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## Hawthorne's Use of Image and Symbol in The Scarlet Letter

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**Abstract:** At the simplest level, we mean by the word "image" a "mental picture" that a particular word, when concretely used in a literary text, evokes. Frequently, sensations other than sight are also evoked : as taste and touch, the auditory sensation (as frequently in Keats, Hopkins and Tennyson) and even the sensation of smell. Some times, we mean by the literary device of an "image" an extended use metaphor and simile. That is, a particular "mental picture," when used repeatedly in a literary text, acquires an pattern of meaning (as image-cluster critics of Shakespeare, people like Wolfgang Clemen, Caroline Spurgeon, and even G. Wilson Knight have shown). The frequency of a particular image may enable a literary critic to arrive at certain speculations regarding either the state of mind of a particular author, or, alternatively, the State of mind of a particular character in a play, novel, a story, or even a dramatic poem (note how images of art-objects acquire a developing connotation in Browning's poem "My last Duchess," and in Henry James' novel, The Portrait of a Lady). In this sense, an image evokes associations beyond the surface demand of concrete or pictorial presentation in a literary text and it evokes certain moods or States of mind. That is, it tends toward symbolism. Thus, a literary image easily shades off into an added semantic significance (i.e. a plurisignificance) and it concretises fleeting spiritual or mental states and inclinations.

**Keywords:** Image, Hawthorne, Scarlet letter

Hawthorne's narrative technique, with its emphasis on pictorial presentation and ambiguity of meaning, is fundamentally amenable to an analysis of image and symbol. His main image and symbol in the story, of course, is the letter A itself, which always keeps in the forefront of the book" reader's mind the fact of a moral transgression (Hester's, as well as Dimmesdale's and Chillingworth's). It points to the idea of sin or moral lapse but as Hawthorne's fable advances, the pictorial image of the scarlet letter A, acquires additional levels of meaning. That is, it is

"transformed" to mean "Artist," "Able," "Angel," "America," "Accused," "Acceptable," the Greek letter "Alpha," meaning the beginning of all things : the Original Sin and even the Word. It is mainly a particular situational context in Hawthorne's fable that generates a new signification of the Scarlet letter A, and the ambiguity of the letter itself is symbolic of the ambivalence of Hawthorne's response to the person behind the letter—this person being each one of the book's four main characters. Thus, the ambiguity of the key image of Hawthorne's novel ensures the relativity of moral judgment by the book's reader, on the character of Hester (mainly) but also on the characters of Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl (secondarily). Thus, Hester is a public sinner as well as a personally responsible penitent ; Dimmesdale is a private sinner as well as a public figure of rare eminence—his tongue-of-flame Election Day Sermon testify to this aspect of his character. Similarly, Chillingworth is a malevolent inquisitor as well as a wronged husband and Pearl is a wayward child as well as a loving daughter.

The other important images and symbols in the book are its colour symbols which are presented schematically in terms of what critic Richard Fogle describes as "the light and the dark." Whereas the "black flowers" of civilization, namely the Boston prison-house and churchyard are associated with the dark colours (as is What Chillingworth calls Hester's "first step awry" and its "germ of evil," is, of course, Pearl, whose bright dress and skipping gait also create a sense of an alternative interpretation of her as a child of sin as well as a "natural" child), the red rose, which springs just outside the prison-house and which is associated with the drops of blood from the martyr Anne Hutchinson's feet (she was ex-communicated from Boston in 1637), is a symbol of "light." Throughout the novel, Hawthorne complicates, enriches, embellishes and even renders ambiguous his colour scheme. Thus, the red rose (a symbol of "passion") is echoed in the spot of "gules" and its opposite, the prison-house and the grave are echoed in the sable field of the tombstone which stands over the separated graves of Hester and Dimmesdale. The stone bears the pattern of an escutcheon (which recalls the coat of arms and the mail of armour in the chapter "The Governor's Hall"), which resembles, ambiguously, also the shape of the human heart. Further, the red rose and the "gules" are associated both with the Scarlet Letter and with the heart-imagery in the book. Again, the heart-image is echoed in the symbol of the maze (which is also heart shaped) in the chapter, "The Minister in a Maze." More, the maze image also shades off into the prison-image, which in its turn, approaches the "dark" polarity in "the light and the dark" scheme of Hawthorne's book.

Again, the three scaffold scenes (with their rhythmic alternation of a June morning, a night in May-June, and again, a June morning) exist under the dual aspect of the book's "light and dark" imagery. In the first scaffold scene, a June sun beats down on Hester's public shame (it is echoed even in the "leaden stares" of the settlement's populace, Whereas grey-to-black dress and tricornered hats and bonnets again echo the "dark" imagery of the book) as if it were a Chillingworth-like agent which ferrets out all moral lapses. (Conversely, the sunlight in the forest scene is fitful and mild, except when Hester plucks out her scarlet letter and doffs her cap.) In the second scaffold scene, although it is a dark night, it is made memorable by two events : the passing away of Governor Winthrop and the appearance of a meteor in the shape of the Scarlet Letter "A" that Hester is made to wear on her breast. The third scaffold scene reverses the images of the first one in that Hester and pearl now mingle with the crowd which had stared at their public shame in chapters II and III, and in that the sombrely-dressed crowd of that episode is now dressed and turned out for an ironically—named "New England Holiday." If there are reversals in the imagery of the first three chapters and the last three chapters of the book, there are also similarities. Arthur Dimmesdale, who was conspicuously absent on the scaffold during the first scaffold scene and only ambiguously present during the second scaffold scene (for he appears on the scaffold with Hester and pearl on a dark night with the conspicuous absence of the crowd), now stands on the scaffold during the third scaffold scene (although his appearance there is, later, on construed to mean different -things to different people). Even though the events in the story cover a span of seven years, Hawthorne's three structurally-placed scaffold scenes give his book the rhythm and the pattern of a present-seasonal imagery of rise-fall-rise. Thus, it indicates the dominance of structure and creative will over the mimetic and realistic presentation that one normally expects to find in a "European novel."

Also, there are auxilliary images of "looking," of being "reflected." Thus, Hester finds her shame reflected by the scarlet letter "A," on her breast, and its irradiation, Pearl as well as by the "leaden stares" of her community. When she goes to visit Governor Bellingham, she finds the letter on her breast magnified in the burnished suit of armour hanging in the hall of the Governor's residence (apparently, its outside reflection projects Hester's over-blown sense of guilt as it also anticipates the appearance of the meteoric letter in the sky later on). The picture of David and Bathsheba in Dimmesdale's chambers again mirrors his guilt. Similarly, the "Black Man" of the forest has associations with guilt, with crime, and thus, with the

"dark" images of the prison house and the graveyard. Even the brook which purls by the feet of Hester and Pearl is made to bear a symbolic extension—an allegorical hint that it represents "life" which would separate Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl for ever.

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