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Impossibility of Choice in The Scarlet Letter by
Nathaniel Hawthorne**

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**“The reader may choose among
these theories”:**

**The Impossibility of Choice in *The
Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel
Hawthorne**

There is an interesting statement in the last chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*. After Dimmesdale's death, a large number of people declare that there was a letter A imprinted on his chest. At the same time, a small group of spectators contend that there was nothing to be seen. In addition we are told that those who mentioned the A are not in agreement and that all in all three separate theories can be offered to account for the cause of the letter. The narrator concludes: “The reader may choose among these theories”. Needless to say that at no point does the text help us, should we decide to exercise our right to choose.

The problem is thus stated clearly. It is the problem of meaning. Meaning is not situated inside the text, even though the text comprises a great wealth of details and elements from which meaning will have to be constructed. Meaning is no more inside the reader's mind as the latter needs to select textual elements from the text in order to produce his or her interpretation. The key word seems to be “choice”. Hawthorne never tells us, however, how we are supposed to choose.

The book abounds in similar examples. One night, a meteor can be seen in the sky. Four theories are presented ranging from the religious to the psychological. The book has also two different endings: a fortunate one telling us about Pearl's supposedly happy life in Europe, and a sad one devoted to Hester's return to Boston.

They follow each other on the same page. To some extent, the modern reader is curiously reminded of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Was Fowles influenced by Hawthorne? He wrote after all a Victorian novel about a woman with a bad reputation. It is also rumoured that she had an illegitimate child and may have been a feminist...

More precisely, it would be more accurate to say that the book doesn't end. The last words of the narrator simply don't make sense. (Most critics of the book usually ignore them...) Hawthorne most certainly used that curious strategy on purpose. Hester is finally buried close to an anonymous grave (which some critics take to be Dimmesdale's final resting place, even though it is most unlikely that the tomb of a famous preacher would have been in such bad repair in an otherwise carefully looked after cemetery). The two graves share a single tombstone with the letter A engraved upon it. Or is it a point of light? The text is not explicit. (We'll assume that that point of light is a metaphor). That point of light is said to be "gloomier than the shadow", making it thus possible for the book to end on a final oxymoron. How can a light be darker than darkness, unless of course we assume that we are once again dealing with metaphors? In the end then, everything appears to boil down to a struggle between the red and the black. What do these two colours represent? Each reader will compile their own lists of possibilities: red may symbolise life, passion, sin, chance, etc., whereas black refers to all that is negative in the book: crime, death, suffering, the forest with its Black Man, etc. We only know that the small red light will continue to shine, albeit very weakly. Life will always go on? The light is also equated by the narrator to the letter A, the first letter of the alphabet, the beginning of meaning, it probably follows that interpretation will never be final, that there will always be new books and articles on *The Scarlet Letter*, including this one...

It is difficult not to notice that Hawthorne uses the word "theory". *The Scarlet Novel* is a theoretical book, not a novel. The writer took great pains telling us he would prefer his book to be

called a “romance” (in “The Custom House”). The word is difficult to define. Hawthorne attaches his own meaning to it, intending his book to be read in a symbolic, philosophical way. He is certainly not concerned with realism (to use an anachronism) or factual truth. The problem we would like to discuss in this paper deals with the implications of that decision.

weeds and clothes

The first question we should ask ourselves is in what way we should approach *The Scarlet Letter*. What sort of reality is Hawthorne telling us about? We will first attempt to determine whether there is a philosophy behind what the writer says. Is it possible to understand the way his mind works? As a starting point, we might suggest in order to simplify things that his vision of the world shares a lot of similarities with the traditional Protestant outlook. We know that Hawthorne did not go to church and that he was extremely skeptical of Christianity. At the same time, it is unquestionable that he was deeply influenced by a generally Protestant ideology that was rampant in America throughout the 19th century. In other words, his mind accepted without any problems the main distinctions of the Protestant worldview.

These distinctions are best expressed by Augustine in *The City of God*. Hawthorne may have read the book. It doesn't really matter. Augustine's basic oppositions were well-known in America. He distinguishes between the City of God and the City of Men. For him, there was a clear-cut opposition between them and one could only move from the latter to the former if God decided to bestow His grace upon us. *The Scarlet Letter* entirely takes place in the City of Men. We are in a world after the Fall, that is a universe characterized by evil and death. We are and we will always remain the prisoners of Original Sin. Chapter I is perfectly clear in this respect. We are told that the Puritans left the corruption of Europe in order to establish “a utopia” in the New World. The 19th century

narrator immediately points out that Boston never was a utopia. The first thing he tells us about the city is that it possesses a prison and a graveyard. In other words, mankind will never escape the two principal forms of evil: human evil (crime) and natural evil (death). Virtue and happiness are simply unthinkable on earth.

The world of *The Scarlet Letter* is a world symbolically characterized by the presence of weeds. Flowers are always exceptions and every time a rose is alluded to, there is always something miraculous about it. Even in the forest, there are weeds everywhere. Similarly, people wear clothes and that is precisely the reason why you can't trust them. For instance, their colourful garments conceal the true intentions of the Indians and of the sailors, who are said not to be very different from pirates. The problem is that you can never be naked. People were naked in the Garden of Eden, they had nothing to hide. As the sexton says, "A pure hand needs no glove to cover it" (ch. XII). Maybe we should remind ourselves that the glove being returned by the sexton is Dimmesdale's. When the minister tears open his shirt before dying, can we say that he reveals the truth about him? At long last? That is a conclusion that seems extremely debatable. That would signify that the book is able to tell us everything there is to know about Dimmesdale. On the contrary we said that the narrator only states four theories about the Minister. It would seem that there is no single Truth. Truth is something that belonged to Eden. In society, we only have access to fragments of truth, to a plurality of opinions. Hawthorne's book can be seen as a list of explanations and theories. It would be wrong to say that the narrator is unreliable. He is only reticent. The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* will never commit himself.

A number of consequences concern the world depicted in the book. It is a world which is difficult to make sense of. The binary oppositions which are part of our culture won't work. Our "either/or" systems collapse, making it very difficult for us to apprehend the world.

To begin with, it is hard to tell the New World from the Old

World. (At least, according to Hawthorne. The typical 17th century Puritan undoubtedly would have objected). Boston society is very much like the English society from which the settlers fled. It is an oligarchy founded on strong social contrasts between the rich and the poor, and certainly not a democracy. We know that sumptuary laws had been enacted, that the clothes people wore were supposed to be plain and simple, but rich people enjoyed lace, ruffs, gloves, etc. Governor Bellingham had himself built a house like that of a rich man in England, and the Reverend Wilson displays a strong nostalgia for England and the stained glass windows of the old Roman Catholic churches...

Lace is indeed important. It poses a real problem. The fine clothes were sewn by Hester, that is to say by an outcast, the symbol of evil. Obviously Hester needed money as the father of her child never deemed it necessary to help her financially. But Boston also needed Hester, which is unquestionably paradoxical, as if virtue could not exist without what these people considered to be vice. We also remember in this respect that the narrator in the last chapter seems unable to establish a difference of meaning between love and hate...

More generally, the book appears to be constructed along a very clearly structured and binary conception of space. Boston in the centre stands for civilization, order and the law. It is opposed to the wilderness that stands around it, that is the forest and the sea, which are seen as synonymous with chaos and madness. The problem is that this system doesn't work. The wilderness is present in the middle of Boston. We have already mentioned the prison and the graveyard. We should also remember that the governor lives in the same house as his sister, Mistress Hibbins, a self-proclaimed witch. It is as if one could not separate good from evil. The wilderness is also to be found in Chillingworth's laboratory in which the doctor processes the weeds he has gathered in the cemetery and in the forest, producing medicines or poisons. (That is never clearly

established). And of course in the laboratory an “infernal” fire seems to be coming from the nether regions...

As so many other things in the book, the status of the main characters is ambivalent (A for Ambivalent?). Hester’s letter stands for her punishment, but also for her passion with its two colours (it is red with a gold thread). It is indeed not clear whether red is symbolic of sin or of strong love. As regards Dimmesdale, we will never know whether he is sincere or not in his final “confession” to the people of Boston. It is certainly possible to consider that he is both sincere and a hypocrite at the same time... (We know that Hawthorne was very fond of oxymorons). If Pearl loves her mother, which she probably does, why is she always torturing her? Last but not least, Chillingworth is most certainly not only a monster, but also a victim.

In fact, ambivalence seems to begin with “The Custom House”. The narrator is there particularly elusive, telling us of his desire to “keep the inmost Me behind its veil”. It is thus remarkably arduous to discover what his Puritan ancestors represented for such a narrator that won’t commit himself. He is obviously extremely uneasy when he recalls their cruelty, while at the same time extolling their strength and honesty...

Hawthorne’s reluctance to make choices may perhaps be traced to a conjunction of biographical and historical reasons. “The Custom House” relates how he returned to Salem, that is the very place where he was born and from where his family came from. At the end of the chapter, he has confronted the past, and he is ready to become “a citizen of somewhere else”. He will be a writer and — just like Hester at the beginning of the book — he enters “the marketplace”. Salem represented certainties, the world of the absolute truths of his ancestors. The large world of the marketplace means that he no longer has any bearings. There are only possibilities. This move actually coincides with the end of the supremacy of New England which ceases to be the political and

cultural centre of America. Hawthorne and his readers are now ready for experiments and theories.

the alphabet and the fetish

What is *The Scarlet Letter* about? The traditional answers all look rather pointless. What are the questions we should ask ourselves? Will Dimmedale reveal that he is Pearl's father? We know. Chillingworth knows. The problem is mainly irrelevant. Will Hester go away with her lover? Most readers have guessed that the minister cannot live outside Boston and that he will never go West. It would appear that the crucial question can only be considered at an abstract level. As we said, *The Scarlet Letter* is a theoretical book.

The first thing we should recognize is that fifty years before Saussure Hawthorne discovered that signs were arbitrary. There is no necessary link between signifier, signified and referent. Signifieds as it were are constantly moving underneath signifiers. It follows that the book encompasses two conceptions of meaning. The first is very traditional and exemplified by the Puritan leaders of the 17th century. It goes back at least to Plato. People and events are always being judged. They are referred to "types", "essences". They are also described as "emblems", "tokens", all words used by the narrator. These ideal types are of course absolutes and they always concern good and evil. For instance, the A on Hester's chest is held to be "a living sermon" and everybody in the community is supposed to understand its meaning intuitively.

The problem is that this conception of meaning doesn't remain efficient very long. (As a matter of fact, the word 'adultery' is never used once in the book). Meaning changes because of time. Nothing remains the same, be it people, society or values. There is nothing transcendental about those alterations. It follows that we should give up the belief that there will always be a privileged point of view above the others. The world is made up of opinions

and partial points of view. In fact, signs become unreadable very quickly. Let us remember the blazon above the house of Hester's family in England, or the strange symbols outside Governor's Bellingham's mansion which nobody can decipher any longer after only one generation. Indeed, some people are simply unable to interpret the A on Hester's bosom: the Indians and the foreign sailors naturally, the indentured servant at Bellingham's house who believes that the sign indicates that she is a very important personality... The A slowly acquires new shades of meaning for the people of Boston: Able, Admirable, and why not Angel? (A term actually used to talk of the Reverend Wilson when he died).

The book is obviously meant to be meaningless for the writer and the reader. The list could be made longer. Hawthorne may have wanted to write a book about Author (he wrote the first American novel?), or America (as a new country conscious of itself?) For Hester, we may imagine that the letter meant Arthur whom she apparently still loved. For Dimmesdale, A may be taken to stand for Apocalypse, his overriding obsession. It is without any discussion the first letter of the alphabet (as Pearl's hornbook reminds us). *The Scarlet Letter* is a book about meaning, its conditions, its possibilities. For Hawthorne, there is the letter first. Meaning always comes after and it has to be interpreted, just like the letter A always has to be interpreted.

The writer was most certainly conscious of the fact that meaning is constructed and that there is no direct link between reality and the meanings we produce. In "The Custom House", he offers a long description of the scarlet letter which very much looks like a kind of theory if we pay careful attention to its implications. The narrator relates his discovery in the attic. Four layers separate him from the origin of the A. The 17th century piece of cloth (1) is meaningless in itself. We only know its measurements. The whole book will be an attempt at trying to understand what it can possibly signify. It is wrapped by an official document (2) on the outside, and then by a parchment (3) summarizing Surveyor Pue's imperfect research into the story of Hester during the 18th century. In other

words, the truth will have to be a compound of private and public concerns. The narrator will complement these elements by a number of oral tales (4) in order to elaborate his own very problematic 19th century presentation of what happened. It is needless to say that today at the beginning of the 21st century the original meaning of the letter is even more remote and unattainable. There can only be hypotheses and theories.

A general pattern seems to emerge from the book. A chance event always starts everything. Hester and Dimmesdale have sex somewhere, only once apparently. Their meeting makes the rest of the story possible. The same thing could be said of the fact that Prynne is shipwrecked without any justification.

Finally the A becomes a fetish as if something that can't be represented were hidden behind or inside it. It seems that the letter at the same time hides and reveals some sort of truth. It acts almost as a veil that will hopefully give rise to a revelation. Here again we encounter a plurality of possibilities among which the reader has to choose. For the community, the A as it were returns their gaze. It gives them an incentive to indulge in their worst instincts (in the same way as today our contemporaries express their sexual fantasies thanks to pornographic movies?) Hester (unconsciously?) clings to her A as it hides (to the community) and reveals (to her) the initial of her lover. For Dimmesdale, the A represents the promise of a final Apocalypse his mind is craving. (We will return to this point later). Chillingworth as for him derives an unspeakable and inexpressible "jouissance" from a vision of the sleeping minister's chest. The narrator doesn't tell us what he sees. It appears to be either (both?) sexual or (and?) mystical. The enumeration could be lengthened. Readers fond of gossip will recall that Hawthorne's biographers state that he had problems solving his Oedipus complex. The A on the chest of a woman depicted as a madonna could possibly stand for the sin of the mother, the sexual pleasure she derived in the act of conceiving her child. In another interpretation, the A could refer to incest. According to some very inquisitive scholars, the writer felt a very

strong attraction (and maybe more) for one of his sisters when was a teenager. *The Scarlet Letter* could be seen as a way for him to relive this traumatic (and pleasurable?) experience in a coded way. The next step would be to contend that each and every reader will project his or her own private fantasies onto the plot of the book. The same is of course true of the author of this paper...

perversion and the law

Meaning is first and foremost social. It has to do with the law. That seems to have been Hawthorne's central insight. It doesn't matter which law it is. There are indeed many laws (in the plural) as opposed to Justice (with a capital J), Justice being a sort of unreachable ideal. It can refer to 17th century religious law in Boston. It can also be the more modern, secular law of 19th century America. None of these laws are perfect. Yet you have to accept them as you can't live outside the law. A lawless life would be meaningless, you would find yourself devoid of identity. It would be like living in the forest. Nobody can live in the forest without becoming mad, as for Hawthorne there is no such thing as a law of nature. There is only chaos.

The essential problem is that of coming to terms with the law and that is a question of individual response. Once again, everybody is different and they all define themselves in different ways. The notion we need in this respect is that of perversion: everybody plays with the law. We all create our own personal law which stands side by side the official law (in our case, the law of Boston). We will briefly analyse three examples.

Hester returns to Boston at the end of the book. She puts back the letter on her chest. She obviously would not have any identity without the A. The text says it is "a badge". (The idea will not be lost on Stephen Crane forty years later... Without a badge arbitrarily imposed on you, you just don't exist). In her case, identity is always on the margin. Such is her own brand of

perversion. She is not inside Boston. She is not outside either. She thus creates her own personality. At the beginning of the book, she embroiders the scarlet letter with gold thread. As a consequence it then possesses two meanings at the same time, one public and one private. Later, she establishes a small group of women in the outskirts of Boston. These women unable to find happiness within the community in this way create a sort of counter-power.

Dimmesdale as for him enacts a complete perversion of religious language. Is he conscious of it? It is far from sure. Earlier on, by means of an oxymoron, we suggested that he is a sincere hypocrite. For him, everything is situated at the level of language and of the voice. At the end of the book, he discovers what his real desire is: Apocalypse. He needs public exposure on the pillory. In this way, he will be vindicated and accepted as a symbol. Furthermore, he is characterized by an extremely strong death wish. The outcome of it is a striking regression process which in his case becomes synonymous with death. In the last chapter but one, the minister has finally found the meaning of his life. He identifies to the puritan script which he applies to him. In order to be recognized as a symbol, he knows he had to become a sinner. In his case, it was the 7th commandment that he broke, probably out of pure chance. (He could have committed any other offense. The consequences for him would have been the same). Then, the next step brings him divine grace (as is explicitly mentioned immediately before he dies). When he cries out, "I am the one sinner in the world," (chapter XXIII) nothing could indeed more perverse — or heretical. Dimmesdale steals Hester's place on the pillory and of course her A. He then proceeds to reject her. He clearly no longer needs her. He is "saved" in his eyes and he becomes the very symbol he wanted to be.

As regards Chillingworth, he perceives the presence of a law inside himself which he can't resist and which demands revenge. Is he a sincere hypocrite too? He earnestly explains to Hester that his torturing of the minister has nothing personal about it.

It thus seems undeniable that *The Scarlet Letter* is a book of

possibilities. It would be very difficult to find a unity in it, unless we force it to enter a preconceived structure. (We all remember for example those Christian readings which thirty years ago artificially reduced the book to Dimmesdale's so-called redemption and Pearl's beneficial influence... Literature was the handmaid of religious propaganda...). The characters make choices. They do so more or less consciously. It could say that one way of analysing the function of the book is to enable readers to think critically about a number of options life offers or denies us. What can we do? As we saw, the main issue is our relationship to the law. Hawthorne knows very well that there is not just one way we actually relate to the law. Perversion is a universal phenomenon. In other words, we could suggest that the book is a series of variations on laws and perversions. The word "variation" of course conjures up the idea of music. The musician has to "interpret" a score, that is make choices, in order to construct his own performance. Each performance of the same work is unique and different. Aren't things similar for a musician and for the readers that we are? Hawthorne has written a book that is open. No choices are made in the text. That is probably why we feel entitled to say the *The Scarlet Letter* is not only experimental, but also theoretical.

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