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A FORMALIST ANALYSIS OF *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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**ABSTRACT**

A formalist analysis focuses on the literary text to the exclusion of social, cultural or political reality outside of the text. A text is examined by the formalists as a complete world in itself. A close reading of the text, therefore, is the foundation of Formalist criticism. When we examine the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, it seems as if the novel has been written with great care and precision. Hawthorne seems to have woven the tapestry of the scarlet letter with utmost care leaving absolutely no loose ends. "The Custom House" section, which appears at the very beginning of the narrative, seems to have no link with the story at a cursory glance. However on a close reading, we find it beautifully bound up with the rest of the novel. Though different chapters seem to focus on a single character individually, they are unified because other characters have not been wholly ignored in these chapters. The three scaffold scenes provide unity to the narrative and the forest scenes form an important part of the story. The plot can be explained in terms of rising action, climax, crisis, falling action and conclusion. Hawthorne has also made use of the devices of irony, ambiguity and symbolism to make the narrative a unified whole.

**Keywords:** Text, plot, structure, irony, ambiguity, symbolism, exposition

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**INTRODUCTION**

*The Scarlet Letter*, written by the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, is an 1850 work of fiction. Set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Boston, it tells the story of Hester Prynne who is one of the early settlers who have come from England to settle in New England. She is cast out by the strict Puritan society for committing the sin of adultery. The novel narrates the story as she struggles to rebuild her life along with bringing up Pearl, her daughter, singlehandedly. *The Scarlet Letter* is undisputably one of the greatest novels of American literature. What makes it extraordinary is the character of its female protagonist Hester whose beauty, intellect and strength of will raise her to heroic proportions. The book has always been a favourite both with readers and critics. Consequently, it has been analyzed from every conceivable angle. A formalist study of the novel too does not disappoint, as one looks closely at the great structural skill displayed by its creator.

Formalism refers to a style of analysis that pays attention only to the form or structure of a work and the literary devices operating within it. It does not take into consideration any other reality outside of the text.

Formalists believed that the focus of literary studies should be the text itself. According to the formalists, story can be called just the summary of the plot, which can be presented in a straight line. It is the use of various techniques by a writer that makes a literary work rich and worthwhile. A mere study of the content of a work, therefore, is not considered sufficient by them. Its form is also to be examined for a complete understanding of any work. Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky are the prominent names in the field of Formalist criticism. "New Criticism", a school of American literary criticism that emerged later also is very similar to formalist criticism in its emphasis on form and objectivity.

*The Scarlet Letter*, written in 1850 by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is one of the greatest novels of American literature. The novel narrates the tale of Hester Prynne, who has come into conflict with society for having committed the sin of adultery. Various critics have interpreted *The Scarlet Letter* in a variety of ways. It has been discussed almost threadbare from every possible angle -- be it romantic, transcendental, psychoanalytical or feminist. This may be due to the richness of meaning Hawthorne imbues his writing with. However, we find that a formalist reading of the text also does not disappoint.

Hawthorne has been praised for the skill and craftsmanship he shows in his writing. *The Scarlet Letter* is no exception. In fact, what strikes us is the extraordinary unity of *The Scarlet Letter*, in spite of it sustaining a surprising variety of interpretations. The plot of the novel is essentially a unified whole. The novel begins with a sketch titled "The Custom House". To a cursory reader, the section may seem to have little link with the rest of the novel. One may even give up its reading halfway, thinking it to be a mere piece of autobiography covering three years of Hawthorne's life. But if we read closely, we see its close link with the rest of the novel. One thing which unites it with the rest of the novel is the narrator of the story with whom we get acquainted in this very section. He is a nineteenth-century man, well-balanced in his approach, reflective and tolerant but also mildly ironical. The narrator, we come to know, was once employed in the custom house of Salem. There, one day, he came across a package belonging to one Jonathan Pue. The package contained a red cloth with gold embroidery of the shape of letter 'A' and several foolscap sheets containing particulars regarding the life of Hester Prynne. The narrator tells us that he has taken up the main facts of the story from these documents. Thus, the nineteenth-century narrator, with a tolerant outlook on life, is retelling the story of seventeenth-century characters. He may be more progressive, but as we see in 'The Custom House' section, he is never condescending towards his puritan ancestors, who were known for their strict moral code and zero tolerance for any kind of violation of that code. On the contrary, he is very much in awe of them as is suggested by the terms such as "dim and dusky grandeur."<sup>1</sup> His sense of inadequacy also comes out when he refers to himself as "a writer of story-books", "an idler like myself" (8). According to Marshall Van Deusen, "It is this personal tension that "explains" and prepares us for the notorious doubleness of judgement which pervades the story of Hester's persecution."<sup>2</sup>

The sympathies of the narrator seem to be divided between Puritans and transgressors. He has a sympathetic attitude towards his protagonists, but at the same time, he does not approve of their adultery. Moreover, the narrator does not stop at being the editor only as he himself confesses that he has allowed himself "nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention" (p.33). Thus his approach becomes very complex. We don't know whether the pious lectures, which we come across in the story, belong to him or they are pieces of calculated irony. This duality of approach can be seen throughout the narrative. His tone in the forest scenes and the subsequent chapter "The Minister in a Maze" can be taken as an example. The lovers, Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale, meet after a long period of time. Both decide to flee the Puritan settlement. Hester, as she takes off the scarlet letter and her cap, is rewarded by "a sudden smile of heaven" (p.124) in the form of sunshine. Dimmesdale also breathes freely after a long time. Here, Hawthorne seems to be on the side of the lovers but his tone in the very next chapter confuses us. The narrator comments, "Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself up in deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin" and that the infectious poison of that sin had "stupefied all blessed impulses, and awakened into vivid life the whole brotherhood of bad ones" (p.233). This doubleness of judgements pervades the entire narrative.

Hawthorne has made conscious use of the devices of irony, ambiguity and symbolism to tie the different parts of his narrative together and to add richness to it. The reader who wants clarity and expects the narrator to emphasise the difference between a rational fact and a superstitious idea is bound to be disappointed. The narrator seems to prefer the usage of "might", "perhaps", "it was whispered" and "it was rumoured". It is never made clear whether the scarlet letter at Hester's bosom really glowed at night. Whether Mistress Hibbins really was a witch and went into the forest to be in the company of witches is also not made clear. The presence of Black Man in the forest is neither denied nor confirmed. The master stroke of ambiguity comes when even this is doubted if Dimmesdale really made a confession or it was just a saintly gesture of his to die in the arms of a fallen woman. Another major instance of ambiguity is shown while delineating the character of little Pearl. We keep on wondering along with Hester if Pearl knows as to why her mother wears the scarlet letter and if Pearl has been sent as "messenger of anguish" to torment Hester.

Another device that the narrator has resorted to in his narrative is the device of symbolism. The most important symbol, the scarlet letter "A" is introduced in "The Custom House" section. This letter stands for adultery but it symbolizes many things as the novel progresses. The Puritans themselves start interpreting it differently. They insist on its meaning "Able" and consider it as sacred as a cross on nun's bosom. But it also becomes the symbol of Hester's isolation and solitude. We see in the chapter "The New England Holiday" that a magic circle forms around the scarlet-letter clad Hester in which nobody dares to venture. In the last chapter, the scarlet letter is symbolic of the awe and reverence that Hester inspires in the people of Boston. The minister's hand on heart is symbolic of the feeling of guilt which keeps on torturing him. Hester's needle work symbolizes her independence and also the passionate side of her nature. The forest, which serves as the backdrop of the fateful meeting between Hester and Dimmesdale, is symbolic of moral wilderness. The scaffold, which had stood for punishment in the beginning of the novel, stands for expiation at the end of the story. On the scaffold only is Dimmesdale able to escape Chillingworth, the wronged husband of Hester, and attain salvation

The ironic mode of narration which is so prominent in "The Custom House" section is continued in the rest of the novel. A fine instance of the irony of the situation can be found in the third chapter, where we find Hester's fellow-sinner exhorting her to tell the name of the father of her child. Another instance of irony can be found in the belief of the people that God has sent Chillingworth bodily through the air to cure Dimmesdale; whereas Chillingworth intends to wreak the worst possible revenge on him. Irony also lies in the fact that whereas Hester is denied any contact by the society, her fellow-sinner is worshipped and deemed a "miracle of holiness" (p.147). Another instance of irony can be found in the fact that whereas society gradually condescendingly accepts her, Hester has risen much above the narrow confines of society through her freedom of speculation.

However, it is not only the narrator who unites both 'The Custom House' section and the rest of the novel; there are parallels between the themes and situations of both too. David Stouck divides "The Custom House" section into three parts. In the first section of this introductory section is described the love-hate relationship that Hawthorne has with his birthplace. Hawthorne tries to explain his strange attachment to Salem which, by his own admission, is quite an ugly and joyless city. The same kind of attachment, says David Stouck, exists between Boston and the three main characters of the story. Though the town has given nothing but scorn and shame to Hester and to Dimmesdale-- nothing except mental and physical torture, the two just cannot leave the scene of their sin. Dimmesdale dies in Boston itself. Hester also returns to the town after marrying off Pearl. Chillingworth too, even after Dimmesdale's death, continues to live in Boston. In the second section, the narrator draws the sketches of three old custom officers with whom he worked in the custom house. The qualities which Hawthorne admires in the three old men, reappear in the major characters as eccentricities "which destroy the ideal balance of human nature."<sup>3</sup> Hester's natural sensual vitality is not unlike that of the old inspector but unlike him is the cause of her misery. Dimmesdale, like the collector, is remote and contemplative. Chillingworth resembles another custom officer in his intellectual pursuits but unlike him uses his intellectual powers to take revenge and bring about destruction. In the third section, the

narrator talks of the fears which had seized him during his stay at custom house. He feared that his intellect is dwindling away due to the dull nature of his job. His dilemma anticipates Dimmesdale's position as he is torn between his calling as a clergyman and his feelings for Hester. But whereas Dimmesdale finds his release in death, the author lives on, making his life parallel to that of Hester. He, like Hester, is a worthy individual shabbily treated by society but who accepts his situation gracefully.

Thus, "The Custom House" section is united with the rest of the novel in a number of ways. The rest of the novel too, in spite of the different chapters focusing on different characters, is a unified whole. *The Scarlet Letter* can be divided into four parts, with a different agent or character forcing the action in each part. In the first part "Hawthorne reveals the force of the Puritan community operating on Hester, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale."<sup>4</sup> It forces Hester to stand on the scaffold. Chapters V and VI describe the effects of the punishment by the society on Hester's psyche. This conflict between Hester and the community is at its peak in the chapters VII and VIII. In these chapters, the community tries to take away Pearl, the sole possession of Hester amidst the hostile Puritan world. In chapter VIII, the community forces Dimmesdale to speak for Hester which consequently makes Chillingworth aware of Dimmesdale's identity. The second part, according to Gordon Roper, comprises chapters IX, X, XI and XII. This part shows Chillingworth as the dominating force, operating on other characters especially Dimmesdale. Chapter XI analyses the psychological state of Dimmesdale. Chapter XIII marks the climax of Chillingworth's force as we see the Minister driven involuntarily to the scaffold. However, we also see Hester and Pearl joining hands with the Minister, thereby bringing a rush of new life to the collapsing man. Thus, in this chapter, we also get the hint that Hester will be the dominating force from now onwards. Chapter XII begins with a summary of Hester's activities during the seven years of her isolation. We find that "two elements have strengthened her while Dimmesdale weakened: her intellectual speculation and her daughter Pearl."<sup>5</sup> We see her freeing herself from Chillingworth's vow of silence in the next chapter. Then she arranges a meeting with Dimmesdale in order to acquaint him with Chillingworth's real identity. She also entices Dimmesdale to flee with her from Boston; thereby plunging him into a moral confusion which is evident in the next chapter. Dimmesdale is the force which directs the action to the conclusion in the last part of the narrative. According to John C. Greber, "Whereas the community, Chillingworth and Hester needed days, months and even years to accomplish their purposes, Dimmesdale needs only moments."<sup>6</sup> However, Hawthorne carefully prepares the ground for Dimmesdale's expiatory action in the chapters XXI and XXII. Chapter XXIV is devoted to the consequences of that action.

The most dramatic and significant scenes and which also provide unity to *The Scarlet Letter* are the three scaffold scenes. In fact, the story of *The Scarlet Letter* is "built around the scaffold."<sup>7</sup> There are three scaffold scenes and they come at the beginning, middle and end of the story. In each of these three scenes, the main characters of the story are present and the scarlet letter is brought into prominence. In the first scaffold scene, Chillingworth is totally unaware of the identity of Hester's lover. In the second scaffold scene, he not only knows the identity of the lover but also has been able to take the worst possible revenge by inflicting mental and spiritual torture on Dimmesdale. It is, in fact, Chillingworth who drives the minister to the scaffold in the middle of the night, thus attaining an apparent victory. But we soon see that this victory is temporary, when we see Chillingworth desperately trying to but failing to stop Dimmesdale from making the confession in the third scaffold scene. Pearl's battle with the world starts in the first scaffold scene itself, when she pierces the air with her violent cries. This battle with the world comes to an end with a kiss to Dimmesdale, her father, at the scaffold. Dimmesdale, Hester's fellow-sinner, doesn't ascend the scaffold along with her in the first scaffold scene. He is conscious of having committed a sin, but he has convinced himself that a public confession is not necessary to attain Divine Mercy. But his sensitive soul does not let him rest in peace. Dimmesdale's mounting the scaffold in the middle of the night is one of his attempts at penance. But an involuntary shriek is not enough, as Dimmesdale himself realizes. By making a voluntary confession before the Puritan community in the third scaffold scene which costs him his life, he performs true penance and attains salvation.

A discussion of the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* would not be complete without a reference to the forest scenes. There are four scenes devoted to the forest. Even before these scenes, there are references to the forest and the black man. In Chapter VIII, Hester is invited by Mistress Hibbins to the forest with the promise of "a merry company in the forest" (p.19). In Chapter XII, a reference to Mistress Hibbins' excursions into the forest is made. But the forest in *The Scarlet Letter* is not essentially a seat of Evil; the deep hidden love of Hester and Arthur finds expression, after a long time, in these scenes. The meeting between them lifts Dimmesdale from the deadly depression and inspires him to deliver the brilliant Election sermon. The beauty and womanhood of Hester is also revealed in the forest scenes. She rises in our esteem because of her firm loyalty to Arthur, her deep affection for the man she has ruined. The forest scenes also mark Dimmesdale's second fall. For the first time, he knowingly consents to do something that he knows to be wrong. The immediate result is a sudden plunge into moral confusion. But in the forest, he has also recognised his common mortality. Here, he discovers that his feelings for Hester haven't changed at all. He has to admit to himself that such emotions are basic to human nature. The main block to his self-knowledge earlier was "because he loathes what he must affirm."<sup>8</sup> However, after returning from the forest he refuses to dance to the dictates of his heart. He decides against leaving his community. He still wants to lead his fellowmen. This he does by ascending the scaffold, thereby hastening the story to its end.

A discussion of the scenes and episodes is not enough as episodes in themselves do not make a successful plot. The episodes should be fully integrated into a single continuing story, otherwise the narrative will appear episodic. *The Scarlet Letter*, we observe, has a well-integrated and unified plot. The background of the story is the somber atmosphere of Puritanism. A dark and gloomy tale, it remains gloomy throughout. Hawthorne builds the gloomy atmosphere by employing dark images and by avoiding superfluous descriptions, actions and scenes. In the very first three chapters, the prison and the scaffold, both grim institutions, occupy a prominent place. The first scene takes place in the market place which is thronged by "bearded men in sad-coloured garments and gray steeple-crowned hats" (1) and hard ugly old dames. The Interview (Chapter IV) between Hester and Chillingworth occurs in the gloomy prison. The next chapter "Hester at Her Needle", describing the moral struggle Hester undergoes, is also dark and gloomy in tone and atmosphere. The next two chapters have occasional shafts of light owing to the presence of Pearl, but the light is as elusive and transitory as the little Pearl is. In the next chapter "The Leech", words conveying decay predominate. Weed images predominate in the next chapter. "The Interior of a Heart" has images of weight and burden in it. The gloom of the novel slightly lightens with Dimmesdale, Hester and Pearl joining hands in the second scaffold scene. The place of action, too, moves from indoors to outdoors. The forest scenes are the least gloomy and strangely beautiful of all the chapters. The last chapters, like the first three, cover only one day. They, too, take place in the market place. But unlike the first three scenes, there is a certain gaiety in the atmosphere due to the holiday mood of the Puritans and the colourful dresses of the seamen and the Indians. The prison has moved into the background and it is on the scaffold, the former instrument of punishment, that Dimmesdale attains his freedom from his burden of guilt.

*The Scarlet Letter* has little action and has been called the most static of all Hawthorne's novels. There is very little external action and the amount of space devoted to exposition and description is considerably greater than the space devoted to narration. Chapters V, VI, IX, XI, XXIV are expository in nature and deal with individual characters. Necessary information is provided about them which would have been difficult to incorporate in dialogues. Though the novel is psychological in nature, the plot can be described in terms of rising action, climax, crisis, falling action and conclusion. The initiating action is the sinful act committed by Hester and her lover which goads Chillingworth into taking revenge. The rising action consists of the measures taken by Chillingworth to ensure his revenge. He moves in with Dimmesdale and makes him so conscious of his sin that ultimately Dimmesdale is driven to the scaffold, thus, forcing the action to its climax. The crisis or the turning point of the novel comes when Hester, moved by her lover's plight, meets him in the forest to acquaint him with Chillingworth's real identity. The fateful meeting between the lovers becomes the turning point of the novel when the lovers, after seven long years of misery and penance, decide to flee from the town. The

falling action consists of the chapter describing the effects of the meeting on Dimmesdale and the chapters that come before the death of minister. Thus, though *The Scarlet Letter* has little action in it, its plot is fairly conventional and unified.

The way Hawthorne has achieved exposition also provides unity to the narrative. Though we are made acquainted with the situation in the beginning of the novel; the exposition cannot be called immediate because the identity of Hester's lover is not disclosed. Even Chillingworth's identity is confirmed in the fourth chapter, though the reader does get a strong clue from Hester's reaction to his presence in the third chapter. However, nobody suspects the pale minister who, the reader is told kept himself "simple and childlike, coming forth, when occasion was with freshness and fragrance, and dewy purity of thought, which as many people said, affected them like the speech of an angel" (67). In the chapter "The Elf and the Minister", Dimmesdale does plead for Hester, but he seems to be doing so in the capacity of her Pastor. The reader is carried along with Chillingworth in his quest of Hester's lover. The undivided attention he bestows on Dimmesdale makes the reader suspect Dimmesdale being Hester's lover. The suspicion of the reader is confirmed in the second scaffold scene when the minister calls upon Hester and Pearl to ascend the scaffold with him. Even the strong bond that still exists between Hester and Dimmesdale is not exposed until the forest scenes towards the end of the novel. Thus, we see that the exposition of the nature of the relations between the different characters is not immediate. But they are not such as may surprise the reader; Hawthorne does throw hints at random which a perceptive reader may find easy to grasp.

In his characterization too, Hawthorne does not reveal all the traits of a character at once. It may be because his characters are not static but keep on changing and developing. We see Hester silently submitting to the cruel treatment meted out to her by society in the chapter "Hester at Her Needle". She even gives charity to the poor and makes coarse garments for them. The only hint in this chapter of the "freedom of speculation" that she will later develop is her acquisition of the new sense which tells her that she is not the only sinner in Boston. We find her still continuing with her social services in the chapter "Another view of Hester", but a change has come over her. Now, she feels a responsibility towards Dimmesdale which she feels "she owed to no other, nor to the whole world besides" (165). Her life having "turned in great measure from passion and feeling to thought" she assumes a "freedom of speculation" (170). The only thing that keeps her from being a total rebel is little Pearl. Thus, it doesn't come as a great surprise when she counsels Dimmesdale to flee with her from Boston. However, she returns to Boston after marrying Pearl off, for she realizes that "here there was a more real life for her" (275). Chillingworth's nature too undergoes a change during the course of the novel. We first notice the change through Hester's eyes in the chapter "The Elf and the Minister". His features seem uglier and his figure more misshapen than before. His personality further degenerates in the next seven years. We are made aware of this change, again through Hester's eyes in the chapter "Hester and the Physician". Now his calm and quiet scholarly demeanour, observes Hester, is replaced by an "eager, searching, almost fierce, yet carefully guarded look" (176). After Dimmesdale's death, he "shriveled away and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wiltingly in the sun" (272). Dimmesdale's nature, too, is not revealed all at once. We first see him trying to persuade Hester to reveal the name of her lover. It is Chillingworth who makes the reader suspect the passionate side of Dimmesdale's spiritual nature. The anguish of the soul, which manifests itself in the fasts and vigils he undertakes, suggests that unlike Hester, he believes that by following the dictates of his heart, he has sinned against God. However, this consciousness of sin, we are told in the chapter "The Interior of a Heart", keeps him down on the level of ordinary human beings and enables him to address them in the "heart's native language" But the weight of his guilt proves too much for him and he agrees to the plan of sailing away from Boston. This decision, however, plunges him into a moral confusion, which is evident from his actions in the Chapter "The Minister in a Maze". However, he surfaces from this confusion and relieves his soul from the burden of guilt by making his confession. The fourth main character Pearl, is also shown having a very complex nature. Rejected by society, she is always at war with it. In the chapter "The Flood of Sunshine", her strange affinity with nature is brought out. The acceptance of Pearl by Dimmesdale, however, develops all her sympathies and forces her to accept

responsibility in the world. As the book trails off, we are given enough assurance that Pearl has, at last, adapted herself to the world.

Thus, we see that *The Scarlet Letter* has great unity of plot and structure. Hawthorne seems to have achieved this unity with conscious effort and artistry. In fact, every scene has its relevance and no detail is superfluous. Like a consummate artist, he has even woven irony, ambiguity and symbols to make his narrative a unified whole. *The Scarlet Letter* definitely bears testimony to Hawthorne's greatness as one of the unsurpassed writers of American literature.

#### References

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