

Q: If the book did not evoke any past memories or associations, do you consider it literature? Based on which other criteria?

I. I did not make a very clear connection with the text at all during my reading of it. Rosenblat said "The readers attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience-external reference, internal response-that have become linked with the verbal symbols." This rang true to me for, as I was plodding through the text, I saw a well crafted story with impressive symbols and techniques, but I was never drawn into the story and often found myself putting it down and struggling back to it later. Because there was no connection for me, it was not really my "poem" and didn't provide any impact on me. My own definition of literature takes two parts: the parts from Rosenblat's essay, such as the connection on a personal level and connecting with experiences; the other part of literature for me is the test of time consisting of whether the text has been taken in by other people. After all, it isn't one person that turns a story into a classic; the same should be said of literature. Rosenblat said the same idea better than I: "Keeping the live process of the literary experience before us, I shall attempt to look more deeply into the nature of the literary experience, and to explore implications for problems of literary theory. . ." I think that Rosenblat would agree with me that it might not be literature in my own sense, but on the larger scale, literature it is.

II. At the beginning of the second semester, each individual in our English class with Dr. Taylor wrote a small definition of what literature was; it is this that I refer to for most of this section. Literature is ideas and thoughts written down with a purpose. "Not a purpose like making a shopping list, but rather to bring forth emotion from your reader, whether it's humorous, sad, depressing, angry, romantic." In my definition, I compared literature to music. I believe that anyone can throw notes onto a sheet of musical paper (or words on typing paper) and have it come out sounding like chopsticks (or a shopping list,) but it takes special talent and emotion to make it sound like any great composer (or any great author.) But the buck does not stop here. This is only half the problem. The person receiving music (or literature) has to define it as they are listening to it (or reading it.) Let me give you an example from my own experience: I have gone through many phases of both music and literature. I have gone from oldies to hard rock, from classical to industrial; I have gone from Stephen King to Kerouac; from Dean Koontz to Vincent Bugliosi. (O.K., I admit it. There was a very brief interlude of country somewhere in there. I wised up; please don't hold it against me, most gracious reader!) Other people might have never appreciated these genres of music or books, yet they were great music or literature to me at that period of time. Even though I might not have the same taste now, I still regard these examples as music and literature. "Literature is for anyone who wants to read it. Anyone."

III. Because my definition deals with two separate functions of literature (that to the reader and that to the bigger picture,) I need to tackle this last part in two parts.

Hawthorne vs. Me:

My experience of *The Scarlet Letter* was one that I have experienced with many school-motivated books: boredom. With few exceptions such as *Childhood's End*, *Demian*, and some various pieces from Kafka and Whitman, school-chosen books have not impressed me. This might be a negative to start each new book off with, but I can't help myself. The story of Hester was an intriguing one. A woman trapped in a love triangle with a clergyman, a (supposedly dead) husband, and her daughter seems the proper setting for a story that would if not intrigue me, at least interest me. But I was not. The first problem that I saw was the setting. I am not terribly interested with the time period of settlers and Puritans; in fact,

there seems to be a wave of interest on a time line for me: I love medieval settings, my interest drops down, comes back up through present times to the future, which I also love. There seems to be a gap of interest. The second detraction from this story was distraction. I appreciate variety and just about every page I was forced to snap out of what little I was getting into it to ask myself "just how many times in this story is Hawthorne going to use some version of 'ignominies'?" It may be a small thing to be annoyed by, but it is the small things that drive you insane. I commend Hawthorne for having an incredibly vast supply of words and the repetition of that one was unbearable. I also like works from my own generation. I had nothing in common with any of the characters, all of them being older people with different problems, problems of a magnitude that I haven't experienced, thus I couldn't imagine them. For example, I couldn't relate to the torture that Chillingworth was inflicting upon Dimmesdale. As if Dimmesdale's own internal-self-torture weren't enough, Chillingworth had "infected all the air around [Dimmesdale]" with the "secret poison of his malignity." (189) I've felt badly about doing something before, but never quite this bad. The last way that *The Scarlet Letter* fails in proving its literature worthiness to me is the user-unfriendly atmosphere. Comparable to Joan Didion, a modern author, Hawthorne uses very complex sentence structure and word usage. As I previously said, Hawthorne deserves credit for his vocabulary, but it makes it difficult for me to get into a story where I have to dissect every fifth sentence and look up every tenth word to get meaning out of it. It does not provide a read-one-more-chapter feel, but rather a oh-geez-I-need-a-break feel. One fine example of this is a gloriously complex sentence: "Walking in a shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps under the influence of a species of somnambulism [what? I don't think my spell checker knows this one!], Mr. Dimmesdale reached the spot where, now so long since, Hester Prynne had lived through her first hours of public ignominy [there's that word again!]." (143) I'm perplexed, but after several minutes of taking apart clauses and looking words up, I'm ready to proceed to the next sentence. Another opinion: I like the authors I read to give me a clear picture of characters and places that I might otherwise not know about. Because the author can never know what his audience is going to know about, I appreciate a little more physical description of the characters and places than Hawthorne provides. He creates half of a character; for instance we learn a lot about how the characters think through expansive paragraphs of thought and character metaphors, but we know nothing about what the characters look like or their setting. I am suggesting that perhaps there is a happy medium in between somewhere; tell us a little more about the superficial aspects of the character and be a little seductive with their mentality, showing a little here, a little more later, leaving even more for our imagination. Of course Hawthorne had no idea that his story would be turned into a movie, but, just from seeing commercials for the movie, I typecasted Demi Moore as Hester; no matter what I tried, I could come up with no other picture. More detail would have been helpful to create new characters. As for setting, the detail was lacking there as well. In my recollection, there was only one scene (inside the Governor's house) that was described well enough that I got a clear picture of what was happening. For all these reasons this particular story does not fit into my literature section on the personal level. (I'll try again in ten years; maybe it'll be better.)

Hawthorne vs. the Big Picture:

On the larger scale, Hawthorne's story *The Scarlet Letter* surpasses most expectations from literature. Where I criticize his complexity on the personal level, I am forced not to forget its importance in my definition, where the author has to put well crafted emotion (as well as class) into his writing to provide a higher quality literature. And while Hawthorne's stylistic tendencies are little more than grammatical tricks, they are the tricks that turn the icing on the cake into the artwork on the cake. He surpasses topping it and turns it into something beautiful, twisting, turning, new nuances appearing each moment. (Now if I could only interpret it.) Hawthorne's use of flashbacks and allusions to his own story is absolutely outstanding. In many occasions Hawthorne made subtle references to

other parts of the story which made you slap your head and say a silent "wow, this guy's good" (more often than not I missed them and had to have them pointed out to me by our teacher). For example, as Dimmesdale says to Hester on the platform, " 'If thou feelist it to be for thy soul's peace, and that they earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer!' " (65)-keep in mind that the "fellow-sufferer" is Dimmesdale, but we don't know it yet-and later, in the Governor's house says he: "The child of its fathers guilt and its mother's shame hath come from the hand of God." (my emphasis) (110) Dimmesdale recognizes himself as a sufferer and, forty-five pages later, restates the fact that Hester has no guilt, rather shame, but it is he that wears the scarlet letter on his soul. One more example of this lovely distant repetition is found with Hester and her Pearl. In the second chapter, Hester attempts to use Pearl to hide her shame. "It seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much as a motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token on her bosom," (50) that token being the scarlet A. Later, in chapter 19, Hester removes the letter and, as if Hester's previous actions had somehow sealed the letter into her child as well, Pearl "suddenly burst into a fit of passion, gesticulating extravagant contortions . . . pointing her small forefinger at Hester's bosom." (206) Again, a beautiful sustained metaphor. The last example of this symmetry comes from the most devious character of all, Chillingworth. As he questions Hester in prison saying " '[The unknown father] bears no letter of infamy wrought into his garment, as thou dost; but I shall read it on his heart!'" (73) he seems to manifest this ominous threat into Dimmesdale's very flesh. "With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole . . . of his figure." This hideous thing, we find out later, is some kind of mark in the shape of a scarlet A, with no evident cause of appearing. As I said before, Hawthorne lacks on physical creation. His characters are, however, deep and intensely metaphorical. Chillingworth, the devious doctor, has a very appropriate title: "leech." I am positive that it is not coincidence that Hawthorne chose the slang of the times (leech slang for doctor) to help personify his character. Chillingworth uses his influence and medicinal powers (sometimes magical powers were alluded to, but never proven) to leech poor Dimmesdale of his soul and life. Hester, a barely feminine name at best, fits her character of a hardy woman who stands up for herself, takes the part of a whipping-boy for Dimmesdale, and raises a child all during the most difficult part of her life. Dimmesdale, a minister, after sleeping with Hester, acts as a corrupt clergyman would (anyone in the '90's reads the papers enough to know how a "corrupt clergyman" would act): by hiding behind his religious garb, saying he has to retain "a zeal for God's glory and man's welfare," thus cannot be turned in. (Coincidentally convenient?) He is not strong enough to confess, but rather take the whip to himself and let himself be tortured by Chillingworth. Hawthorne uses an incredible talent to construct a story worthy of the title "literature." I believe that there is no question about its validity as a useful and influential work for the population of people assimilated. However, the difficulty of the text and the distant approach lead me to believe that this is not the literature to be in my "poem" right now; it just doesn't fit. I realize, however, the talent in the story and I will attempt it again when my experiences and my "poem" have changed.

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