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The Scarlet Letter:
An Analysis of Symbolism

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is generally considered to be the first American symbolic novel. A symbol is something which is used to represent something broader in meaning.

The most obvious symbol in the novel is the actual scarlet "A" which both the criticism and I agree upon. This "A" is the literal symbol of the sin of adultery. The letter A then appears in many different forms throughout the novel. The gold-embroidered A on Hester Prynne's fascinates Pearl Prynne. It is magnified in the armor breast plate at Governor Bellingham's mansion which is so extreme that it seems to hide and cover Hester. On the night of Arthur Dimmesdale vigil, he sees a red A in the sky. And finally, the letter is revealed on Dimmsdale's chest in front of the whole village.

The A also takes on many meanings. It has the original meaning as well as different meanings to various characters. To Hester, the A means humiliation. The A to Dimmesdale is a reminder of his own contrition. To Pearl, the A is peculiarity and Roger Chillingworth sees the A as a journey for retaliation. Other than adultery, the A can also stand for "Angel" and "Able". Angel, for it appears in the sky after Governor Winthrop's death. Able, for Hester has won the respect of the Puritans even if she has sinned terribly.

Hawthorne uses the prison building to describe crime and punishment in contrast with the tombstone at the end of the novel. This statement suggests the crime and punishment will eventually lead to the death of the malefactor.

One positive symbol is the rosebush outside the prison. I feel it represents a sweet person hidden in the encasements of a dark prison, a true diamond in the rough.

The symbol for Puritanism, according to one critic, is when Hawthorne uses the beadle. I can see how the Puritans are compared to minor parish officials in the Church of England by the way the society follows their lead. The Puritan children are taught to scorn Hester for her adultery. In the Puritan rule this is an austere iniquity, so they dominate the judicial side of her punishment. The Puritan world and the natural world are also contrasted continuously throughout the novel.

The rest of the symbolism is showed through the setting and the characters. The setting influences the overall mood of the book, while the characters write the novel and make it what it is.

The entire atmosphere is gray. The skies and clothing of the people of the town are always dark. This darkness symbolizes concealment and secrets. Darkness usually always represents a world of evil. The brightness of the day, however, is the symbol of exposure, where everything is seen.

As color is brought in, happiness is added. The sun is bright with joy and has a life free of guilt. Pearl, as she runs in the forest, obtains and absorbs this sunshine. The sun is incapable of touching Hester because of her peccadillo on her breast.

The scaffold is mentioned numerously throughout the novel for a substantial reason. The scaffold is not only a symbol of Puritan code but becomes a symbol for a corroboration of personal sin. It is the place where Dimmesdale knows he must go for requital, the only place he can escape from Chillingworth's diminutive leash.

The forest is a very symbolic place. It can be interpreted in three different ways. The first mode is as an evil place where souls are signed away to the devil. In addition, the forest is a place where darkness and gloom conquers. Finding a path to guide you through this forest is what Hester has been trying to find over

her years. The forest also is symbolic for it is a place where Pearl can run and play and Hester can let her hair down without society frowning upon them.

The brook is a symbol in several ways. It is an unknown source and travels through obscurity. The brook babbles to Pearl giving a history of misery. The brook then becomes a boundary of two worlds when Pearl will not cross it. The natural world which is the side Pearl is on while the other side is the Puritan orb.

Character symbolism is a distinctive manifestation of Hawthorne's symbolism. The Church, State, and Witchcraft of the Puritan world are represented by Reverend Mr. Wilson, Governor Billingham, and Mistress Hibbins which were, subsequently, all associated with the scaffold, a Puritan sin stand. Pearl's name itself is symbolic because it is the allusion of great price. In this case, that price is Hester's reputation and her standing in the community. Pearl is also a self-contained symbol. The result of her parent's sin is shown in her often imprudent comments and unbridled behavior.

Each character in the novel suffers from a sin which they try to crush and bemoan with goodness from their own heart.

The Scarlet Letter is a book filled with symbolism. I feel the symbolism helps to relate a situation to a position the reader knows about. The critic which I based this on feels that there is voluminous accounts of symbolism, even too much. I must disagree with this. Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter is an amazingly written book for its time with just the right amount of powerful symbolism.