

The Scarlet Letter  
by Brad D. Parker  
(<http://bdparker.cjb.net>)

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is considered to be the first symbolic novel printed in the United States. The major symbol, as the title suggests, is the scarlet letter given to Hester Prynne. Many people interpret the novel as the story of a woman who succumbs to sin, or of corruption and hypocrisy in a puritan village. However, the plot is more clearly traced through the symbol in the scarlet "A." The scarlet letter is symbolic of every major aspect of Hawthorne's novel and the plot centers around views of the letter. It is true that it symbolizes Hester and her sins, but the story is not about Hester. Instead, the plot is developed along a series of symbols representing changes in her life.

It is obvious that the "A" is brought into the novel to represent adultery. This is evident from the circumstances surrounding the plot. However, Hawthorne never mentions the word adultery in the entire text of *The Scarlet Letter*. This leads the reader to believe that this sin is not the major theme of his novel. He does not want the reader to linger on the sin. The effects of the letter are the real focus. Hawthorne makes this evident in the way the letter is presented. When Hester first appears in the novel, all eyes are focused on the letter upon her breast, and for good reason. Not only is this an ignominy that has not been seen before in the Boston village, but it is presented in a way that seems much too pretentious for this humble puritan town. Hester has made the symbol from bright red material and sewn it on her dark vestment with a flourish of shiny gold thread. It separates itself and stands out on her garment much in the same way that

Hester now stands out in the dark, melancholy puritan society. This shows Hester's courage, if not her effrontery to wear her punishment without fear. Furthermore, the letter could also stand for what Hester really is now, "Alone." With the realization of her sin and the curse of the scarlet letter, she is shunned from society. In addition to this stigma she is required to wear, Hester is forced to stand on the scaffold of the pillory to be seen and criticized by the entire town. This scaffold, situated nearly under the eaves of the church, is a symbol of punishment and shame to the town and holds more significance for the reader. It symbolizes the strict nature of the puritan village and the strong link between punishment and religion. It also has an ironic symbolism. Even though the scaffold is a means of punishment for her sins, it physically and morally raises her above the crowd. She is shown to have a strength of character not possessed by any other in the novel.

Reverend Dimmesdale is one of those other characters who does not share Hester's strength of character. He did share in Hester's crime but did not have the courage to suffer the humiliation of discovery and the scarlet letter. This man is described as having a "white, lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes and a mouth which...was apt to be tremulous." This physical description is also a description of his character. The white forehead suggests that he knows in his mind what he should do. He should admit his guilt publicly and share in Hester's disgrace. The dark eyes represent his soul, a soul that is prone to commit evil and hide his transgressions. His tremulous mouth symbolizes his nervousness about speaking of his sins. Thus he does not admit his guilt. While the authorities do not punish Dimmesdale, the reader is led to believe that God does. It may be that he has the scarlet letter etched

on his chest by some unknown means. Also one night a red “A” is alleged to have appeared in the sky above his head. He receives his due punishment for his adultery in privacy unlike Hester who has to suffer openly. His punishment is still no less. He becomes the target of Hester’s wronged husband, Roger Chillingworth. He unmercifully tortures Dimmesdale by making him recall his sin daily. Chillingworth has a misaligned will that is represented in his disfigured body. His outward appearance, with one shoulder higher than the other is symbolic of a mind that is inclined to evil.

The letter is not the only symbol of Hester and Dimmesdale’s union that serves to punish them. There is also a child held closely to her mother’s bosom. This child, Pearl, is the product of Hester’s adulterous affair. The scarlet letter symbolizes little Pearl as much as Pearl symbolizes it. It is a symbol of the affair that brought Pearl into the world. Likewise, Pearl becomes the scarlet letter incarnate. Her mother dresses her in bright, sometimes showy dresses, once even in the same red and gold as the letter. She acts in place of the letter to remind Hester and the townspeople of her sin. Although to Hester the letter represents her darling daughter, to Pearl the letter represents her mother. Pearl grows up never seeing her mother without her scarlet letter. As a baby she stares at the letter, reaches for it, and grasps it. It is how she recognizes her mother. Every time Pearl looks on to this scarlet symbol of ignominy, it hurts Hester as if the letter burned into her soul. There is only one scene in *The Scarlet Letter* where Hester removes her letter. She is in a forest where she meets with Dimmesdale to discuss their common sin. The forest is dark and removed from the confines of civilization. This dark forest can be seen as a symbol of evil and immunity from society’s constraint. In this forest, Hester is almost always in shadow while Pearl always manages to find the points of sunlight streaming

through the leafy canopy. This play with sunlight is expressive of Hester's blackened soul and Pearl's pure, lively spirit. Nevertheless, Hester is more feminine in the forest. She lets her hair down, removes the scarlet letter and can relax. At this point, she reclaims her womanhood, but is rejected by Pearl who does not recognize her without that symbol. It is not only Pearl who recognizes the symbolism in the scarlet letter. Hawthorn illustrates Hester's realization of the letter's significance to her image when she sees her reflection in a suit of armor. In the reflection the letter appears to be of gigantic proportions and to make it seem that she is completely hidden behind it. The symbol of her shame has become the symbol of all that she is. Of a truth, it is the most prominent feature of her appearance and reputation.

The letter is not only a symbol of shame, however. It comes to be a symbol of Hester's compassion and strength of character. She is not afraid to go into town, into the market, or to other's homes. When neighbors are sick she goes to stay by their bed and help them. She gives food and clothes to the poor with whatever extra money she has. Because of these deeds, the letter begins to represent something else to the people of Boston. They say it means able. To those who know Hester's deeds, it is a symbol of good will and a kind heart. After years of being seen only with that scarlet "A" on her garment, it actually comes to represent Hester. The people in town, especially newcomers and children know her as the "woman of the scarlet letter." They accept it as a symbol of Hester's spirit, not just her past sin. Through her compassionate spirit, the scarlet letter can also be interpreted as an allusion to Christianity. The color of the letter is symbolic of the blood of Christ. Although Christ was blameless and Hester was not, she is depicted as the highest moral character in *The Scarlet Letter*. She took on the

burden of that scarlet letter in atonement for the sins of the minister whom she refused to denounce in the same way that Christ took up the cross for the sins of man. This allusion to Christianity adds poignancy to Hawthorne's novel.

Although she was at first burdened by the scarlet letter she had to wear, Hester, through her strong will overcame the obstacle it presented. The letter lost its symbolism in regards to an adulterous affair, and took on a new meaning. Hester worked hard to change the way people looked at her. Finally, they saw her as a compassionate soul. By this time, she had accepted the letter as a burden she was condemned to carry for all her life. Even when the magistrates would not force her to wear it, or might even wish her to take it off, Hester carried her letter in repentance. The letter became the salvation of this woman, a blessing more than a curse.