson" (p.66). Both of these characters have consciously rebelled against Puritanist dogma and ethics. In the second chapter when Hester stands at the scaffold with the child in her arms she is compared to Madonna and her child. The use of such an intensely Catholic image on the part of Hawthorne shows that he is largely free from Puritan bigotry and intolerance.



Hester and Pearl

You have also to make a note of the fact that the names of the main characters have a strange resonance. For example, Hester's husband assumes the name of Roger Chillingworth. There is something chilling, cold and inhuman about his pursuit of his wife's lover. The guilty priest is Arthur Dimmesdale who is a dedicated pastor but there is something dim, something fading about him. He is also in the habit of keeping his hand on his heart. It is a gesture that indicates his divided self and also the turmoil in his heart--to confess or not to confess. Pearl has the ring of a beautiful and esoteric object of nature and Hester has the oriental and exotic association of the Biblical Esther who was a dark, beautiful and mysterious queen. There is no wonder that *The Scarlet Letter* A that has been fixed on Hester's bosom has been rendered in a flamboyantly fashionable and artistic mode. While to savage Indians it appears like a badge of distinction and excellence, the women of Boston regard it as the work of a brazen hussy and a rude defiance of Puritan orthodoxy and conformity. The sense of beauty that Hester possesses does not at all agree with the Spartan simplicity of men and women in colonial New England. There is something exotic and colourful about Hester. There is also something oriental about her. Her sense of beauty and passion make her look like a pagan goddess.

7.3 COMPLICATIONS

Chapters 5 to 11 constitute an important stage in the narrative in which our attention is focussed first on Hester and Pearl and later on the complex relationship between Arthur Dimmesdale, the guilty priest and Roger Chillingworth, the physician who clings to him like a leech. After her release from the prison, Hester goes to a lonely cottage outside Boston and leads a secluded life. In those days, a lonely young woman could only survive through her needlework. There was no other profession open to her in colonial New England. It is through her hard work that Hester is able to earn her bread and bring up her child. She dresses herself according to the Puritanic mode of sombre and grave attire but her lovely child Pearl is dressed in gorgeous and flamboyant apparel. It has also been pointed out earlier that there is something oriental and exotic about Hester's natural taste for the gorgeous and the flamboyant. Her submission to an austere and Puritanic mode of dressing is half-hearted. At heart, she is oriental and loves what is flamboyant and gorgeous. She is an alien in colonial New England. It is no wonder that both the mother and the child live a secluded life and even the children of the town "scorned them in their hearts, and not unfrequently reviled them with their tongues" (p.117). Hester loves Pearl but she is also tormented by her awkward questions. Sometimes she begins to wonder if Pearl is the child of a demon. Her

The Scarlet Letter

lovely exterior and resplendent attire cannot hide the terrible inquisitiveness of her mind.

Later on Hester goes to the Governor's house along with Pearl. It is a very significant point in the narrative. Both the church and the state of New England are unanimous in persecuting Hester. There is a proposal to separate the mother from the child because a fallen woman is not supposed to be a good mother. Hester, however, opposes the proposal vehemently and urges Arthur Dimmesdale to speak on her behalf. Her words to the priest have a contemporary ring even for a reader of our time--"Speak for me! Thou knowest--for thou hast sympathies which these men lack--thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are mother's rights, and how much the stronger they are when that mother has but her and *The Scarlet Letter*" (p.138). It is clear that Hester is asserting the mother's rights at the Governor's house where she has to confront single-handed the hostile prejudices of male society in colonial New England. It has also to be noted that she is affirming the rights of a fallen woman to keep and bring up her child in a male-dominated society where both the church and the state marginalized such women and rendered them utterly powerless. You can easily imagine how forward-looking and almost prophetic the assertion of a fallen woman's mother rights are in *The Scarlet Letter*!

Arthur Dimmesdale defends vigorously Hester's right to bring up her child and his vehemence creates a suspicion in Roger Chillingworth's mind. His reaction is brief, "You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness" (p.140) but it shows a strong doubt in his mind pertaining to the exact relationship between Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale. There is no wonder that from this point onwards Roger Chillingworth, the physician, is preoccupied with the priest's health and the state of his mind. He begins to stay in the priest's house and keeps a constant watch over him. The people of Boston come to know that "the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of especial sanctity, in all ages of the Christian world was haunted either by Satan himself, or Satan's emissary, in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth. This diabolical agent had the Divine permission for a season to burrow into the clergyman's intimacy and to plot against his soul".

There is no wonder that Roger Chillingworth is overjoyed when he sneaks to the priest who is sleeping and sees a sign on his chest. We are not told what that sign exactly is but it is clear that the rest of the narrative will focus on the drama of sin and redemption going on in the priest's soul. He will either confess his sin and save his soul or he will be tempted by Devil and remain unredeemed, unrepentant. The priest is very much disturbed at the inquisitive vigil of the physician and goes out of his house almost in a trance to confess his guilt and save his soul.

At the Governor's house, Hester also meets Mistress Hibbins who is a witch and who invites her to come to the forest and meet the Black Man of the forest, that is Devil. Hester replies that she would have done it if she had been deprived of her daughter Pearl. It is Pearl, both her innocence as well as her inquisitiveness, that saves Hester from the snares of Devil. Hester's confrontation with Mistress Hibbins creates the atmosphere of mid-seventeenth century New England when Puritans literally believed in witches that tempted men and women and acted as the agents and emissaries of Devil. The word 'leech' refers to the physician, Roger Chillingworth, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. The physicians in those primitive days used to bleed the patients and through that process cured them. In a metaphorical sense, 'leech' means a blood-sucking creature that clings to one's skin and sucks all blood. The image of 'leech' aptly suggests Roger Chillingworth's ferocious cruelty and hatred towards Arthur Dimmesdale whom he suspects of having turned the husband into a cuckold. As an injured and humiliated husband, the physician pretends to be a friend of the priest but, at bottom, he is an implacable enemy. His only joy is to keep on tempting and tormenting the priest till the end of the narrative. It is the painful consciousness of being hounded by the physician that stirs Arthur Dimmesdale into his midnight adventure.



The Leech and his Patient

7.4 A TURNING POINT

Chapter 12 marks a turning point in the tale and it also foreshadows the climax in chapter 23, titled *The Revelation of The Scarlet Letter* in which the priest overcomes his hesitation and fear of social disgrace and confesses his relationship with Hester and Pearl. It has also to be noted that the most crucial action in *The Scarlet Letter* takes place near the scaffold of the pillory in the market. The spot thus comes to acquire a kind of sanctity and mystery. It is linked with Hester's bold confession of her sin at the beginning of the tale and with the priest's confession and acceptance of Hester and Pearl towards the end. The significance of chapter 12 lies in the fact that it shows the priest's willingness to confess his sin of adultery. He is, however, still not fully ready for an honest confession before the Puritan community of Boston. He is afraid of facing public ridicule and losing his face before the community. It is due to this factor that he lets out a loud shriek at midnight. He has yet to acquire the courage and fortitude to confess his sin before the community and face the consequences of his action. He has not yet reached the stage of growth that Hester had reached at the beginning of the tale.

The priest is in such a disturbed state of mind when he stands near the scaffold of the pillory and there is a strange, dazzling light that illumines the whole sky, that he notices the letter A etched boldly in the sky. It seems to the priest that his guilt, long buried in his heart, has been projected all over the sky. We also hear at this critical moment the sceptical voice of the narrator of the tale. The commentary of the sceptical narrator is trenchantly expressed in the following words, "In such a case, it could only be the system of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate" (p.188). What the narrator is trying to say is that the reader must be able to look at the priest in an objective and balanced manner and realise that the suppression of dark truth, that is the sin of adultery has rendered the priest morbid and sickly. He could neither face the Puritan community in Boston with courage and fortitude as Hester has done earlier nor come to terms with his own self. There is no doubt that the priest's egotism and self-love are morbid and sickly and he has a long way to go before he attains the equanimity and courage to go through the ordeal of a public confession of his sin. Yet, he has taken an initial step towards that stage and as such one can safely affirm that chapter 12 constitutes a sort of dress rehearsal for the final public confession on the part of the priest.

The chapters 13 and 14 are also preoccupied with the tangled relationship between Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester and Roger Chillingworth. Hester's life of labour and sacrifice has won the respect of the Puritan community in Boston. The narrator's commentary on this transformation is revealing, "She was self-ordained a sister of Mercy or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her--so much power to do, and power to sympathize--that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (p.195). The narrator's contention is that there has been a change in the Puritan community's perception of Hester. They have nearly forgotten her as an adulteress and now they regard her as a Sister of Mercy who has been helpful to the most poor and the most needy women of Boston. The letter A on her bosom has ceased to be a symbol of punishment and persecution. It has now become the cross of Hester and has been sanctified and hallowed by her life as a compassionate Sister of Charity.

There is no wonder that while Arthur Dimmesdale is still hesitant, Hester takes a decisive step in chapter 14. She tells Roger Chillingworth that he has not been fair to Arthur Dimmesdale. He has been hounding him like a Devil, "You tread behind his every foot-step. You are beside him, sleeping and waking. You search his thoughts. You burrow and rankle in his heart! Your clutch is on his life, and you cause him to die daily a living death, and still he knows you not" (p.206). In a situation like this, she has no choice but to be loyal to her lover. She would tell him that Roger Chillingworth was her husband and he has been plotting to catch the priest's soul and trap him into evil. She also urges her husband to be fair in his dealing with the priest, "Forgive, and leave his further retribution to the Power that claims it" (p.210). It has to be noted, however, that forgiveness and mercy are alien to Roger Chillingworth and he says that it is his fate--and doom--to trap the soul of the man who has cuckolded him into sin and damnation. He will go his way and she can go her own way.

7.5 TEMPTATION IN THE FOREST

Chapters 15 to 19 shift the action of the tale to the forest outside the town. There is a kind of ambiguity about the forest. The Puritans of mid-seventeenth century colonial New England believed that the forest was the abode of the Black Man, that is Devil. You may recall that after Hester leaves the Governor's House with her daughter Pearl in her custody, Mistress Hibbins, the witch, invites her to join the Black Man and his companions in the forest. The scenes that occur in the forest in these chapters are, however, mostly full of joy and happiness. While Pearl plays near the brook, Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale get a chance to talk freely. The priest tells her what has been disturbing him, "Happy are you, Hester, that wear *The Scarlet Letter* openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret" (p.232). Hester is deeply upset at the agony of her lover and tells him, "That old man? the physician?--he whom they call Roger Chillingworth? he was my husband?" (p.234).

The priest is extremely unhappy and tells Hester that he will never forgive her. He, however, loves her so much that his anger subsides but his anger against the physician is unrelenting. He says that Roger Chillingworth has betrayed the trust of a friend. He has been mean and treacherous. He has also violated the sanctity of the human heart. Hester puts a sharp question to the priest, "Does the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest track?" (p.238). Hester is able to persuade the priest to run away from the small city of Boston and go either to Europe, that is the Old World, or into the wilderness that is widespread in the New World. Once he is inside the wilderness, he will attain freedom, the freedom to live along with Hester and Pearl. In other words, Hester urges the priest to escape from Boston and begin life afresh. It is clear that for Hester the forest is not only the abode of the Black Man but a sort of

utopia where the priest will attain supreme happiness and bliss. The wilderness of the New World seems to be more tempting to Hester than the cities of the Old World.

Reading the Text

Chapter 18 is appropriately titled "A Flood of Sunshine." Hester is so much thrilled at the prospect of attaining happiness along with her lover and daughter that she throws *The Scarlet Letter* away, removes her cap and lets her hair fall over her shoulders. The narrator's comment on the transformation of Hester from being a Sister of charity to an exquisitely beautiful young woman is telling indeed, "A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had long been so pale. 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" (p.245). The moment of ecstasy for Hester, however, does not last long. Necessity is expressed in the form of the stand taken by her daughter Pearl. She refuses to accept her mother without her cap and without *The Scarlet Letter* restored on her bosom. In chapter 19, Hester is forced to act as Pearl wants her to. She puts on her cap and her rich hair is suitably confined. She also puts on *The Scarlet Letter* on her bosom. The focus of the narrative in this chapter is on the fact that Hester can escape from the wiles of Roger Chillingworth but she cannot escape from the reality that Pearl embodies. That is her sin in colonial New England. The dream of freedom and hope that is generated in the forest is sharply negated by *The Scarlet Letter*, the cross that Hester has to bear on her bosom and the terrible burden of guilt that the priest has to bear within his heart. There is no wonder that the priest eventually comes to regard Hester's offer in the forest as a kind of temptation of Devil.

7.6 TOWARDS THE CLIMAX

Chapters 20 to 24 mark the last phase of the narrative and the events move inexorably towards the climax-public confession by the priest on the scaffold of the pillory and acceptance of his relationship with Hester and Pearl. The romantic reunion of Hester and Dimmesdale in the idyllic sanctuary of the forest energizes the priest and he returns to the town a man reborn. There is a feverish rush of ideas in his mind and he looks forward to the plan made by Hester. There has been, however, a change in their plan. Instead of escaping into the vast American wilderness, it has been decided to return to the Old World. As the ship is expected to leave on the fourth day, the priest starts writing the Election Sermon which he will deliver as his parting message to the Puritan community in New England. While the priest gets busy in drafting the Election Sermon, he also becomes aware of many contrary dark impulses in his mind. While returning to the town, he has an impulse to utter a certain blasphemy to one of his fellow priests. He also treats casually the eldest female member of his parish and looks down upon with disdain the youngest female in his parish. In other words, he doesn't behave as a responsible and dedicated priest. There is no wonder that Dimmesdale is at last able to realize that in some insidious way he has been tempted by Devil. There has been so much impiety within him that he cannot help crying to himself, "What is it that haunts and tempts me thus? Am I mad? Did I make contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood" (p.265).

It is clear that Dimmesdale begins to feel that he has been tempted by Devil in a most seductive mode. It is this realization that gives him the strength to face the consequences of his sin and not to run away from Boston. On the Election Day the whole town wears a gala, festive look. For a change, the people are in a happy mood. They are going to celebrate the assumption of office by a new Governor and also to listen to Election Day sermon by their popular priest, Arthur Dimmesdale. The narrator also draws our attention to the rich heritage of New England Puritans, "But we perhaps exaggerate the grey or sable tinge which undoubtedly characterized the mood and manners of the age. The persons now in the market-place of Boston had not been born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom. They were native Englishmen, whose

The Scarlet Letter

England, viewed as one great mass, would appear to have been as stately, magnificent, and joyous, as the world has ever witnessed" (p.277). In Chapter 21 entitled "The New England Holiday" the narrator has tried to recapture the exuberance and jollity of the Elizabethan England. Apart from the inhabitants of Boston, some sailors and a few Indians are also present among the crowd. There is a procession that moves towards the scaffold of the pillory. While Dimmesdale, the priest, is in the procession along with magistrates and fellow-priests, Hester and Pearl are among the crowd gathering around the scaffold.



The Market Place

Dimmesdale's Election Day sermon is straight from the heart and the audience is thrilled. The people are, however, shocked to find that the priest begins to look pale and haggard after the sermon. He has been drained of all strength. He also looks like a dying man. As he does not have much time left at his disposal, he urges Hester and Pearl to join him at the scaffold. He also makes a frank confession, "At last! at last! I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood, here, with this woman, whose arm, more than the little strength wherewith I have crept hitherward, sustain me at this dreadful moment from grovelling down upon my face" (p.305). After Dimmesdale makes his confession and owns Hester and Pearl, Hester comes forward to help the collapsing priest. In the words of the narrator, "Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom" (p.307). This is a moment that stuns Roger Chillingworth because his plot of revenge against the priest fails miserably and he is seen "with a blank, dull countenance, out of which life seemed to have departed" (p.307). *The Scarlet Letter* is such a rich, romantic tale that it is simultaneously a drama of sin and redemption and a moving love story. The climax at the scaffold of the pillory marks a fitting end both of the spiritual drama of sin and redemption and a heart-warming love story. The lovers are united briefly but unforgettably near the scaffold. There is no wonder that the scaffold comes to acquire a strange kind of awe and mystery. It is the most hallowed spot in New England.

The last chapter entitled "Conclusion" is a kind of post-script to the main body of the historical romance. The narrator takes over and offers various possibilities to explain Dimmesdale's death on the scaffold. You may recall that he bares his bosom before

Reading the Text



The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

he dies in Hester's arms. Some people see the letter A imprinted on his heart. While Hester has *The Scarlet Letter* A on her dress, Dimmesdale has it over his heart. Some people regard it as the result of medicines given by Roger Chillingworth. Some are of the view that it is the result of self-torture inflicted by the priest. Some people are of the view that they did not see anything imprinted on the priest's heart. What the narrator is using here is, according to F.O. Matthiessen, "the device of multiple choice." There is a certain mystery and awe associated with the priest's death on the scaffold and it is not possible to explain it in clear-cut, rational terms. This seems to be the idea behind the narrator's use of the device of multiple choice. What is clear, however, is the fact that Dimmesdale dies in glory but Roger Chillingworth shrivels like an uprooted weed and dies a year after. He tries, however, to atone for his sin by giving all his wealth to Pearl who has been the daughter of the man he hated the most.

Hester and Pearl disappear from Boston and go back to some country in Europe. While Pearl is happily married to a noble in the old world, Hester returns to her cottage in New England. For her, the cottage outside Boston has become sacred. She resumes her life as a Sister of Charity and puts on *The Scarlet Letter* A on her bosom. The narrator says, "Never afterwards did it quit her bosom" (p.314). Women of the town come to Hester for help and advice. They also want to know, "why they were so wretched, and what was the remedy" (p. 315). Hester looks upon *The Scarlet Letter* on her bosom and replies, "She assured them too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (p.315). You may recall that at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* there is a sceptical reference to the Utopia that the Puritans wanted to establish in the New World. But at the end of the romance the narrator makes a passionate affirmation that men-women relationship would be completely recast in the future. That is a kind of Utopia that would be established in which men-women relationship would be based on natural impulses and women would

be neither wretched nor miserable. They would also not be forced into a loveless marriage with an old man. The ambiguity of the narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* is brought out by the fact that it is both a critique and an affirmation of utopia. While a Utopia based on Puritan ideals is negated, a Utopia based on the ideal of equity-based men-women relationship is affirmed. It is undeniable that the Elizabethan and New England past and the glorious future are artistically fused in the tale that is narrated in *The Scarlet Letter*. One could also describe Hawthorne's historical romance as a dialogue between the past and the future.

7.7 LET US SUM UP

The most dramatic scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* revolve round the scaffold of the pillory in Boston. It is the scaffold that bears witness to Hester's confession of the sin of adultery. It is near the scaffold that Dimmesdale has his midnight adventure in chapter 12. It is near the same scaffold that Dimmesdale makes his final public confession and saves his soul.

Hester's suffering and redemption largely take place in the cottage outside Boston. Her hard work to earn her bread, her bringing up Pearl as a single parent, her service to the poor and the needy, especially the women earn her the respect and love of the Puritan community in New England. *The Scarlet Letter* A on her bosom ceases to be a badge of shame. It is transformed into something holy and pious and the people look upon it with awe and wonder. There is no wonder that the letter A also shines on the grave where Hester and Dimmesdale are buried side by side. It seems to embody both sin and redemption and also the agony and ecstasy of Hester and Dimmesdale.

The Scarlet Letter is a historical romance that encompasses the glory of the Elizabethan England, the bigotry and intolerance of the new settlers in New England, and a brief vision of the future in which men-women relationship would be based on natural impulses and passion. It is a complex narrative in which the various dimensions of the past and a brief but poignant vision of the future are artistically fused. It is a strange work of art in which there is a recurring dialogue between the past and the future. It is both a critique and an affirmation of Utopia in mid-nineteenth century American fiction. You may recall that Hawthorne creates a strange world in *The Scarlet Letter* in which both the Actual and the Imaginary are inextricably dovetailed.

7.8 QUESTIONS

1. Bring out the significance of the three scaffold scenes in the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*.
2. How does Hester defend a mother's rights in the scene at the Governor's House? Do you really agree with her?
3. Why does Roger Chillingworth come to stay with Arthur Dimmesdale? Do you think the image of the 'leech' aptly sums up his behaviour?
4. Describe critically the action and interaction between Hester and Pearl in the forest.
5. *The Scarlet Letter* is both a critique and an affirmation of Utopia. Illustrate your answer with suitable examples from the text.

6. Examine *The Scarlet Letter* critically as a love story in which love triumphs over various obstacles.
7. What is the relevance of the 'Introduction, The Custom-House' to the unfolding of the narrative? Does it really help you in locating the romance-novel against the backdrop of colonial New England?

7.9 SUGGESTED READING

1. Read 'Tradition and Disinheritance in *The Scarlet Letter*' by Frederick Newsberry and *The Scarlet Letter* by F.O. Matthiessen included in *Norton Critical Edition of The Scarlet Letter*, 1988.

Also read 'Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter* from the same book. John C. Gerber has made a perceptive analysis of the narrative in Hawthorne's masterpiece.
2. *Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies* by Michael Dunne, University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
3. *Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tradition and Revolution* by Charles Swann, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991.
4. *The American Historical Romance* by George Dekker, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

UNIT 8 CHARACTERIZATION

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Hester
- 8.3 Dimmesdale
- 8.4 Chillingworth
- 8.5 Pearl
- 8.6 Minor Characters
- 8.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.8 Questions
- 8.9 Suggested Reading

8.0 OBJECTIVES

Our objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the major characters Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl. We would also give you some idea of the minor characters like Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins. You would also be able to appreciate the complex relationship between the major and the minor characters.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Since *The Scarlet Letter* is more of a historical romance rather than a realistic novel, the characters tend to be allegorical and symbolical. There are various ways in which scholars have looked upon the characters in the book. While Hester seems to stand for art reflected in her exquisite needle work, Dimmesdale stands for religion due to his dedicated work as a pastor in his parish. While Chillingworth stands for science in his relentless search for herbs and medicines, Pearl stands for nature that is radiant, lovable but beyond human control. Taken together, the major characters seem to represent art, religion, science and nature. From another angle, these characters seem to foreshadow the Freudian categories of mind, the Id, the Ego and the Super-ego.

It is Pearl who seems to stand for the Id, and with her wild, impulsive nature is governed by the "pleasure principle." She always acts according to impulses rather than conscious thought. You know Freud said that the Id is the biological part of personality, the seat of instincts and is not subject to any social regulation. While Pearl stands for the Id, Hester stands for the Ego that is operated largely by the "reality principle." Hester is aware of her own self, her Eros and physical needs, but she is also aware of the pressures of external reality, that is the norms of the Puritan community in mid-seventeenth century New England. She also serves as a bridge and link between Pearl, the Id and Dimmesdale, the Super-ego. It is the priest who represents the social and moral dimension of personality and is always governed by the high ideals of society. Dimmesdale has a pronounced conscience and suffers from a terrible sense of guilt and anxiety due to the sin of adultery. It is the dominance of the Super-ego in the priest, and his awareness of the id within him, his craving for Hester, that gives an edge to the drama of sin and redemption that is unfolded so graphically.

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From another angle, Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth seem to represent heart, soul and mind. As a Sister of Charity, Hester is full of compassion and always tries to help the poor and the needy. The narrator makes it clear that Hester stands for heart and as a result she is able to atone for her sin and is transformed into an able nun serving humanity. Dimmesdale is a priest and seems to stand for the soul. He does care for the soul of others and he is also tormented by his conscience. His antagonist, Chillingworth is, however, primarily governed by his mind. His cold, calculating mind, utterly divorced from his heart, stifles his noble impulses as a physician dedicated to the profession of healing. He is too cerebral to be a credible and acceptable human being. While Hester seems to stand for life instinct, that is Eros, Chillingworth seems to stand for death wish, that is Thanatos. You know Eros and Thanatos are two other basic concepts postulated by Freud in the twentieth century. That Hawthorne could foreshadow some of the key Freudian concepts is an indicator of his keen probing into the psyche of his major characters. *The Scarlet Letter* is not only a historical romance; it is a psychological romance as well. The narrative that is unfolded so graphically encompasses action as well as incisive probing into mental processes of the major characters like Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl.

While the major characters are multi-dimensional and complex, the minor characters are more simple and allegorical. Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham represent the head of the church and the head of the state in New England. Their close collaboration makes it clear that the government at that time was a kind of theocracy. They also represent the hegemony of the church and the state in the Utopia established by the Puritans and the individual who in any way challenged the authority of the church and the state had to bear persecution. It has also to be kept in the mind that while the major characters are portrayed as dynamic, that is they undergo a subtle transformation, the minor characters are more or less, static. While the major characters are portrayed as complex characters, the minor characters are rather flat and one-dimensional. To sum up, while the major characters act and interact to create a moving drama of sin and redemption, the minor characters locate the tale in mid-seventeenth century New England. While the major characters soar into a world of romance and make-believe, the minor characters remind us of the historical context of the romance. As we have already told you, the Imaginary and the Actual are closely interwoven in the text creating a sort of "neutral territory."

You may also bear in mind Mistress Hibbins who acts as the agent and emissary of Devil. She is definitely an allegorical character who tries to tempt both Hester and Dimmesdale but does not succeed. The narrator, who belongs to mid-nineteenth century America, has rightly suggested that the dialogue between Mistress Hibbins and Hester could be taken as a parable, that is a confrontation between good and evil. Mistress Hibbins is a product of the Puritan Utopia created by the earliest settlers in colonial Boston.

8.2 HESTER

No feature in Hawthorne's romances of the 1850s is of greater psychological and cultural interest than his remarkable heroines. There is no other female protagonist that dominates the narrative as much as Hester does. According to Luther S. Luedtke, "The problem of *The Scarlet Letter* is really the problem of how to interpret Hester" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient*, p.165). It is Hester who is present in the romance at the beginning and it is also Hester who is in focus at the end of the tale. The narrator makes it clear at the beginning that she is not an ordinary woman in colonial Boston. She is dark, handsome and "a rich, voluptuous Oriental" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.105). When she comes out of the prison and moves towards the scaffold of the pillory, her Oriental beauty, dark eyes and dark hair, has a strange, esoteric appeal. Even the letter A that has been embroidered on her sombre dress is designed in a flashy and flamboyant mode. Its flourish and singularity is a sort of curt

defiance and challenge to the all-pervasive grey and sombre that marked the fashion of the grim Puritan men and women in mid-seventeenth century New England. There is something of Anne Hutchinson's non-conformity and radicalism (as described in Block I) in Hester's psychological make-up. As a lonely woman in a hostile city in the New World, Hester submits to the punishment inflicted on her but in a subtle way she also subverts Puritan orthodoxy through her wild, colourful scarlet letter.

Her retreat from the market to the lonely cottage outside Boston marks a new phase in her life. She is able to support herself and her daughter Pearl through her needlework. It is her aesthetic sense and her exquisite needlework that enables her to perform the duty of a single parent in a traditional, male-dominated society. The narrator has drawn our attention to "all the combative energy of her character" (p.99) which enables her to serve the poor and the needy. There is a subtle transformation in Hester and the community that has persecuted her as the fallen woman begins to look upon her as a Sister of Mercy. *The Scarlet Letter* A that in the beginning appears to the community as a badge of sin and shame later on appears as a symbol of her calling as a Sister of Mercy. It is also viewed by the Puritan community as "Able, so strong was Hester Prynne with a woman's strength" (p.195). The letter A, *The Scarlet Letter* to be precise, also becomes "the cross on a nun's bosom" (p.196). In keeping with her status as a Sister of Mercy, Hester's dark, Oriental beauty also undergoes a change. The narrator's comment on this change is revealing indeed, "It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine" (p.197).

While Hester is transformed from a sinful woman into an angelic Sister of Mercy, and from a dark, voluptuous Oriental woman into a nun who deliberately suppresses her youth and beauty by capping her hair, there is another subtle transformation at work. The narrator of the tale makes it clear that "much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstances that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling to thought" (p.198). If in her routine conduct, Hester remains a conformist to the tenets of Puritanism in colonial New England, it is at the level of speculation and critical thinking that she tends to become subversive and challenges the patriarchal basis of man-woman relationship in mid-seventeenth century Boston - "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (p.200). What the narrator is suggesting, commenting on Hester's radicalism, is that before women can really be empowered there has to be a drastic and radical change in their consciousness and mental make-up. Without such a radical transformation in female psyche, the complete recasting of man-woman relationship will not take place and there will be no end to their suffering and persecution in the existing society.

One can sum up, Hester's complex, radical character through the words of David Levin, "No English or American novelist before him had been able to represent convincingly the feelings and thoughts of a passionate woman and scarcely any American novelist had posed such forceful and critical questions for prevailing nineteenth-century beliefs" (*The American Novel* ed. by Wallace Stegner, p.24). Hawthorne is supposed to be Janus-faced, that is he looks both towards the past and the future. It is through Hester that the past and the future are dexterously woven in the text. There is no wonder that a recent critic like Charles Swann has described the text as future-oriented history (p.72). There is no other character in *The Scarlet Letter* who is a better embodiment of future-oriented history, that is one who can be a bridge between the past and the future. It is through an appreciation of the vast range of Hester's conduct and radical thought that one can adequately evaluate *The Scarlet Letter* as a work of fiction illuminating both the past and the future.

Dimmesdale is a respected priest in colonial Boston. He has come to the New World with the learning and sophistication of the Old World. It is, however, his misfortune that he is trapped into adultery with a married woman of his parish. Since he is a man of high status, he is very much aware of his moral responsibility. As a pastor he is responsible for the moral uplift of the men and women in his charge. There is no other character in *The Scarlet Letter* who has such a dominant Super-ego. When Hester stands on the scaffold and makes a public confession of her sin, Dimmesdale also has an acute awareness of his guilt. He is a product of the Puritan ethos that dominates New England and as such he cannot think either in terms of returning to the old world or escaping into American wilderness. It is also difficult for him to confess his guilt in public because he is afraid of losing his status and good name. He admires the courage and strength of Hester but his intense preoccupation with his social role prevents him from doing what she does on the scaffold. He has a divided self. He is aware of Hester's sexual attractiveness but he doesn't have the courage to own her publicly. There is no wonder that he has a habit of putting his hand over his heart. This gesture is an index of the protracted conflict in Dimmesdale's mind. Pearl repeatedly asks her mother why the priest always puts his hand over his heart.

It is Dimmesdale's divided self and agonizing mental conflict that leads to the weakening of his body and mind. The fact of Chillingworth's staying with him and keeping constant vigil on his psyche adds manifold to his woes. He is driven to such a desperation that he begins to fast, inflict harsh punishment on his body and confesses his sin in such a manner in the parish that the listeners look upon his theatrical confession as a sign of his virtue and probity. The more the priest tortures himself, the more he realizes that he is a hypocrite in the eye of God. The narrator's comment is significant, "He thus typified the constant introspection, but could not purify himself" (p.176). It has also to be noted that the fasting, penance and self-torture are not in conformity with the tenets of Puritanism.

The narrator's comment on Dimmesdale's behaviour is revealing indeed, "His inward trouble drove him to practices more in accordance with the old corrupted faith of Rome than with the better light of the church in which he had been born and bred" (p.175). Whether we evaluate the priest from a secular point of view or from the point of view of a mid-seventeenth century Puritan, he appears before us as a moral hypocrite and a betrayer of love and family responsibility. There is no wonder that the priest has a terrible consciousness of being a non-entity both in a human and also within a theological framework. The narrator has expressed poignantly the dilemma of Dimmesdale, "To the untrue man, the whole universe is false--it is impalpable--it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light becomes a shadow, or indeed ceases to exist" (p.177).

It is in this state of mind that Dimmesdale sees the letter A in the sky as there is a flash of meteors during his midnight journey to the scaffold. The narrator makes it clear that the letter A is simply a creation of Dimmesdale's morbid imagination and is also a projection of his guilt. When he lets out a wild shriek, he has a fear that the entire town of Boston would come to the scaffold and see him with Hester and Pearl. It is clear that the priest's fear of social disgrace is far more powerful than his conscience which prompts him to mount the scaffold and publicly own Hester and Pearl. Since he occupies a distinguished position in the community, it becomes difficult for him to confess his guilt. It is Chillingworth, the antagonist who holds his hand and takes him away from the scaffold. The narrator's comment on this scene is significant indeed, "with a chill despondency, like an awakening, all nerveless, from an ugly dream, he yields himself to the physician, and was led away" (p.190). It is significant that Chillingworth is the man who takes Dimmesdale away from the scaffold where he is united with Hester and Pearl for a brief moment. The priest does not have the strength to extricate himself from the grip of his antagonist.

Dimmesdale has later on a meeting with Hester and Pearl in the forest. It is in its idyllic atmosphere that he agrees to elope with her to the old world. There is a momentary burst of energy within him and he writes the Election Sermon to be delivered on the day the new Governor is to take over. The Election Sermon is a huge success but the priest's triumph is momentary. He is eventually united with Hester and Pearl and dies on the scaffold. Before his death, the priest, however, makes a prophecy. In the words of the narrator "it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord" (p.299). While at the personal level Dimmesdale is full of a premonition of death, he does not fail to forecast a glorious destiny for the Puritan republic in New England. The past and the future are, in the ultimate analysis, as closely entwined in Dimmesdale as they are in Hester. They know that they will not live to see the future materialize in their lifetime but it would materialize one day. There is a Transcendentalist's hope of a Utopia being eventually realized on the earth both for Hester and Dimmesdale. It is their sin that unites them and their hope as well.

8.4 CHILLINGWORTH

We have told you that *The Scarlet Letter* is not only a historical romance but a psychological romance as well. Chillingworth, the cuckolded husband, is a fine study of a man degenerating due to an obsession. His obsession is to find out the man who has committed adultery with his wife. When Hester refuses to name her lover in the first scaffold scene, Chillingworth says with vehemence, "But he will be known?--he will be known?--he will be known!" (p.82). As a physician, he is given to the collection of herbs and medicines. He does admit that as an old man he was unwise to marry a young, beautiful woman. There is a touch of regret in his words to Hester--"It was my folly, and thy weakness. I--a man of thought--the bookworm 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?" (p.94). It has to be noted that Hester is equally forthright in her reply to her husband, "Thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any" (p.95).

Later on Hester urges Chillingworth to cast her off at once as an adulterous wife. Chillingworth is, however, too deeply hurt and humiliated by her lover's deed to forgive him. He acts as a typical husband in a male-dominated patriarchal society and he does not want to be publicly reviled as a cuckolded husband. What becomes the goal of his life is to hunt the man who has sullied his honour as a husband and when Hester refuses to reveal the name of her paramour, Chillingworth is obsessed with the idea of hunting the man and punishing him. It is in the fourth chapter of the tale that there is a crucial exchange between Hester and her husband,

'why dost thou smile so at me?' inquired Hester, troubled at the expression of his eyes.

'Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?'

'Not thy soul,' he answered, with another smile. 'No, not thine?'
(p.98)

It is from this point onwards that Chillingworth ceases to be human and becomes an allegorical character. Hester wonders if her husband is the Black Man of the forest who traps man's soul into evil and leads him to damnation. The word "leech" that is used by the narrator to describe the physician is most appropriate. He clings to the priest like a leech, sucks his blood and gets a devilish pleasure when he sees the mysterious mark on his chest. When Hester urges him to forget and forgive and leave

punishment to God, Chillingworth tells her sternly, "I have no such power as thou tellest me. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer . . . It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!" (p.210). The old faith mentioned by Chillingworth, perhaps, refers to the Old Testament according to which the evil-doer must be punished. Retribution is the spirit that guides the physician and the New Testament spirit of forgiveness is alien to his make-up.

Chillingworth is present in all the three scenes near the scaffold. In the first scaffold scene, he is a stranger standing near an Indian. In the second scaffold scene, he appears suddenly and leads Dimmesdale away. In the third and the last scaffold scene, he is utterly, humiliated and lost when the priest mounts the scaffold and publicly confesses his sin. His last spoken words are an index of his utter failure, "Thou hast escaped me!" (p. 307). His life has been an utter failure. As he himself foreshadows it, the black flower has blossomed and ruined him as a husband and also as a physician. Instead of healing others, he injures them and also injures his own soul irreparably. The phrase "black flower" stands for evil and sums up Chillingworth's life and destiny. Of all the major characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, he is the only character who has a past but has no future. Before he dies, unknown, unnoticed, he does bestow his property on Pearl but it is too small a deed to redeem his soul.

8.5 PEARL

Pearl is a lovely, mischievous and naughty young child. She is a creature of impulse and is not amenable to rules. The narrator describes her as "a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion" (p.111). When Hester retires to the solitary cottage, Pearl is her only companion. She finds her daughter so wild and impulsive that she wonders whether Pearl is a human child. There is no peer group to socialise Pearl and she grows into a wilful, obdurate young girl. Most of the time she plays alone and she is not much bothered by the hostility of the little Puritans in and around Boston. The narrator describes Hester's solitary daughter in these words, "Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world" (p.116). As Pearl grows up, wild and wilful, Hester is disturbed by her mischievousness. There are also rumours floating in the community that Pearl is "a demon offspring" (p.122). Pearl's obsession with *The Scarlet Letter* on her mother's bosom also disturbs Hester and creates a sort of ambiguity in her response to her daughter. She loves Pearl and also dreads her inquisitiveness reflected in her bold, penetrating eyes. The narrator has described Hester's anxiety in these words, "It was as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just then peeped forth in mockery" (p.120).

It is in the scene in the Governor's house that Pearl's worth as a human being is fully reflected. When Reverend Wilson, the most venerable clergyman asks Pearl if she is a Christian child, Pearl replies frankly, "I am mother's child and my name is Pearl" (p. 134). The Governor also asks Hester if she will be able to bring up Pearl properly. Hester's goal of life as a single parent is vividly expressed by the narrator, "I can teach my little Pearl what I have learned from this!" answered Hester Prynne, laying her finger on the red token (p.135). The narrator makes it clear that even a fallen woman like Hester has rights, mother's rights to be precise. There is no wonder that Hester's right as a mother is fully vindicated by Arthur Dimmesdale and both the civil and the religious authority abandon their plan of separating Pearl from Hester. The narrator makes a pertinent point at the end of the scene in The Governor's House, "Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan's snares" (p. 143).

It is clear that the responsibility of bringing up Pearl as a single parent gives a goal, a sense of purpose to Hester. It is in this sense that Pearl saves her from the temptation of Devil. In the forest scene also when Hester throws *The Scarlet Letter* away, it is Pearl who urges her to put *The Scarlet Letter* back on her bosom. Hester's daughter reminds her mother that *The Scarlet Letter* cannot be discarded. It is inseparable from

her destiny. Pearl plays a very crucial role in the forest scene and but for her insistence Hester would have forgotten her badge of shame and her cross. In the last scaffold scene also Pearl kisses Dimmesdale and plays a key role in the reunion of her father and mother in the market. She sheds tears as she kisses her father. The narrator's comment on Pearl's tears is revealing indeed, "They were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (p. 307).

As an infant and as a young girl, Pearl plays an important role in the unfolding of the narrative. She is both a symbol of beauty and a stern reminder of her mother's sin. It is not only Hester but Dimmesdale as well who feels uncomfortable in her presence. As a young woman, however, Pearl becomes the archetypal American young woman who is blessed by a fortune and also marries a noble of the Old World. While Hester returns to New England, Pearl goes back to the Old World. Her childhood is an integral part of the moral and spiritual drama unfolded in *The Scarlet Letter* but her youth and marriage remind us of the happy ending associated with fairy tales. It is also a glimpse of poetic justice that operates marginally in a dark, brooding world of mid-seventeenth century New England. Pearl is the only ray of hope in a world governed by Roger Chillingworth and Mistress Hibbins.

8.6 MINOR CHARACTERS

We have already told you that the minor characters are products of history and locate the drama of sin and redemption in a specific time and place. Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins are among the significant minor characters. Both Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham are present in the first scaffold scene. It is Reverend Wilson, the eldest clergyman in Boston, who urges Hester to name her lover. Later on, he requests Arthur Dimmesdale to put pressure on Hester to confess her sin and declare the name of her partner in the sin of adultery. When Dimmesdale's efforts did not bear fruit, Reverend Wilson delivers a sermon admonishing unrepentant sinners. He warns both Hester and the community present near the scaffold of the danger of being trapped by Devil. It has, however, no effect on Hester who, after her ordeal before the scaffold, goes back to the prison. The narrator draws our attention to the folk belief in mid-seventeenth century New England, "It was whispered by those who peered after her that *The Scarlet Letter* threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-ways of the interior" (p.89).

In the scene at the Governor's house we find that Governor Bellingham and Reverend Wilson are together and it is Reverend Wilson who is given the chance to interrogate Hester and Pearl. It is clear that the Head of the church and the Head of the state worked together and as far as Hester's conscience is concerned it is Reverend Wilson who is entrusted with the sole responsibility of chastising Hester and her unruly child. One can conclude that the state in New England was a kind of theocracy and there was no separation of civil authority and religious authority. Following the lead by Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham also wants to know if Hester would be able to bring up her child as a sober, disciplined Puritan. He also urges Reverend Wilson to find out if Pearl is being brought up in a proper religious atmosphere. It is clear that Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham work with perfect understanding. It has also to be noted that when Dimmesdale defends Hester's right as a mother, both Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham show an open mind, and in spite of their reservations about Hester, agree to give a trial to Dimmesdale's suggestion to let Hester bring up Pearl.

Mistress Hibbins is a witch-lady who is supposed to be an agent and emissary of Devil. There is a conversation between Hester and Mistress Hibbins at the end of the scene in Governor's house and she urges her to come to the forest and sign a pact with Devil. Hester, however, does not fall in the trap set by Mistress Hibbins. The witch-lady is

also present in the Governor's house during the second scaffold scene. When Dimmesdale shrieks at midnight, he feels that the whole town will awake and find him with Hester and Pearl. The narrator has made it clear, "The town did not awake; or, if it did, the drowsy slumberers mistook the cry either for something frightful in a dream, or for the noise of witches, whose voices, at that period, were often heard to pass over the settlements or lonely cottages, as they rode with Satan through the air" (p. 180). It is clear that Mistress Hibbins is not only an allegorical character but is also a product of the folk imagination in colonial New England. There is no doubt that Mistress Hibbins is an authentic product of the folk belief in mid-seventeenth century New England. There is a touch of legend about Mistress Hibbins who is definitely a throwback to the remote past. She belongs to a past that is dark, mysterious and irrational.

8.7 LET US SUM UP

Chillingworth represents science, Hester art, Dimmesdale religion and Pearl nature.

Pearl, Hester and Dimmesdale also foreshadow "Id," "Ego," and "Super-ego."

Hester and Chillingworth stand for Eros and Thanatos.

Hester, Dimmesdale, Pearl and Chillingworth are major characters and Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins constitute minor characters. While the major characters are multi-dimensional and undergo subtle transformations, the minor characters are rather flat and one-dimensional. While the major characters act and interact to create a moving drama of sin and redemption, the minor characters locate the tale in mid-seventeenth century New England.

The characters have been developed largely through allegory and symbols. They are far from realistic.

8.8 QUESTIONS

1. "While Hester is the unrepentant sinner, Dimmesdale is the half-repentant sinner and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner." Is it a fair assessment of the three major characters in *The Scarlet Letter*?
2. Do you agree with the view that Pearl saves Hester from the temptation of Devil?
3. Compare and contrast Reverend Wilson with Governor Bellingham.
4. "It is remarkable that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 199). Examine the ups and downs of Hester in the light of the statement quoted above.
5. Write a note on Mistress Hibbins, the witch-lady.
6. Bring out the importance of the minor characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. How are they related to the major characters?
7. Why does Pearl migrate to the old World? Why does Hester return to her cottage in New England?

The Scarlet Letter

8. "Let the black flower blossom as it may!" *The Scarlet Letter*, p.210. Examine the ups and downs of Roger Chillingworth in the light of the statement cited.
9. "He hath proved His mercy, most of all, in my afflictions" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 308). Make an assessment of Dimmesdale in the light of the statement cited.
10. How are the past and the future entwined both in Hester and Dimmesdale?
11. Why is Hester compared to a non-conformist like Ann Hutchinson? Is it appropriate to describe her as a radical woman?

8.9 SUGGESTED READING

1. *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient* by Luther S. Luedtke. (Indiana University Press, 1989).
2. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter* by David Levin, included in *The American Novel* ed. Wallace Stegner. (New York: Basic Books, 1965).
3. *Primitive Strength in Hawthorne's Women* by Kristin Herzog, included in *Women, Ethnicity, and Exotics*. (The University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

UNIT 9 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND STRUCTURE

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Symmetrical Design
- 9.3 Form and Content
- 9.4 Open-endedness
- 9.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.6 Suggested Reading

9.0 OBJECTIVES

We have already told you that the narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* is quite complicated. It encompasses both action and commentary. The commentary is through a narrator, projected in the Introduction, who examines the past from the point of view of a nineteenth century observer. Even the supernatural and the folk beliefs of mid-seventeenth century New England are subjected to the narrator's incisive irony and scepticism. In this unit we will also give you an idea of the symmetrical design, form and content and open-endedness of the text.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter is a carefully designed work of fiction in which the supernatural, the marvellous, and the strange have been artistically fused. Although Hawthorne considered himself a romancer rather than a novelist, he also admired the well-made novel in which the incidents and scenes are arranged in a symmetrical order, leading to a profound concentration and intensification of meaning. F.O. Matthiessen has rightly observed that Hawthorne has developed in *The Scarlet Letter* his most coherent plot (Norton Critical Edition, p.279). It is the result of beginning the tale with a scaffold scene and also rounding the tale with a scaffold scene near the end. There is also a scaffold scene right in the middle of the tale. There is no wonder that the scaffold of the pillory comes to acquire a hallowed status for the three major characters in the romance-novel.

While F.O. Matthiessen looks at the structure of the romance-novel in terms of the sequencing of the scaffold scenes, with the second scaffold scene showing Dimmesdale in Chillingworth's grip, John C. Gerber makes a four-fold division of *The Scarlet Letter*. In chapters I-VIII, it is the community in Boston that initiates the action and the main characters simply suffer the action. While Chillingworth dominates the action in chapters XI-XII, Hester dominates the action in chapters XIII-XX. It is Dimmesdale, the priest, who dominates the action in chapters XXI-XXIV. According to Gerber's analysis, it is the community--and the state--in Boston that sets the tune and later on Chillingworth, Hester and Dimmesdale seize the initiative. The thrust of the narrative is to show how the community creates a challenging situation and how the major characters respond to the challenge. The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* shows both the authority of the community and the state and also the resilience and resourcefulness of the major characters like Chillingworth, Hester and Dimmesdale. Thus, the form and content are dexterously dovetailed in the romance-novel.

There is also a kind of openendedness of the text because of the use of the device of multiple choice by the narrator who looks upon the incidents and events of mid-seventeenth century New England from the ironic and sceptical perspective of a mid-nineteenth century observer. You could recall the narrator's comment on the meteors during the second scaffold scene at midnight and also on Dimmesdale's baring of his chest in the last scaffold scene. While the incidents are visualised in all their awe and mystery, the narrator's voice is ironic and sceptical. It is the narrator's voice that makes the superstitions and folk beliefs of mid-seventeenth century colonial New England somewhat credible to a reader of our time.

9.2 SYMMETRICAL DESIGN

If the three scaffold scenes provide a kind of narrative focus on the drama of sin and redemption in colonial New England, the scenes around the lonely cottage and the forest liberate Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl from the clutches of the stern Puritanic ethos and enable them to slowly work their way towards reunion and happiness in the Old World. While the scaffold scenes show that a natural life of passion and joy was just not possible in mid-seventeenth century New England, the forest scenes show that a natural life of passion and joy was quite possible for the major characters like Hester and Dimmesdale. While the scaffold scenes are dramatic and sombre, the forest scenes are lyrical and romantic. It is through a subtle inter-weaving of the scaffold scenes and the forest scenes, the dramatic and the lyrical, that the complex narrative structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is created.

It has to be noted, however, that even in the romantic scenes in the forest, the sinister shadow of Chillingworth is not entirely absent. It is in the forest that Hester tells Dimmesdale that the old man, Chillingworth, has been her husband. It is in the forest that Hester throws away *The Scarlet Letter* and realises her dream to be free. It is in the forest that Pearl refuses to accept her mother till she puts on the badge of shame and dishonour on her bosom. It is in the forest that Hester realises that she cannot undo her past. It is in the forest that Hester puts on her cap over her lovely, flowing hair and becomes appropriately subdued and sedate as a nun. It is true that the scaffold scenes and the forest scenes, by and large, convey the contrary outlooks of conformity, order and submission to divine will on the one hand, and individualism, rebellion and assertion of human will on the other hand. The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is so artfully designed that the forest scenes and the scaffold scenes interpenetrate and create an absorbing drama in which the sacred and the profane are inextricably fused. There is no wonder that a radical critic like D.H. Lawrence finds in the romance-novel "a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy" (Richard Chase, p.9). Needless to add that the morality is embedded in the scaffold scenes and the passion in the forest scenes. One can look at the tale from the point of view of Dimmesdale and one can also look at the tale from the point of view of Hester. While for Dimmesdale their sexual relationship was a sin, for Hester it was a celebration of the erotic impulse. It is in this sense that the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses both the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the carnal, the divine and the demonic.

9.3 FORM AND CONTENT

In his perceptive essay "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*" John C. Gerber has looked at the structure of the romance-novel in a different manner. Instead of focussing on the binary contrast between the forest scenes and the scaffold scenes, Gerber divides the romance-novel into four distinct clusters of scenes. Each cluster has

a distinct activating agent. The critic is of the view, "Thus the community, aside from the main characters, is responsible for the action in the first part (chapters I-VIII); Chillingworth for that in the second (XI-XII); Hester for that in the third (XIII-XX); and Dimmesdale for that in the fourth XXI-XXIV)" (Norton Critical Edition, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.284). The focus of the narrative in the first part is on the people in Boston. Apart from the church and the state, the common people also react to the basic situation unfolded. The reactions of the women in the market are very revealing. One old woman of fifty says that the authorities have been very lenient to Hester. They should have imposed on her a more stern punishment. Another one says that Hester's forehead should have been branded with a hot iron. When a young woman shows sympathy towards Hester, there is another one who says that "This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.70).

The nature of the community and the state is sharply brought out in the first part of the romance-novel. While the narrative creates an antipathy towards the Puritan community in Boston, it also creates sympathy towards Hester and Pearl. The scene in the Governor's House marks the end of this phase of the narrative. Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth play a crucial role in this scene. While Dimmesdale defends Hester's right to bring up Pearl, Chillingworth wonders why the priest advocates her case so vehemently. From this point one can see a smooth transition to the second part of the tale in which Chillingworth plays a crucial role. In this section, Dimmesdale is helpless and Chillingworth plays the role of the hunter. It is Dimmesdale's helplessness against the hunter that leads to Hester's activating role in the forest scenes, chapters XIII-XX. In the fourth section of the tale, Dimmesdale's Election Sermon and confession are the direct outcome of his being rejuvenated by Hester in the forest. In keeping with the nature of the romance-novel, both Dimmesdale and Hester are also used as the instrument of a prophecy. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* becomes a kind of dialogue between the past and the future. It encompasses both the terrible burden of the past and the immense possibilities of the life in the future.

9.4 OPEN-ENDEDNESS

We have told you that the text of *The Scarlet Letter* has the capacity to encompass diametrically opposite and conflicting outlooks. While for Dimmesdale the sexual relationship between Hester and the priest was a sin, for Hester, "What we did, had a consecration of its own" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.236). One can look at the tale as a drama of sin and redemption. One can also look at the tale as a love story and on Hester as an Oriental, a pagan. While the scaffold scenes are grim and sombre, the forest scenes are, by and large, lyrical and joyous. The juxtaposition of opposite and conflicting outlooks, the piety and the passion, creates an open-endedness in the text. Focussing on the ambiguity of the text, Sacvan Bercovitch says, "It entails a sustained open-ended tension between fundamentally conflicting outlooks" (*The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, p.25). It is a fact that the narrator, by and large, presents the tale of mid-seventeenth century New England from the ironic and sceptical perspective of a nineteenth century observer. There is no wonder that in the first scaffold scene, Hester is described by the narrator through an intensely Catholic image of Virgin Mary. *The Scarlet Letter* which is a badge of sin and shame appears to Indians as a symbol of "a personage of high dignity among her people" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.296). Later on, even to the Puritans of Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* ceases to be a badge of sin and damnation and becomes holy as the cross on a nun's bosom. One can safely affirm that the narrator's voice through irony and diverse images creates a sort of polyphony. The community in Boston that is initially so hostile to Hester's defiant radicalism, eventually accepts her as a holy nun.

There are gaps and silences in the text. When Dimmesdale returns from the forest, he is a rejuvenated man. He is full of energy and a vision. In his Election Sermon he visualises a glorious future for the Republic in New England. After he makes his

confession, he is completely debilitated. He collapses suddenly and dies in the arms of Hester. It is difficult to understand that a man who returns from the forest completely rejuvenated becomes so weak after his confession. It can only be taken as a mystery of life. Perhaps, the burst of energy after he returns from the forest could be taken as the last flicker of a dying candle. There is no doubt that the text is open-ended and could be interpreted differently. Hester becomes pious as a nun towards the end of the tale yet the narrator's voice is sceptical as ever, "Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but 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" (p.315).

Even Hester's radicalism is subject to the narrator's irony and scepticism.

9.5 LET US SUM UP

The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses both action and commentary. The commentary is from the perspective of a mid-nineteenth century observer of the life in colonial New England.

The symmetry of the narrative design is due to the three scaffold scenes at the beginning, the middle and the end. They hold the scenes together. While the scaffold scenes are grim, sombre and dramatic the forest scenes are lively, bright and lyrical. While the scaffold scenes are charged with piety, the forest scenes are charged with passion.

The narrative generates a kind of dialogue between the past and the future. There is also a kind of open-endedness embedded in the text.

9.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tradition and Revolution* by Charles Swann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
2. *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, by Sacvan Bercovitch (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991).
3. "Hawthorne in Our Time" from *Beyond Culture* by Lionel Trilling (Oxford University Press, 1980).
4. "The Romances" from Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Truth of Dreams* by Rita K. Gollin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).
5. *Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies* by Michael Dunne (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1995).
6. *The American Historical Romance* by George Dekker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
7. *The Scarlet Letter* by F.O. Matthiessen and "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*" by John C. Gerber included in Norton Critical Edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, 1961. (Strongly recommended.)

UNIT 10 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.1 Introduction
- 10.2 Nineteenth Century Response
- 10.3 Modern Response
- 10.4 Contemporary Response
- 10.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 10.6 Glossary
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10.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the shifting critical responses to *The Scarlet Letter* from the nineteenth century to the contemporary time. A classic like *The Scarlet Letter* has been interpreted differently in different times.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

In nineteenth century it was Henry James, himself a distinguished American master of fiction, who set the tone of a qualified approval of *The Scarlet Letter*. On the one hand, James admired the work as an authentic portrayal of New England Puritanism in all its specific colour. On the other hand, he was also critical of its excessive allegory and symbolism and an absence of realism that was so triumphant all over Europe. Even major realist novelists like Anthony Trollope and William Dean Howells admired the tragic intensity of *The Scarlet Letter* but could not really understand "why Hawthorne could lean so heavily on the fantastic, the supernatural, the symbolic, and the allegorical and yet create a sense of truth as strong as in any realistic novel" (*The Scarlet Letter*, A Reading by Nina Baym, p.xxv).

It was, however, a twentieth century critic like Richard Chase who could differentiate Nathaniel Hawthorne from the realistic writers of the novel in the nineteenth century and describe *The Scarlet Letter* as a romance or a romance-novel, that is a novel with a strong element of romance, supernatural and the marvellous. F.O. Matthiessen was another important twentieth century critic who could discern a formal coherence and unity in the sequencing of the three scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*. D.H. Lawrence was a radical critic and thinker who could see a kind of duplicity in the romantic tale in which the celebration of passion nearly destroys the world of piety that the puritanic imagination of the writer has so meticulously created.

The contemporary critics like Michael Dunne, Sacvan Bercovitch, Charles Swann and Nina Baym look at *The Scarlet Letter* as an open-ended text in which there is a recurrent dialogue between the past and the future. While the Puritan utopia that was established in mid-seventeenth century New England with so much hope is sharply negated by the thrust of the narrative, a kind of feminist utopia is obliquely visualised by the narrator. It is the many-sidedness of the text that forces the reader to interpret the tale differently. There is no wonder that the ambiguity of the narrative is forcefully brought out by the contemporary critics.

10.2 NINETEENTH CENTURY RESPONSE

The Scarlet Letter, according to Nina Baym in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* was "recognized as a classic even before publication" (p.xxi). The original intention of Hawthorne had been to publish the work as a loose collection of short tales. It was James T. Field, one of the three partners in the firm that published Hawthorne's works, who read the manuscript and urged the hesitant author to publish it as a single work. Field agreed with Hawthorne that the work was "not a mixture of bright and dark, sunshine and shadow, humor and pathos as the taste of the time preferred" (p.xxi). In reality, Hawthorne's tale was a product of his brooding imagination and was "intense and single in its stress on the dark, the somber, the gloomy" (p.xxi). Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick* also referred to Hawthorne's brooding, melancholy imagination, "this great power of blackness is derived from that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free" (Richard Chase, p.89).

After its publication, various critics responded to *The Scarlet Letter* in different ways. While admitting that it was a most powerful but painful story, Henry Chorley drew our attention to the fantastic and the supernatural in the tale, "The touch of the fantastic befitting a period of society in which ignorant and excitable human creatures conceived each other and themselves to be under the direct rule and governance of the wicked one, is most skillfully administered. The supernatural here never becomes grossly palpable--the thrill is all the deeper for its action being indefinite, and its source vague and distant" (*Critics on Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas J. Rountree, pp.18-19). What Henry Chorley suggested was that the use of the fantastic and the supernatural was done in a most judicious and artistic manner in order to bring out the strange life in mid-seventeenth century New England in all its primitive and specific particularity. In other words, it was the use of the fantastic and the supernatural that made Hawthorne's sombre romance authentic and credible. Leslie Stephen also drew attention to the use of the marvellous in Hawthorne's romance, "In fact Hawthorne was able to tread in that magic circle [of the marvellous] only by an exquisite refinement of taste, and by a delicate sense of humor, which is the best preservative against all extravagance" (*ibid.*, p.26).

Anthony Trollope was a major Victorian writer who wrote novels in the realistic mode. He was, however, perceptive enough to discern that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* belonged to an altogether different tradition of fiction, "The creations of American literature generally are no doubt more given to the speculative--less given to the realistic--than are those of English literature . . . But in no American writer is to be found the same predominance of weird imagination as in Hawthorne" (*ibid.*, p.28). It is this strange and brooding imagination of Hawthorne that enabled him to look at the institutions and individuals of mid-seventeenth century New England from the perspective of an outsider, "In this, however, there is a streak of that satire with which Hawthorne always speaks of the peculiar institutions of his own country. The worthy magistrates of Massachusetts are under his lash throughout the story, and so is the virtue of her citizens and the chastity of her matrons, which can take delight in the open shame of a woman whose sin has been discovered. Indeed, there is never a page written by Hawthorne not tinged by satire" (*ibid.*, p.29).

It was Henry James who made an attempt to include Hawthorne in the canon and described him as the foremost American master of fiction, "To talk of his being national would be to force the note and make a mistake of proportion; but he is, in spite of the absence of the realistic quality, intensely and vividly local" (*ibid.*, p.38). Henry James could notice the paradox of Hawthorne's fictional art. There was an absence of realism, that is an elaborate and comprehensive depiction of incidents of everyday life, and yet *The Scarlet Letter* could present the life of colonial New England in all its

starkness and specificity. It is Hawthorne's ability to evoke the life and folk beliefs of the city of Boston in colonial New England that made him the foremost American writer of his time. It is true that Henry James was critical of the absence of realism in Hawthorne and he also lamented the excess of allegory and symbolism in the unfolding of the narrative. He also suggested, like Anthony Trollope, that, "He is to a considerable degree ironical--this is part of his charm--part even one may say, of his brightness; but he is neither bitter nor cynical--he is rarely even what I should call tragical" (*ibid.*, p.40). It is the reader's inability to perceive the irony in Hawthorne's narrative art that makes the tale appear so morbid and gloomy. True, there is gloom and melancholy as the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* is unfolded but it is, to some extent, countered by the narrator's irony and scepticism. Even in the most intense scene, for example, the last scaffold scene, the note of irony is unmistakable.

10.3 MODERN RESPONSE

It was in the twentieth century that *The Scarlet Letter* was seen as a product of a native tradition of American fiction. Richard Chase suggested in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* that "romance, rather than the novel, was the pre-destined form of American narrative" (p.18). A romance was preoccupied more with the marvellous and the supernatural but it also was faithful to what Hawthorne himself described as "the truth of the human heart" (p.18). F.O. Matthiessen looked at *The Scarlet Letter* in terms of the structure of a tale that had a symmetry of design. The symmetry resulted from the sequencing of the highly dramatic scenes near the scaffold of the pillory where all the major characters were present. These scenes were located at the beginning, the middle and the end of the tale (Norton Critical edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, p.279). In other words, there was a classical unity of design in the structure of the romance designed by Hawthorne.

While keeping in mind the modernist temper F.O. Matthiessen focussed attention on the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* and the importance of the three scaffold scenes, Yvor Winters laid stress on the strange nature of the fiction created by Hawthorne. He said, "In *The Scarlet Letter*, then, Hawthorne created a great allegory; or, if we look first at the allegorical view of life upon which early Puritan society was based, we might almost say that he composed a great historical novel" (*Critics On Hawthorne*, p.64). A critic like Charles Fiedelson, Jr. was of the view that allegory and symbolism were often in conflict in *The Scarlet Letter*. He said, "The symbolistic and the allegorical patterns in Hawthorne's books reach quite different conclusions; or, rather, the symbolism leads to an inconclusive luxuriance of meaning, while allegory imposes the pat moral and the simplified character" (p.66).

We have already told you that *The Scarlet Letter* A is initially visualised as the badge of a sinful woman but later on it becomes a rich symbol of a noble nun and a compassionate woman. In other words, while allegory has a more or less definite meaning, a symbol has a host of associations clinging to it. It was a critic like Q.D. Leavis who could look upon Hawthorne as a poet rather than an allegorist, "And if much of Hawthorne's writing is allegorical, it is in the manner of Shakespeare--the Shakespeare of the tragedies . . . each of which may be regarded 'as an expanded metaphor'--rather than in the style of Spenser, Milton or Bunyan" (*Collected Essays*, Vol.2, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.3). The difficulty of a final interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter* arises from the symbolical and metaphoric density of the text.

In her celebrated essay "Hawthorne as Poet" Q.D. Leavis looks upon Hawthorne as a leading cultural critic of his time. She says, "Hawthorne was writing a kind of mythic prophecy about the great cultural change involved in the shift from the Old World to the New" (Richard Chase, p.75). It has to be noted that both Hester and Dimmesdale had eventually planned to escape to the Old World but later on they changed their plan and stuck to the New World. D.H. Lawrence was a radical thinker who could see in

Hawthorne "a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy" (Richard Chase, p.9). What D.H. Lawrence was suggesting is that there was a split in Hawthorne's mind. He was both a Puritan like Dimmesdale and a pagan like Hester. *The Scarlet Letter* was both a drama of sin and redemption and a celebration of romantic love. It could be read from a sacred perspective and it could also be read simultaneously from a secular perspective.

10.4 CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE

Rita K. Gollin has laid stress on daydreams that Hester has in the first scaffold scene, and Dimmesdale has during the second scaffold scene at midnight. The reverie or daydream helps them to come to terms with the consequences of their sexual encounter. Rita K. Gollin is able to draw a line of demarcation between the function of the daydream in the life of the two main protagonists in *The Scarlet Letter*, "Hester's daydream establishes her character, and Dimmesdale's explores his dilemma" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Truth of Dreams*, p.141). Since Hawthorne's romance is not only a historical romance but a psychological romance as well, the writer has made a judicious use of dreams in order to portray the inner reality of the protagonist's mind. Lionel Trilling draws our attention to the similarity between Hawthorne and Kafka, "There is a very considerable degree of similarity in their preoccupations--'man's dark odyssey in an alien world' may serve to describe Kafka's as well as Hawthorne's 'Hawthorne in Our Time' from *Beyond Culture*, p.171). Lionel Trilling also points out, "Then too, having in mind Kafka's negation of the world of actuality, I think it can fairly be said that there is something comparable in the way that Hawthorne deals with the world. He encourages the comparison when he tells us that he does not write novels but 'romances,' by which he means that his fiction does not make a very determined reference to the concrete substantialities of life, the observation and imitation of which is the definitive business of novels" (p.171). We would like you to remember the key phrase "negation of the world of actuality." That is, at the heart of Hawthorne's creativity in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Terence Martin has drawn our attention to the ambivalent nature of reality portrayed in Hawthorne's masterpiece, "In *The Scarlet Letter*, however, Hawthorne sustains a vision of the ambivalent nature of reality beyond all he had done before and in a way he was never to do again. Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, *The Scarlet Letter* itself--all signify more than one thing; all must be considered in more than one way" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, p.117). While Terence Martin lays stress on the many-sidedness of Hawthorne's sombre tale, Kristin Herzog lays stress on the subaltern and the marginal groups that fill the canvas in *The Scarlet Letter*, "*The Scarlet Letter* is a story set up at the rough edge of civilization. The dark forest is still ominously near, and the dark dangers from foreign servants, untamed children, stubborn heretics, idle Indians, or hell-bound witches seem to threaten the Puritan civilization's sacred new orders" (*Women, Ethnicity and Exotics*, p.7). If you want to appreciate the extraordinary richness of the text, you have to keep in mind not only the Puritan ethos but also the voice of the subaltern and the marginal groups, that is the Indians, the witches and the Quakers and heretics. There is indeed a polyphony of voices in *The Scarlet Letter*. Kristin Herzog has rightly affirmed, "American literature gained strength whenever it drew on the power of the powerless" (p.189).

George Dekker lays emphasis on the fact that the American Historical romance is a genre that shows a preoccupation with the past. He is of the view that there are time and place markers in *The Scarlet Letter* and when we look at a character like Governor Bellingham he appears as an anachronistic figure to the readers of our time (*The American Historical Romance*, p.15). Luther S. Luedtke is of the view, "The problem of *The Scarlet Letter* is really the problem of how to interpret Hester" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient*, p.165). In other words, the real significance of *The Scarlet Letter* lies in our ability to look at the pagan and oriental

nature of Hester and also in our ability to look upon her as the most radical woman of nineteenth century American fiction. Nina Baym is also of the view that Hester is the core of the romance, not Dimmesdale.

Charles Swann is nearly of the same view, "she is genuinely subversive in that she desires and prophesies a radical subversion of the patriarchal structures of the society and, most significantly, of the religion that legitimates that patriarchy" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tradition and Revolution*, pp.90-91). He is also of the view that the narrative form resists closure. It remains deliberately open--open to the future (p.94). Charles Swann sums up his evaluation of Hawthorne's masterpiece in these words, "*The Scarlet Letter* is a historical novel--one which takes past, present and future into consideration--and is at the same time political in that the future is presented as something that we have to struggle to make--a making based on desire corrected by our perspectives on the past" (p.95).

Sacvan Bercovitch lays stress on the gaps and silences in the text and we do not really understand why Hester Prynne returns to Boston after Pearl's settlement in the Old World. He is also of the view that Hawthorne's imagination has something of Bakhtin's dialogic imagination. Bercovitch says, "Dialogics is the process by which a singular authorial vision unfolds as a 'polyphony' of distinct voices" (*The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, p.24). Michael Dunne also draws our attention towards open-endedness of the text of *The Scarlet Letter* (*Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies*, p. 19). There is no wonder that the reader has to read the text with utmost care and judgement.

If one were to sum up the contemporary relevance of *The Scarlet Letter* one could do no better than quote Nina Baym, "Perhaps, then, the most exciting thing about *The Scarlet Letter* is not that we can translate it into a core meaning, but that it is full of meanings; though a dead work if it is not read, it comes to life for each reader in a slightly different way, just as human beings do for each other. The elusiveness of the text is thus the essential reason for its continuous fascination throughout the years" (*The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*, p.xxix).

10.5 LET US SUM UP

In the nineteenth century *The Scarlet Letter* was evaluated in terms of a realistic work of fiction. As such, critics felt that there was an excess of allegory and symbolism in the romantic tale.

It was in the twentieth century that *The Scarlet Letter* was evaluated in terms of its structure based on a sequence of the three scaffold scenes that encompassed the romantic scenes in the forest. It was also seen as a romance--novel in which allegory and symbolism played such a crucial role.

The contemporary critics could discern a kind of dialogic imagination informing the text. The past and the future were embedded in the text inextricably. Each reader has to recreate the text in the light of his or her own experience, keeping in mind both the dominant voice and also the voices of the subaltern, marginal groups in colonial New England.

10.6 GLOSSARY

Dialogic imagination is a key concept developed by Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. It enables a writer to present more or less simultaneously concepts which were opposites and could not be reconciled in terms of reason. Novels using this technique use multiple voices called **polyphony**. *The Scarlet Letter* brings out the opposing views of Dimmesdale and Hester on their sexual union.

10.7 A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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