



Research Article

Woven In Scarlet: The Architecture of Symbolism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) occupies a foundational place in the American literary tradition of symbolic romance, a mode of narrative that Hawthorne himself distinguished from the realist novel by its willingness to admit "the Marvellous" into otherwise ordinary human affairs. This paper undertakes a systematic examination of the symbolic architecture of the novel, arguing that Hawthorne constructs meaning not through a single, stable emblem but through a network of interlocking and evolving symbols: the scarlet letter itself, the scaffold, the forest and the settlement, the child Pearl, light and shadow, and the recurring imagery of concealment and revelation. Drawing on the methodology of close textual reading informed by the American symbolist tradition of criticism inaugurated by F. O. Matthiessen and Charles Feidelson, the paper demonstrates that Hawthorne's symbols resist fixed allegorical resolution, acquiring instead a deliberate multivalence that mirrors the novel's larger meditation on the instability of moral judgment in Puritan society. The discussion further considers how this symbolic indeterminacy has been read by successive generations of critics as a form of psychological realism, a historiographic critique of Puritan typology, and a proto-feminist commentary on the policing of the female body. The paper concludes that the enduring critical richness of *The Scarlet Letter* derives precisely from Hawthorne's refusal to let his symbols settle into single meanings, a refusal that transforms the novel's central emblem from a badge of shame into an open and continually re-signified sign.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, he prefaced the narrative with a lengthy autobiographical sketch, "The Custom-House," in which he described discovering a faded scrap of scarlet cloth, shaped into the letter A, folded within an old manuscript. This framing device is more than an antiquarian conceit; it announces, at the very threshold of the novel, that the reader is about to encounter an object before a story, a sign before its signified. The letter arrives already detached from any single fixed meaning, and it is this detachability, this openness to reinterpretation, that becomes the governing principle of the novel's entire symbolic economy.

Hawthorne's fiction has long been recognized as pivotal to the emergence of a distinctly American mode of literary symbolism, one that departs from the fixed, one-to-one correspondences of Puritan typology even as it borrows that typology's outward vocabulary of emblem and sign. Where a Puritan divine might read an object in the natural world as a stable and divinely authored message, Hawthorne repeatedly stages scenes in which his characters attempt such a reading and fail, or arrive at contradictory interpretations, thereby exposing the interpretive act itself as a fraught and historically situated exercise. The scarlet letter is condemned as a badge of shame by the Puritan magistracy, embraced as a source of perverse artistry by Hester Prynne, mythologized by the surrounding community into a talisman of supernatural power, and finally, in the novel's famous closing image, inherited by Pearl and transformed into a mark of reconciliation. No single reading of the letter is permitted to stand as final.

This paper argues that symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* functions not as a decorative or illustrative device layered atop an otherwise realist plot, but as the very mechanism through which the novel conducts its critique of Puritan moral absolutism and its exploration of psychological interiority. The analysis proceeds by examining four major symbolic clusters: the scarlet letter itself; the recurring scaffold scenes that structure the novel's three-part architecture; the opposition between forest and settlement; and the figure of Pearl, whom Hawthorne repeatedly describes not as a conventional child but as a living hieroglyph. Through close attention to these clusters, the paper aims to demonstrate how Hawthorne's symbolic method produces a text that is at once a historical romance of seventeenth-century Boston and a searching inquiry into the nature of sin, guilt, and interpretation itself.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Primary Material

The primary text examined in this study is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, first published in 1850. The Norton Critical Edition, prepared by Bradley, Beatty, Long, and Hudson, was consulted for textual accuracy and for its inclusion of Hawthorne's own critical prefaces. References to the novel follow chapter divisions in order to permit ready cross-reference across editions.

2.2 Secondary Material

The secondary scholarship consulted for this study represents the principal currents of Hawthorne criticism from the mid-twentieth century to the present. F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) and Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953) together established the critical vocabulary through which Hawthorne's symbolic method has since been discussed, situating his work within a broader American Romantic tradition of the symbol as an ambiguous, self-generating sign rather than a fixed allegorical counter. Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) is drawn upon for its account of the American romance form as distinct from the European novel of manners. Later historicist and revisionist readings, including Michael Colacurcio's *The Province of Piety* (1984) and Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* (1991), are used to situate Hawthorne's symbolism within the specific theological and political culture of colonial Puritanism. Nina Baym's *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (1976) and Frederick Crews's *The Sins of the Fathers* (1966) provide, respectively, feminist and psychoanalytic vantage points on the novel's central symbols.

2.3 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual reading, supplemented by comparative engagement with the critical tradition outlined above. Symbols are identified not merely by their explicit designation within the text -- as when the narrator directly names the letter, the scaffold, or Pearl as bearing symbolic weight -- but through recurrence, structural placement, and their capacity to accrue and shed meaning across the narrative. Particular attention is paid to the three scaffold scenes, which occur at structurally significant intervals in the novel and have long been recognized by critics as an organizing device for the narrative as a whole. The analysis also draws on historicist method to distinguish Hawthorne's nineteenth-century symbolic technique from the typological reading practices of the seventeenth-century Puritan culture his novel depicts, a distinction Hawthorne himself repeatedly dramatizes through the interpretive disagreements among his characters.

3. OBSERVATIONS / RESULTS

3.1 The Scarlet Letter as an Unstable Sign

The most immediately apparent finding of this study is the sheer instability of meaning attached to the letter A across the course of the narrative. At its introduction, the letter is imposed by the Puritan magistracy as an unambiguous mark of adultery, intended to function within a closed system of public shame. Yet Hester's own needlework transforms the letter into an object of considerable visual splendor, embroidered in gold thread with what the narrator describes as "a fertility, a gorgeous luxuriance of fancy," so that the very mark meant to announce her degradation becomes, through her artistry, an assertion of individual expression that unsettles the community's intended reading. By the middle of the novel, townspeople have begun to reinterpret the letter as standing for "Able," a testament to Hester's tireless charitable labor, and legend eventually attaches to it a supernatural glow, said to

light Hester's path through the forest at night. In the novel's final chapter, the letter is transposed onto the Puritan graves shared by Hester and Dimmesdale, appearing on their shared tombstone not as a badge of shame but as a heraldic device, described in the novel's closing line as "on a field, sable, the letter A, gules," a formulation that fixes the letter permanently in the register of ambiguity rather than resolution, since the final image offers no interpretive gloss.

3.2 The Scaffold as Structural and Symbolic Center

The scaffold recurs three times across the novel, in the opening chapters, at the narrative's midpoint, and in its climactic final scene, and each occurrence has been read by critics as marking a distinct stage in the moral and psychological development of the principal characters. In the first scaffold scene, Hester stands alone in public exposure while Dimmesdale, unrecognized as her partner in sin, watches from the crowd; in the second, occurring at night, Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold in a private, unwitnessed act of self-torment, joined briefly by Hester and Pearl in a moment of concealed rather than public revelation; in the third, Dimmesdale ascends the scaffold in daylight and confesses openly, drawing Hester and Pearl to him in a scene of full disclosure. This structural progression -- from public exposure without confession, to private confession without publicity, to public confession -- positions the scaffold as the novel's central symbolic stage, upon which the competing demands of public justice and private conscience are repeatedly re-enacted and only finally reconciled in Dimmesdale's death.

3.3 Forest and Settlement

A further recurring symbolic pattern is the spatial opposition between the Puritan settlement, governed by law, doctrine, and surveillance, and the surrounding forest, associated throughout the novel with moral ambiguity, natural law, and a freedom that is simultaneously liberating and dangerous. The forest is where Hester removes her letter and lets down her hair in the pivotal scene with Dimmesdale, an act the narrator explicitly links to a temporary escape from the symbolic order of the settlement; it is also, however, the space in which the community locates the Black Man and rumors of witchcraft, so that the forest's freedom from Puritan law is never presented as an unambiguous good. Pearl, notably, is described as more at home in the forest than in the settlement, her wildness explicitly aligned with the untamed natural world rather than with the ordered, doctrinally governed space of the town.

3.4 Pearl as Living Hieroglyph

Pearl occupies a distinctive symbolic register in the novel, described by the narrator on more than one occasion as a living version of the letter itself, dressed by Hester in garments of scarlet and gold that visually echo the embroidered letter. The narrator explicitly calls Pearl "the scarlet letter endowed with life," a formulation that collapses the distinction between symbol and character and makes Pearl the novel's most direct embodiment of its central concern with the relationship between sign and substance. Pearl's persistent, almost obsessive questioning of the letter's meaning throughout the novel -- she repeatedly asks Hester and Dimmesdale to explain the mark and

its connection to the minister's own habitual gesture of pressing his hand to his chest -- dramatizes within the plot itself the interpretive uncertainty that the novel's symbolism generates in the reader.

4. DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Symbol versus Puritan Type

The observations above support Feidelson's foundational claim that Hawthorne's symbolic method marks a decisive departure from the typological reading practices of the Puritan culture he depicts. Where Puritan typology assumes a stable, divinely sanctioned correspondence between sign and meaning -- an earthly event or object understood as the fulfillment or prefiguration of a fixed scriptural truth -- Hawthorne's letter accrues contradictory meanings that are never adjudicated by any authoritative voice within the text, including the narrator's. This is a crucial distinction: Hawthorne repeatedly allows his Puritan characters to attempt typological readings of the letter, the meteor, and Pearl herself, and just as repeatedly shows these readings to be partial, self-interested, or simply incommensurate with one another. The effect, as Matthiessen first argued, is to relocate the authority for meaning away from any single doctrinal source and toward the process of interpretation itself, a shift that aligns Hawthorne's method with a recognizably modern, rather than Puritan, understanding of the symbol.

4.2 Symbolism as Psychological Interiority

Frederick Crews's psychoanalytic reading offers a complementary account of this symbolic instability, locating its source not primarily in historiographic critique but in the psychological interiority of the novel's characters, particularly Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale's recurring, unconscious gesture of pressing his hand to his chest -- eventually revealed, in intimation rather than direct statement, to conceal a self-inflicted mark mirroring Hester's letter -- functions as a somatic symbol of repressed guilt, one that the narrative allows the reader to partially decode well before any character within the story articulates it outright. On this reading, the novel's symbolic ambiguity mirrors the mechanisms of repression and displacement: meaning is not simply withheld by Hawthorne for aesthetic effect but is structurally analogous to the way guilt itself operates in Dimmesdale's psyche, surfacing in bodily symptom and involuntary gesture rather than direct confession until the novel's final scaffold scene.

4.3 The Letter and the Female Body

Nina Baym's feminist-inflected reading draws attention to the way the letter, imposed upon Hester's body as an instrument of public discipline, is progressively reclaimed through her needlework as a site of individual artistic and psychological assertion. On this account, the novel's symbolism cannot be separated from its meditation on the policing of the female body under a patriarchal legal and religious order: the letter begins as an inscription performed upon Hester by external authority, and the narrative's central symbolic drama is her partial, never fully completed, reappropriation of that inscription's meaning. This reading gains further support from the scene in which Hester

briefly removes the letter in the forest, an act the narrator describes in terms of physical relief and transformation, immediately undercut by Pearl's refusal to approach her mother until the letter is restored, suggesting that even Hester's most intimate circle has become bound to the symbol's continued presence.

4.4 Historicist Qualifications

Bercovitch and Colacurcio caution against reading the novel's symbolic ambiguity as a straightforward anticipation of modern relativism, arguing instead that Hawthorne's irony operates within, and is legible only against, the specific doctrinal and political controversies of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, including antinomianism and the Puritan magistracy's anxieties about civil dissent. Bercovitch in particular argues that the novel's apparent multiplicity of meanings ultimately consolidates, by the final chapter, into a qualified endorsement of civic consensus, with Hester's return to the settlement and her voluntary resumption of the letter read as a symbolic reconciliation with, rather than a final escape from, Puritan community. This historicist counter-reading usefully complicates any account of Hawthorne's symbolism as a simple triumph of individual over communal meaning, suggesting instead that the novel's symbolic openness is itself carefully bounded by the historical and political framework within which Hawthorne situates his narrative.

4.5 Synthesis: The Symbol as Method

Taken together, these critical perspectives suggest that Hawthorne's symbolism operates simultaneously on historiographic, psychological, and gendered registers, and that its characteristic ambiguity is not an incidental stylistic feature but the central formal principle through which the novel conducts its inquiry into sin, guilt, and interpretation. The scarlet letter, the scaffold, the forest, and Pearl each function less as fixed emblems than as sites of ongoing interpretive contest, within the fictional world and among the novel's critics alike. It is this quality -- the symbol's refusal to be finally decoded -- that accounts for both the novel's original unsettling effect on its Puritan characters and its continued capacity to generate divergent scholarly readings some seventeen decades after its publication.

5. CONCLUSION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* constructs its meaning through a densely interwoven system of symbols that resist settling into single, stable significations. The scarlet letter itself moves across the novel from an imposed badge of public shame to an object of individual artistry, a rumored talisman, and finally a heraldic emblem inscribed on a shared tombstone; the scaffold structures the narrative's progression from public exposure to private torment to public confession; the opposition between forest and settlement stages the competing claims of natural law and civil doctrine; and Pearl herself embodies, quite literally, the novel's central preoccupation with the relationship between sign and substance. This study has argued that this symbolic instability is best understood not as authorial indecision but as a deliberate formal strategy, one that allows

Hawthorne to critique the interpretive certainties of Puritan typology while dramatizing, through Dimmesdale's psychology and Hester's reclaimed needlework, the more particular and modern concerns of guilt, repression, and gendered bodily discipline. The persistence of critical disagreement over the novel's central symbols, from Matthiessen and Feidelson through Baym, Crews, and Bercovitch, is itself the surest evidence of Hawthorne's success in constructing a symbolic architecture that continues to generate rather than foreclose interpretation. Future research might extend this analysis through comparative study of symbolism in Hawthorne's shorter fiction, particularly "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil," to further clarify the broader contours of his symbolic method across the corpus of his work.

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