

The Obliquity of Signs and Symbols in The Scarlet Letter

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In the United States, a group of novels like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) are remarkably complete embodiments of the symbolic form, written as they were at a time of flourishing American optimism, materialistic expansion, and sentimentalism in fiction.

Presumably the central drive in *The Scarlet Letter* is directed towards an attempt at inquiring the tragic phase of human conjecture, involving of course the skilful portrayal and interaction of characters and done through the inner organisms of image, polysemy and symbol. These indeed constitute the complex architecture meant for clarifying and objectification of that condition. The main character of the novel is Hester Prynne, a young married woman who has borne an illegitimate child, Pearl, while living away from her husband in a village in Puritan New

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England. The husband, Roger Chillingworth, arrives in New England to find his wife pilloried and made to wear the letter 'A' (meaning adulteress) in scarlet on her dress as a punishment for her illegal affair and for her refusal to reveal the name of the child's father. Chillingworth becomes obsessed with finding the identity of his wife's former lover. He learns that Hester's lover is a saintly young minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth then proceeds to revenge himself by mentally tormenting the guilt-stricken young man. Hester herself is revealed to be a compassionate and splendidly self-reliant heroine who is never truly repentant for the act of adultery committed with the minister; she feels that their act was consecrated by their deep love for each other. Hester's sense of sin is incomplete; her inspired individualism insists (as she tells her lover) that what they did had a consecration of its own. The resulting conflict in her heart and mind is never resolved, and, although it does not destroy her, she lives out her life in gray and tragic isolation. In the end Chillingworth is morally degraded by his monomaniac pursuit of revenge and Dimmesdale is broken by his own sense of guilt and publicly confesses his adultery before dying in Hester's arms. Only Hester can face the future optimistically, as she plans to ensure the fortune of her beloved little girl by taking her to Europe.

The Scarlet Letter had been written half a century before Ferdinand de Saussure formally talked about the signs and signification. The novel seems as an exhibition of codes, signs and symbols of the seventeenth-century life. Hawthorne's sharp eye penetrates even into the finest object of Boston's society to draw a code or a specific sign connecting it to the main theme of the novel.

The major signs and symbols move panoramically within the theme of how this woman of illicit and sensual passion challenges and breaks the law of a male - dominated community of Boston during 1640's. The first sign the reader meets is in the introductory part to the novel "The Custom - House". The eagle above the Custom - House is a national emblem. As a 'signifier', it denotes power, protection and then peace. But the eagle as a 'signified' no longer produces such meaning. The deviation from the normal literally and expected meaning of the eagle to the figurative and highly suggestive level is obvious.

Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterize this

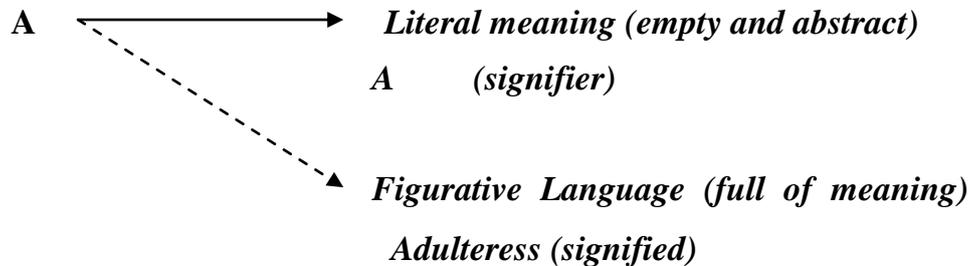
unhappy fowl, she appears by the fierceness of her beak and eye, and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community and specially to warn all citizens careful of their safety against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking at this very moment to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle: imagining, I presume, that her bosom has ail the softness and snugness of an eiderdown pillow. But she has no great tenderness even in her best of moods, and, sooner or later - oftener soon than late - is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows.⁽¹⁾

With her "shield before her breast", "a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw", the eagle appears to be aggressive, warlike, offensive, oppressive and militant. No peace or tranquility can be found under her wings. The whole sign now indicates the American imperialistic tendency we witness nowadays everywhere more than the peaceful dogmas brought by Thomas Jefferson and other founders of modern America. One may

remember that during the 1840"s America led an aggressive war against Mexico.

Technically speaking, signs work in a direct line with metaphor and a sign is produced by breaking down the distinction between the 'tenor" and the 'vehicle'¹ which are inextricably interwoven together to become a single entity. In other words, the associative total of the signifier and the signified creates and produces the sign. Signs are integral and inescapable parts of the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*. The 'A' letter is perhaps the most enigmatical and ambiguous sign in the work. It is highly suggestive and to limit its meaning to 'Adulteress' only would be unfair.

The literal meaning of the letter 'A' by itself has nothing to do here as far as the theme is concerned; it is abstract and empty. However, when this letter is associated with a word or certain words it becomes then rich and pregnant in the sense that it is full of meaning especially when a suggestive adjective like 'scarlet' is used. Therefore the first letter 'A' of the word adultery makes a sense when this word is understood according to the main incidents of the novel. Consequently, the letter 'A' is no longer empty or abstract. It deviates from the literal and abstract level to the figurative and suggestive one. The meaning of the sign is now complete. The 'A' letter as a tenor and 'adulteress' as a vehicle are mixed together creating, in the Saussurian Language, a signified.



The scarlet letter in fact becomes and understood by the Puritan society in Boston as 'adulteress'. In other words, the distinction between 'A' letter as a tenor and its vehicle 'adulteress' has become lost, the 'A' letter has now its own entity, it becomes the adultery and the adultery becomes the 'A' letter in the novel.

'A' letter is the initial letter of many words associated in meaning with the heroine and her milieu. It may mean 'angel' for Hester acted as a nurse and a counselor to the community in spite of her tragic and terrible circumstances. 'Angel' as a sign is produced by breaking down the tenor (Hester the nurse) and the vehicle (angel) -she is an angel - and mixing them to have a symbol; or a sign presented as 'A' letter. However, love in general to Hester does not mean something to be reckoned with in the market place on the basis of rough and ready calculation rather it is something grasped and apprehended as an imaginative entity. Hawthorne compares 'A'

letter to a "cross on nun's bosom". Consequently, he says that Hester is clearly a sinner but she may be compared to a nun in her virtue. She is the victim of her social circumstances and her own fate as 'Able' himself was. The letter represents shame that shared by everyone, rather than by Hester alone.

'A' may also signify 'art'. The Puritans believed that the Bible, all of it, was the revealed word of God, it presents the beginning and the end, and it must rule the lives of men. They hated and rejected the physical indulgence of any kind such as music, paintings and theatre. They disdained decorations of clothes or buildings regarding them as trivial distraction from piety and were equated to vanity. Subsequently, Hester's beauty, her skills as a needlewoman and her taste put her beyond the acceptable criteria of Boston's moral laws. The sign 'A' is produced to be a symbol that represents 'art' through Hester since they are interwoven together; it is the 'associative total' of the signifier and the signified, of Hester and art.

Hester Prynne is guilty of adultery but the Boston's community is guilty of being inhuman and of lack forgiveness. Therefore, the reader may feel a kind of 'admiration' towards a female victim who is struggling patiently and bravely with self - confidence to defend herself amidst a male community for survival. She is a victim of inappropriate marriage and she endures the punishment without

revealing the name of her partner in adultery. It is the same feeling we get when the Shakespearean tragic hero feels alien and hopeless at the end of the play. It is a kind of admiration towards the tragic hero although he is a criminal or a sinner. 'Admiration' as a signifier generates a literal meaning, i.e. dictionary meaning of regarding a person with respect, pleasure, satisfaction, etc.; but when it deviates to a sign associated with a certain personae and a specific situation through the process of signification, it becomes suggestive, symbolic and implicative. This situation produces a sign in which 'A' letter and 'Admiration' become one.

For the semiotician, the associative total between the signifier and the signified simply constructs a sign which has the capacity to be polysemous, to carry multiple meanings. This sign is connotative. In Chapter One, the wild roses which grow beside the prison are used by Hawthorne to refer to Hester Prynne. They are attractive and beautiful but wild as Hester herself.

The prison, cemetery and the rosebush are very important for such a Puritan community with their inflexible and rigid doctrine. Hawthorne tells us that.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.⁽²⁾

The three signifiers destroy their literal (dictionary) levels to have new codes so as to generate fresh signs. The cemetery and the prison do not literally refer to two places the former consists of a group of tombs and the latter is a place for criminals and sinners. Rather, they become signs each of which has its fresh code and its connotative meaning within the context of the novel. These two signs are equivalent and artistically associated together to refer to the 'fallen' state of man: the fallen man ends his journey either in a tomb or in a prison and both of them refer to an action of imprisonment. This is very clear with Dimmesdale who is forced to the conviction that the constituent factors of his personality have fallen into disarray, its cohesiveness is gone and this leads on to the self-excoriating experience which is integral to the novel. The prison is also a symbol for the Puritanical severity of law. He describes this place as cold, rusted, yet strong with an "iron clamped oaken door". This represents the rigorous enforcement of laws and the lack of ability to break free of them.

The prison and the rosebush, one represents the Puritanical rigid dogma and the other represents passion and love, are put together within the same scene. Therefore, these two symbols paradoxically link Hester's crime to the rosebush. On the other hand, Hawthorne connects the rosebush to the wilderness surrounding Boston. Only in this wilderness the strict morals of the Puritan community cannot apply. This paves the way for a foreshadowing that one day this passionate wilderness may penetrate the Puritan dark environment and may serve as a moral blossom in the novel.

In chapter one, the wild roses which grow beside the prison are used by Hawthorne to refer to Hester Prynne. They are attractive and beautiful but wild as Hester herself. In chapter seven, inside the Governor's mansion, Pearl asks her mother to give her a red rose. Hester refuses to give her the rose. This indicates that the moral of the story has not yet become clear, and that like Pearl, the reader will have to wait. The eldest clergyman in Boston, John Wilson, calls Pearl as a "Red Rose" when he first sees her. Obviously, this discloses the moral element of the story, for Pearl epitomizes the morality which she will later reveal

The prison may also represent the authority of the regime, which will not tolerate deviance. Hawthorne artistically presents his point of view challenging this notion by mentioning the name Ann

Hutchinson at the beginning of the novel. Hutchinson was a religious lady who rejected most of the Puritanical teachings and thoughts; consequently she was imprisoned in Boston.

It has been acutely observed that the cottage in which Hester and her daughter are herded together as the poorest specimens of sub-human species and which offers them temporary refuge from the pitiless pelting of the storm raging outside in all its elemental fury takes on a symbolic significance. For a moment, these two creatures, hovering over the periphery of human existence, come to share a fraction of the burden with Dimmesdale who has been moving in the midst of the delirium of sin for so long. As counterpoised to the palace of the Governor - the symbol of superfluity - the cottage is an emblem of necessity to which they are now reduced owing to the vicissitudes of their fortunes. Hawthorne does not miss this opportunity to deepen this idea, he describes the palace as:

a large wooden house , built in a fashion of which there are specimens still extant in the streets of our elder towns; now moss-grown, crumbling to decay, and melancholy at heart with the many sorrowful or joyful occurrences, remembered or forgotten, that have happened and passed away within their dusky chambers. Then, however, there was the

freshness of the passing year on its exterior, and the cheerfulness, gleaming forth from the sunny windows, of a human habitation, into which death had never entered. It had, indeed, a very cheery aspect, the walls being overspread with a kind of stucco, in which fragments of broken glass were plentifully intermixed: so that, when the sunshine fell aslantwise over the front of the edifice, it glittered and sparkled as if diamonds had been flung against it by the double handful. The brilliancy might have befitted Aladdin's palace rather than the mansion of a grave old Puritan ruler.⁽³⁾

On the other hand, Hawthorne, through dramatic contrast and crude symbolism, presents Hester's cottage as:

On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that social activity which already marked the habits

*of the emigrants. It stood on the shore, looking
across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills,
towards the west.⁽⁴⁾* :

The cottage is an emblem of Hester's sharpened sense of isolation and of man's regression into primitivism which is in accord with his ultimate reduction to animality. It has the status of a veritable dark tower into which Hester lands and where, along with Pearl, she is likely to be afforded a fugitive moment of cessation from the agonizing experiences to which she has been consistently exposed. Hester is symbolic of the desecration of human personality which is affected in an altogether alien and antagonistic universe. This home on the outskirts of Boston, directly on the edge of the woods, puts Hester in a place of limbo between two contradictory milieus: moral and immoral or the stark Puritanical environment and the wilderness beyond. In fact, Hester is not completely submitted or dominated by the strict Puritanical moral code, but rather tries to live in both locations simultaneously.

Far from being a mimetic unity, Hester is more or less equivalent to a device or symbol and thus paves the way for the emergence of symbolic configurations so evident in the novel. It is not for nothing that she finds congenial company in and a sort of temperamental affinity with the poor. Both of them try their level

best and each, to put Hester back on the rails - help her achieve her moral and spiritual rehabilitation.

The image of a human being which issues forth from *The Scarlet Letter* is that of a tormented, isolated being- one who, after the fading away of his 'human naturalness' and the exhaustion of the flamboyancy of culture - looks more or less like a haunted animal or an impaled insect wriggling along the edges of the wall. It is the sense of 'alienation' and precariousness within the iron; world of Puritanism and ossification of law, human emotion and culture, when the dynamics of human will of choice is no longer within his grasp, which registers a shock of pain and surprise on Hester. Therefore, 'A' letter signifies 'alienation' which is the dominant sense throughout the action of the novel to the end. Thrown upon the sea of isolation, troubles, rudderless, life for a man of Hester's sensitivity is no more than a futile and horrid affair; man seems to have lost his moorings and life partakes of sheer and total absurdity.

From the beginning, Hester is portrayed as an alien, a woman who faces the whole society alone. She

[was] now impressed as if [she] beheld her for the first time-was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon the

bosom. It had the effect of spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity: and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.⁽⁵⁾

But Hester has no alternative, she does not choose her fate, she has had it imposed upon her. The Puritan people should be blamed and must be guilty of a very grave wrong in Hawthorn's catalogue of sins. Yes, she is guilty of adultery but they are guilty of lack of charity. This society imprisoned Hester within a magic circle, so that even in the crowd she was always alone; therefore, she gains the reader's sympathy of being a powerless victim.

She had been literally forced into practicing Emerson's greatest virtue, self-reliance, in the isolation of her 'magic circle of ignominy'. No less excuse, in Hawthorne's world, would have exonerated her for breaking the connections in the 'electric chain' of mutual sympathy and interdependence that should bind us together.⁽⁶⁾

The dress colours, for example, are also used as codes to identify signs that present the rigid and inflexible system of Puritanism. Hawthorne describes how the citizens of Boston gather before the door of the town's prison waiting for Hester's appearance on the stage:

A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.⁽⁷⁾

The Puritan dress-code and the "oak and iron" of the prison-door generate signs associated with the gloomy life of Boston at that time. They reflect the inflexible religious beliefs and firmness of faith. The "grey steeple-crowned hats" and "the oak and iron" as signifiers are empty, but when these terms are defamiliarized by deviating them from the literal to the figurative meaning they become rich and suggestive. The hats here suggest the whole dismal puritan male society of Boston and "the oak and iron" indicates the Puritan tough life.

Pearl, Hester daughter, is presented as a living reflection of the scarlet letter. She is the main cause of the torment, humiliation and anguish of both Hester and Dimmesdale throughout the novel. Pearl lacks certain Christian qualities. Symbolically, one may venture to compare Pearl to Moby Dick. What actually puzzles the readers of *Moby Dick* is the white color of the beast. The whiteness is a clear symbol of the ambiguous mask-like appearances of the phenomenal

world. It stands for innocence, purity, chastity , magnificence and divinity on the one hand. It also symbolizes terror and death. So, whiteness offers a paradoxical interpretation which complicates the given symbol, just like the universe itself. Thus, the name of Pearl is misleading. A pearl is an attractive object found inside an ugly oyster. Hawthorne tries to say that appearance does not reflect reality, and that Pearl is anything but a beautiful creature. This paradoxical interpretation also suggests that man's spiritual and moral power may turn into either destructive or creative momentum. Pearl prances on the graves of the dead and breaks every moral law that the Puritans have created.

Artistically, Hawthorne tried to emphasize certain aspects in reality through a pattern of symbols and signs. Therefore, we may notice in almost all his works the incest, witchcraft, the haunted mind and the secret guilt, murder, the resurrection of the dead as all the elements of the Gothic romances. He endeavored to show us that we do not always see what we think we see. It is true that *The Scarlet Letter* is a book of much complex and dynamic symbolism, but without using such techniques the novel might seem flat and superficial. Moreover, it shows Hawthorne's linguistic skill in using signs and signification half a century before Ferdinand de Saussure formally talked about them.

Notes

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Everyman's Library, 1971), pp. 9-10.
2. *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 59.
3. *The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 125-126.
4. *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 99.
5. *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 68.
6. Charles Feidelson and Pall Brodtkorb, *Interpretations of American Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 21.
7. *Interpretations of American Literature*, p. 59.

ملخص

الانحراف في استخدام الرموز والإشارات في

رواية "الحرف القرمزي"

**The Obliquity of signs and Symbols in
*The Scarlet Letter***

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يؤسس ناثنيل هوثورن روايته (الحرف القرمزي) (1850) بنويا على استخدامات الرمز والإشارة الأمر الـ الذي جعل كثير من النقاد يصفون روايته بأنها مثقلة به ذين العنصريين. لقد استخدم هوثورن منهجا روائيا لغويا لم يسبقه احد به من قبل. فقد طبق نظرية العالم اللغوي السويسري فرديناند دي سوسور قبل خمسين عاما من ظهورها مما يؤكد أصالة الكاتب وحسه اللغوي المرهف في عمله الإبداعي واستخدامه قيم تعبيرية إبداعية لوصف المدلول بطريقة غير مألوفة.

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يتناول البحث الفروق الفنية بين الرمز والإشارة وتحليل استخداماتهما في النص طبقاً لنظرية دي سوسور اللغوية والتي تقول بأن ما يميز اللغة الأدبية هو في انزياحها من المستوى القاموسي إلى المستوى المجازي. يحطم هوثورن كل المفاهيم المعدة سلفاً في طبيعة العلاقة بين الدال والمدلول للوصول إلى تطابق منسجم بين اللغة المجازية وما تحويه من رموز وإشارات وبين المعنى. فلا نلاحظ أي تنافر بينهما أو تضاد بل على العكس فإن هـ ذا الاستخدام يمنح المعنى حرية الانفلات في فضاءات مفتوحة سواء ان أكان ضمن النص أو في مخيلة القارئ، وبه ذا يبتعد هوثورن عن الاستخدام الكلاسيكي في التعامل مع الرمز والإشارة.