

The Scarlet Letter — An introduction

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: PURITAN NEW ENGLAND

- NB: The first successful British settlement in America was Jamestown, in the Colony of Virginia (i.e. not in New England), founded in 1607 by the Virginia Company (i.e. not Puritans).
- The Plymouth Colony was founded in 1620 by a group of Dissenters (Protestants rejecting the authority of the Church of England) arriving on the Mayflower, later called the Pilgrim Fathers.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was established by Puritans (strictly speaking, non-separatist Protestants) in 1629. Boston (named after Boston in Lincolnshire) was founded in 1630 by John Winthrop (the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony). Salem was founded in 1626.

The Providence Plantation (in today's Providence, RI) was founded in 1636 by Roger Williams, who had been exiled from the Massachusetts Bay for religious reasons. He established religious tolerance and separation of Church and State.

- "Puritans were generally members of the Church of England who believed the Church of England was insufficiently Reformed and who therefore opposed royal ecclesiastical policy under Elizabeth I of England, James I of England, and Charles I of England. Most Puritans were 'non-separating Puritans', meaning they did not advocate setting up separate congregations distinct from the Church of England; a small minority of Puritans were 'separating Puritans' who advocated setting up congregations outside the Church." (*Wikipedia*, "History of the Puritans in North America") Some use the term Puritan only for non-separatist groups. They played a crucial role in the history of Britain in the 17th century, especially during the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1649–60) under Cromwell. They were Calvinists — although the theological details varied — and as such insisted on such notions as simple ritual, with sermons rather than the decorum of a Catholic mass, and public confession.

- The traditional vision of Puritans as "grave", "sad", "stern" and sexually repressed is partly a 19th-century misinterpretation. But they were extremely strict in their religious views, harsh in their laws, and largely intolerant of other religious denominations (especially Roman Catholicism in theory, and Quakerism in practice). In most cases, the religious and the political were intermingled in the Colonies, which are usually termed theocracies, even though the institutions had a separation between the two realms: the state rulers and church leaders were frequently the same persons (e.g. John Winthrop).
- On board the *Arbella*, Winthrop delivered the sermon "A Model of Christian Charity": see quotations.



Jan de Bray, *The Regents of the Children's Orphanage in Haarlem* (1663)

→ See n° 3–5, 17 & 46

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: TRANSCENDENTALISM

- A school of thought developed during the 1820's around people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism is a form of American Romanticism. Among the tenets of the movement are the inherent goodness of human nature, which society, human institutions, can only corrupt, and thus an insistence on "self-reliance" (Emerson) and "civil disobedience" (Thoreau): people should not let a government (by definition unjust) dictate their moral choices, and must disobey human laws rather than contradict the laws of nature.
- In 1841, Hawthorne briefly lived at Brook Farm, a utopian commune (school / farm / phalanstery) inspired by Transcendentalism. He later satirised that experience in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE SPOILS SYSTEM

- "In the politics of the United States, a spoils system (also known as a patronage system) is a practice in which a political party, after winning an election, gives government jobs to its supporters, friends and relatives as a reward for working toward victory, and as an incentive to keep working for the party — as opposed to a merit system." (*Wikipedia*) This was common practice in the USA mainly between 1829 with Andrew Jackson's election and 1883.

KEY ISSUES, THEMES AND QUESTIONS

The individual & society — Choices, freewill & predestination — Origins & heritage, atavism — Appearances & identity; deciphering signs, symbols & portents; uncertainty — Guilt & innocence; crime & punishment — Redemption & reconciliation.

What link is there exactly between the introductory "TCH" and the main narrative? What role in the narrative (if any) should be ascribed to the claimed autobiographical dimension of "TCH"?

What light does the novel shed on America and American history?

Is a moral reading of the book tenable? If so, what moral does it offer?

THE STATUS OF THE "INTRODUCTORY SKETCH"

- During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *TSL* was regularly published without the preceding "TCH", which was considered a separate work having no direct connection to the novel. Critical attitudes to it have changed — arguably for the best. It can be said that the "Preface to the second edition" (p. 5) shows how important his introductory narrative was to Hawthorne: even though he had been harshly criticised for it, and even though "TCH" was ostensibly a more general introduction to a projected whole volume of stories (see the reference to "Main Street" p. 31, and p. 42), he decided to leave it as was. This certainly means that we should see it, as the author apparently did, as a part of the final work, or having a bearing on it, and not as mere accessory, disconnected decoration.
- This also suggests that a full understanding of the whole work (introductory sketch *and* main story) should take into account any link, echo, or parallel to be found between both constituents — between Salem and Boston, the 19th and the 17th centuries, Hawthorne and the Puritan settlers, etc. When Hawthorne describes Surveyor Pue, and thus indirectly himself, as a "local antiquarian", the term should be taken in the context of the time, when the concept of national heritage was being born.

ORIGINS: THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST

- Although they were not the first British settlements on American soil, the Puritan colonies of New England can be called the cradle of what would become the United States. The *Mayflower* remains to this day a symbol of the birth of the USA, with the Pilgrim Fathers in a list with the Founding Fathers (Washington, Jefferson *et al.*). This might be especially true for a man whose family roots lie in Salem (see below) — and perhaps even more so in the years leading up to the Civil War (emphasising the prominence of the North would then have been politically significant). It is certainly true that the North played a central role in the development of the country, be it demographically (in 1850, only two of the ten most populated cities in the USA lay in the South, if one includes Missouri; Boston was in the third place), economically, or politically — the independence movement developed mainly in New England (see the Boston Tea Party e.g.). The institutions of the Puritan Colonies can also be said to be the source of the American system, with an insistence on democratic consensus, elected officials, etc.

What is more, Hawthorne was associated with the Young America movement, one aim of which was to establish and champion a specifically American culture, independent from European tradition (a case of American exceptionalism): writing about the birth of a nation was consistent with such a purpose.

- Hawthorne also had a connection with (a “home-feeling with”) the past on a personal level, as stated and elaborated on in “TCH”. His ancestors, William then John Hawthorne (see p. 12 and notes p. 229–30), were among the first leaders of the Puritan community in Salem, the latter being a magistrate during the infamous witch trials. So Hawthorne was a direct descendent of original settlers, their “representative”, and felt, as “few of [his] countrymen [could] know”, a connection with “the Puritanic traits, both good and evil”, and a sense of responsibility for “their sins”.

→ See n° 2, 8, 17, 21, 22, 30 & 60

UTOPIA (OR DYSTOPIA?)

- In the beginning of Chapter 1, Haw.’s narrative persona (perhaps, but not necessarily, ironically) calls 17th-century Boston a “Utopia of human virtue and happiness”. This is indeed consistent with the endeavour of the Puritan settlers: fleeing religious persecution in England, they saw the New World as a haven, a new Promised Land where they could not only be free and safe, but implement their theological, social and political ideals. A famous expression of this project is Winthrop’s “City upon a hill”: in his sermon, he presents their soon-to-be-founded colony as a new Jerusalem, the result of a new “covenant” with God, a case of *tabula rasa*; re-creating a perfect society from scratch, they were to serve as a model for the whole world (i.e. Europe, the Old World).

Such an attitude would be taken up by the Founding Fathers in 1789: the aims of the newly created United States, as stated in the Preamble to the Constitution, were “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to [them]selves and [their] Posterity”. Furthermore, Brook Farm or the Icarian communes founded by Étienne Cabet and his followers in the 1840’s show that the utopian promises offered by the wild expanses of the American territory had not died out when the novel was published.

Poised between the ocean and the forest, between Europe (the past) and America (the future), beleaguered outposts of Christian civilisation amid the wilderness, the colonies of the early 17th century felt — from their very creation — as symbolic echoes of the Biblical Hebrews, or even of the prelapsarian Garden of Eden, a vision which, slightly de-Christianised perhaps, kept its full force in the 19th century (at least until 1890 and the end of the Frontier) — and possibly does to this day.

- It is this light that the adulteress’s banishment to a cottage on the outskirts of the village, the near-wilderness (she appears as a Biblical scapegoat, almost literally), should be understood. It is also, cer-

tainly, how the figure of Hes. as “prophetess” in the last pages of the romance should be read, in keeping with the link established by “TCH” between the origins of the USA and Haw.’s own time: the Puritan colonies (be it Salem or Boston) ushered in the modern-day United States. Whether the utopian experiment they represented was felicitous may very well be what the novel is trying to assess.

→ See n° 4, 5, 7, 17, 21, 45, 49 & 51

THE QUESTION OF GUILT: MORALS, RELIGION, POLITICS

- If Boston was a version of Eden, then the sins committed by the characters are a version of the Fall. An easy (simplistic?) vision of the protagonists would then identify Dim. and Hes. with Adam and Eve, Chill. with Satan. Of course, this would hardly account for Pearl or the magistrates and citizens of Boston; still, the idea of an original sin representing a fault in the colony’s utopian perfection may be fruitful.
- What seems indisputable is that, at least for some definition of the term or from some point of view, all three characters *have* sinned: Hes. & Dim. did have an adulterous affair, Dim. did refuse to confess and lives as a hypocrite, Chill. does torment Dim. (thus violating his Hippocratic oath: *primum non nocere*). In the same way, Haw. *does* present his ancestors as guilty in “TCH”.

Conversely, it may be argued that Hes. & Dim.’s love is pure and has a sacred dimension which puts it above the laws of men and the base, meaningless (because loveless) terms of her marriage with Chill. And in the same way, for all their failings, the Puritans (Bostonians or Salemites) can very well appear morally superior to Haw.’s contemporaries, the customs officers.

- Connected with the notion of guilt is the question of human nature. From a Calvinist perspective, every human being is intrinsically flawed, tainted with the original sin; thus, guilt is general, a fact of nature, and one can only hope to counteract the evil of the world by following God’s law and helping implement it. The Transcendentalists held an opposite view: man is inherently good, society can only corrupt him, and one should follow one’s own principles.
- One way of addressing the moral question in the book is in terms of social morals and personal ethics, or of moral choice and freewill of the individual in society. In the context of a Puritan colony (a “theocracy”— see above), the distinction between the public and the private, between church and state (in terms of moral doctrine at least) was limited; Hes. can only become an outcast, a pariah, when she violates the all-encompassing (some might say “totalitarian”, despite the anachronism) ideology of her society, i.e. the social compact on which it was founded. Her position can be compared to Haw.’s (or his persona’s) straying from the family ethos: the pun on the word “customs” that permeates “TCH” then takes its full force. *TSL* may be addressing the political issue of the extent any community ought to give to its values (moral, religious, political) and their enforcement.

→ See n° 4, 6, 9, 16, 27, 29, 31, 34, 38, 44, 47, 52 & 53

INDETERMINATION & SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATIONS

- *TSL* is replete with elements that seem to beg for a symbolic reading — beginning of course with the scarlet letter itself. For example, one could construe Dim. and Chill. as representing passion and rationality respectively; see the forest as a symbol of benevolent nature (as opposed to oppressive society), and/or of the perils of the wilderness (as opposed to the safety of society), or of evil, the realm of Satan (as opposed to godly civilisation); comment at length — as many critics have — on the wild rose bush in Chapter 1, on the meaning of the letter A, on Pearl, on the use of colours in the romance, on Hes.’s reflection in the suit of armour in the Governor’s house, on what the three customs officers in “TCH” represent, and so on.

- Although these symbolical readings seem perfectly legitimate, what is striking is their fluidity, the explicit refusal of the narrator to interpret the signs, and the insistence on the question of their interpretation. It seems that everyone — from the narrator to the protagonists to the people of Boston, even to the readers of the first edition of the book — feels a compelling urge to assign symbolic readings to phenomena, to try and unveil their hidden identity, and decipher their one true meaning.

This suggests that the ambiguity, or ambivalence, of some (arguably most) of them is deliberate. To give but two examples, the colour red seems to function both as symbol of lustful passion (the scarlet letter as intended by the magistrates) and innocent freedom (the wild rose); the Indians who took Chill. prisoner represent both the wilderness, a threat from the outward chaos, and a force for good (through their medical knowledge, at the very least).

- But it is also a fundamental motif in the plot of the novel, and most certainly part of the meaning of it: the characters tend to force preordained significance on phenomena, whether natural or social. Determined as they are by a set ideology, they fail to question and interpret reality for what it is, they *want* to see meaning in it, a meaning that *has* to be consistent with the tenets of that ideology.

It seems that that all-encompassing, deterministic, imposed symbolic reading is the crucial flaw defining the Puritan world, which needs to be overcome if “a new birth of freedom” (Lincoln) is to occur in the USA. Such is, of course, the reader’s task.

→ See n° 13, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 33, 35, 40–44, 46, 47, 50, 53 & 54–61

ART AS SUBLIMATION



Four scarlet letters:

Lilian Gish, Demi Moore, Molly Wilson & Emma Stone in the 1926, 1995, 2015 film versions & *Easy A*

Art is another word beginning with A.

A pearl is the result of a mollusc’s transforming a wound into something beautiful: in the same way, Hes. turns her intended badge of shame into an elaborate piece of artful embroidery; Dim.’s misery is what allows him to write his sermons, and even Chill. finds in his tribulations matter for his art as a physician. Parallel to that is Haw.’s using his being removed from office as occasion for writing his novel.

In the Preface to *The Marble Faun*, he insisted that “romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wallflowers, need ruin to make them grow”, that no romance can rise “where there is no shadow”, but only “commonplace prosperity”: art is thus necessarily the product of some negative element. Furthermore, in *TSL*, art is a way to sublimate the negative, transform it into something positive and beautiful, the way the wild rosebush seems to grow from the prison wall.

→ See n° 1, 2, 21, 23, 30, 32 & 39

MISCELLANEOUS REMARKS

- **On the subtitle “A romance”**, see the Prefaces to *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Marble Faun*.
→ See n° 1 & 2
- **On the name Esther** (of which Hester is a variant) in the Bible: “During the course of the story, she evolves into someone who takes a decisive role in her own future and that of her people” (*Wikipedia*). Besides, one theory is that the name comes from Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love (including sex and fertility); it may also be connected with a word meaning “myrtle”, a plant mythologically associated with Aphrodite; others think it comes from a Semitic root meaning “morning star”.
- **On the surname Prynne:** Esther’s name may be a reference to William Prynne (1600–69), an English writer and politician. A strict Puritan, he opposed feast days, the theatre, toasts, and thought that it was “mannish, unnatural, impudent, and unchristian” for women to cut their hair short (or cover it, as Hester does?).
- Historically, the law requiring an adulteress’s wearing an A on her dress was passed only in 1694 in Plymouth. Before that, death or whipping were the traditional sentences for adultery. John Hathorne ordered such a whipping in Salem in 1688. Hawthorne took other liberties with the historical facts, notably as regards who was Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony at a specific date.
- The phrase “the Prince of the Air” for the Devil is from Ephesians 2:2 (“the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience”, KJV). It was used by repenting jury members after the Salem witch trials (1692–3), and also appears in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.
- Our edition retains Hawthorne’s original spelling, which differs from the modern one in a few cases.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Several study guides can be found on the internet: have a look at <http://www.gradesaver.com/the-scarlet-letter>, <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/s/the-scarlet-letter> or <http://www.shmoop.com/scarlet-letter> among others for character lists, quizzes, etc.
- Robert Vignola’s 1934 film adaptation is in the public domain. It can be watched freely here: <https://archive.org/details/MajesticPicturesPublicDomainTheScarletLetter>.