

THE CRITICAL REPUTATION OF THE SCARLET LETTER

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PREFACE

Since my first reading of The Scarlet Letter, I have wanted to know why it is considered such a controversial masterpiece and to ascertain the evaluations attributed to it by its many critics. In this research I have utilized all the available nineteenth century criticisms, but only the major ones from the twentieth century. In addition to reading the criticisms cited, I perused a great deal of miscellaneous material for information concerning the setting and historical background of The Scarlet Letter.

Chapter I gives a concise picture of the historical setting of The Scarlet Letter. Chapters II, III, IV, and V present in chronological order the major criticisms of The Scarlet Letter from its date of publication to the present. Chapter VI presents a consensus of the trends in the critical reputation of The Scarlet Letter.

I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mark Van Doren, Columbia University, for the loan of material used in this research. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Alton P. Juhlin, Oklahoma A. and M. College Librarian, who so graciously and liberally aided me in this research, and to my adviser, Dr. Cecil B. Williams, for his genuine interest and his invaluable constructive criticism.

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CHAPTER I

THE SCARLET LETTER AND ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

The American public was pleasantly surprised when Nathaniel Hawthorne published The Scarlet Letter. The United States was a comparatively new nation and had not produced many recognized literary masterpieces. To be sure, Cooper's works were being widely read in Europe as well as in America, but up to the mid-nineteenth century, Europe had produced most of the famed novelists. In 1898, Henry James stated that The Scarlet Letter was the finest piece of imaginative writing yet produced in the country and that there was a consciousness of this in the welcome that had been given it.¹

Before 1850, Hawthorne had made several attempts to write a good novel. Some of his attempts had resulted in Fanshawe, Seven Tales of My Native Land, Twice Told Tales, and Ethan Brand. He was depressed because he had not produced a piece of literature that would attract the public's attention.²

The story has been related that James T. Fields, hearing that Hawthorne was ill in Salem, went to call on him and found Hawthorne hovering near a stove in an upstairs room on Mall street. Fields began conversing with Hawthorne about his future prospects of producing a good novel for the press. Hawthorne was in a despondent mood and

¹Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, 1899), p. 111.

²Ibid., p. 34.

answered him, "Nonsense, who would risk publishing a book for me, the most unpopular writer in America?" Fields said, "I would." He then pressed Hawthorne to reveal to him what he had been writing. Hawthorne shook his head and firmly insisted that he had produced nothing. Fields caught sight of a chest nearby where they were sitting, and it immediately occurred to him that hidden away in a chest drawer was one of Hawthorne's manuscripts. He charged Hawthorne with this fact, but still Hawthorne would not admit the truth of the accusation. As Fields was departing down the stairs, Hawthorne stepped into the entry with a roll of manuscript in his hands and said: "How in heaven's name did you know this thing was there? . . . It is either very good or very bad--I don't know which." On his way up to Boston, Fields read the draft of The Scarlet Letter, was delighted with it, and encouraged Hawthorne to finish it.³

A short time later, Hawthorne wrote to Bridge that he had read the final chapters to Sophia. He said:

It broke her heart, and sent her to bed with a grievous headache which I look upon as a triumphant success. . . . Some portions of the book are powerfully written; but my writings do not or ever will appeal to the broadest class sympathies. . . . There is an introduction to this book giving a sketch of my Custom House life, with an imaginative touch here and there, which may, perhaps, be more widely attractive than the main narrative. The latter lacks sunshine, etc. To tell you the truth, it is . . . positively a hell-fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light.⁴

On February 1, 1850, Hawthorne finished The Scarlet Letter. Within six weeks the book was off the press, and almost immediately was called for. For the third edition the type was reset and stereotype plates were made.⁵ Probably one reason that the book sold so quickly was the

³Mark Van Doren, The Best of Hawthorne (New York, 1951), p. 427.

⁴Ibid., p. 428.

⁵James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 34.

wide divergence of opinions. Some were delighted with it while others were shocked by the bold theme.⁶

The first edition of two thousand copies sold out in ten days. Three thousand copies had sold within a month and six thousand copies two years later. If six thousand copies were sold at seventy-five cents per book, Hawthorne's royalty of ten per cent was only four hundred and fifty dollars.⁷ This was not a large amount to receive for a masterpiece during a period of two years, but it was a larger sum than Hawthorne had received for his other literary productions.

The public was apprehensive on the appearance of The Scarlet Letter, but at once the makers of literary reputations fastened upon the genius of Hawthorne. As Evert Duyckinck said, "The Scarlet Letter was a palpable hit."⁸

Hawthorne was forty-six years old before he gained his long-delayed success. Henry James has expressed the feeling of many of Hawthorne's readers, both critics and laymen, in the following lines:

But what a grievous pity that the dullness of this same organ should have operated so long as a deterrent, and by making Hawthorne wait till he was nearly fifty to publish his first novel, have abbreviated by so much his productive career.⁹

Hawthorne was amazed to realize that he was no longer the most unpopular writer in America but probably one of the most famous and certainly the most widely discussed.¹⁰

⁶Ibid.

⁷David A. Randall and John T. Winterich, "One Hundred Good Novels," Publisher's Weekly, CXXXVII (March, 1940), 1182.

⁸Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck, eds., Cyclopedia of American Literature, IV (New York, 1856), 503.

⁹James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 34.

¹⁰Ibid.

What sort of book was this that so quickly brought its author from the obscurity and semi-obscurity that he had long labored under? Perhaps this question deserves an answer as part of the logical introduction to a detailed study of the reputation that the book has gained through the years.

Hawthorne had been mulling over the idea for The Scarlet Letter a long time. In a historical tale of 1837, "Endicott and the Red Cross," he had recorded the legend of

. . . a young woman, with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown, in the eyes of all the world and her own children. And even her own children knew what the initial signified. Sporting with infamy, the lost and desperate creature had embroidered the fatal token in scarlet cloth, with golden thread and the nicest art of needlework; so that the capital A might have been thought to be Admirable, or anything rather than Adulterous.¹¹

Seven years later, Hawthorne made this entry in his notebook: "The life of a woman, who, by the old colony law, was condemned always to wear the letter A, sewed on her garment, in token of her having committed adultery."¹² Five years later, he began to write the story. It had lain twelve years in his mind while the material was clustering about it that it would need to make it shine as it shines today.¹³

Hawthorne's subject is not only adultery and not only what the symbol means, but how the symbol gains significance. This aspect of the book is gained by Hawthorne's pointed use of a problematic symbol, a letter.¹⁴ In the opening chapters, the scarlet A is the object of

¹¹Van Doren, The Best of Hawthorne, p. 428.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Charles Feidelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago, 1952), p. 10.

hundreds of eyes. Hester is not the only one who wears the symbol, if wearing it is synonymous with discovery and absorption of its meaning, for Dimmesdale wears an invisible A stamped upon his heart and mind, symbolizing the sin he has committed. As Mr. Wilson reads to the crowd his discourse on sin with continual reference to the scarlet letter, the minds of the crowd are confirmed in the Puritan thought and the real Hester is an adulteress.¹⁵

Hester, standing before them, is caught in their vision of the world. As she looks down at the letter on her bosom and touches it with her fingers, she feels that this hostile society and its judgment upon her are "her realities." At the same time her point of view of the pillory is one wholly different from that of her judges. Although she cannot withstand the pressure of the surrounding Puritans, the view of life that she will later attain is foreshadowed by the images of these stern people. As time goes by this symbol has a powerful effect upon her being. Hester escapes the Puritan world by taking the letter to herself, extending the "lawlessness of adultery into her habits of thought, and re-shaping conventional values into her own reality."¹⁶

The world's law was no law for her mind. . . . She assumed a freedom of speculation . . . which our forefathers had they known it, would have held it to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter."¹⁷

Arthur Hobson Quinn said:

She alone thought of others. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth thought only of themselves and found unhappiness. She worked for the ill and the needy, and in time her disgrace became her distinction.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, 1929), p. 55.

It never became her glory, for in the Puritan atmosphere that would have been impossible, but Hawthorne granted her the greatest reward that he permits any of his characters--that of regaining her own self-respect.¹⁸

For all the seeming compliance with the doctrines of the Puritans, the symbol has rendered much to her, and she inhabits a realm quite different from theirs. She was twice blessed because of the mercy that she showed to those who had scorned her.

Williams stated that the slender thread of narrative in The Scarlet Letter is no great affair as to originality or complexity.¹⁹ As Hester is on the scaffold, she recalls her home in England, and Pearl is the constant reminder of her youth; Dimmesdale in a similar fashion remembers the days of his youth. Hester recognizes on the outskirts of the crowd the slightly deformed figure of her wronged husband, who is bent on revenge. The story portrays a clear picture of these lovers and Chillingworth, too, who married Hester to mitigate his loneliness. All of these delicately conveyed memories give body to the story, and as one reads it, he realizes "that he is studying no timid trio reared in a fantastic theology, but rather three high-minded persons facing dilemmas as ancient and as recurrent as all common experiences."²⁰

Hawthorne wrote in an apparently effortless fashion. According to Stanley T. Williams,

. . . it is too easy from the time that one mingles at the prison door with the hooded women and the men in the gray steeple hats until one

¹⁸Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction, An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), p. 136.

¹⁹Stanley T. Williams, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Literary History of the United States / Robert E. Spiller, et al., eds. / (rev. ed., New York, 1953), p. 425.

²⁰Ibid., p. 426.

stands beside Hester Prynne's grave, to undervalue Hawthorne's superb interfusion of fact and fancy in the story.

Williams said that there is no heavy-handed intrusion of theological doctrine of local custom. "Church, priest, sermon, court of justice, and meeting house are here, but all are incidental."²¹

Williams stated that the Puritan mechanisms, such as the emblazoned A, are not inherent in the tragedy but represent only an era which might have counterparts in twentieth century conventions. The sting of the story lies not in the church laws which are given no special emphasis, but in the pangs of conscience which not even the Puritans have monopolized. The sin and its consequences could happen in any age.²²

According to Arthur Hobson Quinn, the great moral lesson of The Scarlet Letter is all the more effective because it is not stated. It is the futility of human punishment for crime. The penalty imposed upon Hester Prynne has no great effect. The scarlet letter had not fulfilled its purpose. She was not redeemed by society's remedy, but by her own character. Neither is Arthur Dimmesdale's self-inflicted punishment to any avail. His mortification of the flesh, his veiled attempts at confession give him no relief because he will not share the guilt with Hester.²³ The punishment of one individual by another is shown to be futile, for when Roger Chillingworth has driven Dimmesdale into confession and death, he not only feels that his victim has escaped him, but that his own life has been built upon revenge and that revenge in the end has won an empty victory for him. Mr. Quinn said that the

²¹Ibid., p. 427.

²²Williams, p. 427.

²³Quinn, p. 136.

novel seems to be the very incarnation of the voice of God saying, "Vengeance is mine."²⁴

Williams said that Hawthorne had intertwined the following subtle moral questions in The Scarlet Letter and characteristically provides us with no definite answers:

Was Chillingworth's capitulation to marriage for which he was unsuited a sin? If this is true, is not his punishment in hideous discrepancy with his fault? Or was his anterior absorption in learning his principal error? Why does his plan of revenge upon Dimmesdale, upon whom his hate increases, grow into abnormal love? How can we explain the fact that Dimmesdale's descent to his doom seems to begin with Hawthorne's favorite question from Bunyan at the gate of Heaven, in a spiritual attraction for Hester? Why does his cowardice in not acknowledging his fault exalt him to heights of moral counsel to his people? Why does the confession of guilt free Hester from remorse? Why does the whole experience enrich and dignify her nature? Contemplating this regenerative power of sin, which so absorbed Hawthorne in his later study of Donatello in The Marble Faun, can we wish the evil undone?²⁵

Examination of the evidence indicates that there has been a wide divergence of opinion in the criticism of The Scarlet Letter as to its literary qualities, including plot, style, theme and characterization since the book was published a little more than a century ago. It began at once to establish a reputation as an outstanding American novel, and it has continued to be regarded as that. However, it has not always been equally esteemed, or for the same things by everybody at any one time. The purpose of this thesis will be to show how its reputation has varied with different critics in the same period and also from period to period.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Williams, p. 427.

CHAPTER II

CRITICISMS OF THE SCARLET LETTER (1850-64)

In spite of the fact that the general public accepted The Scarlet Letter, there were from the outset those who criticized it for its boldness and crudeness. A scandal was caused among many of Hawthorne's readers because of the theme which he had used in the book. The Custom House officials were stirring up a furor in Salem, and on March 21, 1850, the Whig party's attitude was represented in the Salem Register. They said that Hawthorne, who was a Democrat, was merely sneering at their community by the use of an adulterous theme in The Scarlet Letter.¹ Their opinion is clearly represented in these words:

Is the French era actually begun in our literature? And is the flesh, as well as the world and devil, to be henceforth dished up in fashionable novels, and discussed at parties by spinsters and beaux, with as much unconcealed relish as they give to the vanilla in their ice cream?²

Actually the Salem conspiracy was of the greatest advantage to Hawthorne. Throughout the nation newspapers echoed the indignation expressed by William Cullen Bryant in his Saturday Evening Post: in dismissing Hawthorne, President Taylor had violated a pledge. The newspapers linked the name of Hawthorne with that of the President of the

¹Randall Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New Haven, 1948), p. 99.

²H. F. Chorley, "The Scarlet Letter," The Athenaeum, No. 1181 (June 15, 1850), 634.

United States to the advantage of Hawthorne rather than of the President. According to H. H. Hoeltje, no other writer in the history of American literature had ever received equal publicity.³ He said that when The Scarlet Letter appeared, its author's name was known wherever newspapers were read. With its publication, "Nathaniel Hawthorne was the best-known writer of prose fiction in America."⁴

Not only had Hawthorne achieved fame in America, but also his creative genius was recognized abroad. It was this recognition of his genius that prompted H. F. Chorley to say in the Athenaeum:

We rate him among the most original and peculiar writers of American fiction. There is in his works a mixture of Puritan reserve and wild imagination, of passion and description, of the allegorical and real, which some will fail to understand and which others will positively reject, but which to ourselves is fascinating, and which entitles him to be placed on a level with Brockden Brown and the author of Rip Van Winkle.⁵

Hawthorne moved as an equal among a few of the best spirits of his time. The impression which he made upon them may be traced in the journals of Longfellow, Emerson, Fields, Melville, Holmes, and several others. However, although Hawthorne made a notable impression upon the men named and a few other slighter figures, he did not seem as eminent to the public between the publication of The Scarlet Letter and the outbreak of the Civil War as he seems when viewed from the twentieth century.⁶

It was a common opinion among many of the critics that there was

³H. H. Hoeltje, "The Writing of The Scarlet Letter," New England Quarterly, XXVII (September, 1954), 345.

⁴Ibid.

⁵H. F. Chorley, The Athenaeum, No. 1181 (June 15, 1850), p. 634.

⁶Mark Van Doren, The American Novel, (New York, 1926), p. 109.

no writer who better combined the picturesque elements in writing than Hawthorne. As one critic so aptly stated:

His style may be compared to a sheet of transparent water, reflecting from its surface blue skies, nodding woods, and the smallest spray or flower that peeps over its grassy margin; while in its clear yet mysterious depths we espy rarer and stranger things, which we would examine.⁷

The book was sustained with a more "vigorous reach of imagination, a more subtle instinct of humanity," than any of his most successful previous works.⁸

Herman Melville wrote of Hawthorne in The Literary World:

Now I do not say that Nathaniel of Salem is a greater man than William of Avon, or as great. But the difference between the two men is by no means immeasurable. Not a very great deal more and Nathaniel were verily William.⁹

And of Twice Told Tales and The Scarlet Letter the same critic averred: "there are things in those two books which had they been written in England a century ago, Nathaniel Hawthorne had utterly displaced many of the bright names we now revere as authority."¹⁰

Longfellow attributed this praise to The Scarlet Letter:

⁷"Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter," North American Review, CXLVII (July, 1850), 146.

⁸"The Scarlet Letter," Littell's Living Age, XXV (April 27, 1850), 203.

⁹"Hawthorne and His Mosses," The Literary World, CLXXXVI (August 24, 1850), 145.

¹⁰Ibid.

Cf. Leon Howard, Herman Melville (Berkeley, 1951), p. 160. In November, 1942, Willard Thorp, Princeton University, attempted to prove that Melville never reviewed The Scarlet Letter in The Literary World, but that Duyckinck wrote the article. In 1951, Leon Howard stated that Melville had written the letter while visiting the Duyckinck brothers. They agreed with Melville that the manuscript should be altered to attribute it to a "Virginian spending July in Vermont" rather than to Melville for personal reasons.

Live ever sweet, sweet book! It comes from the hand of a man of genius. Everything about it has the freshness of morning and May. These flowers and green leaves of poetry have not the dust of the highway upon them. They have been gathered fresh from the secret place of a peaceful and gentle heart. There flow deep waters, silent, calm and cool, and the green leaves look into them and God's blue heaven. The book, though in prose, is nevertheless written by a poet. He looks upon all things in the spirit of love, and with lively sympathies; for to him eternal form is but the representation of external being, all things having a life and end.¹¹

After the publication of The Scarlet Letter, Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked:

He has done it and it will never be harsh country again . . . a light falls upon the place not of land or sea! How much he did for Salem! Oh, the purple light, the soft haze, that now rests upon our glaring New England! He has done it, and it will never be harsh country again.¹²

The reading of The Scarlet Letter seemed to affect Moncure D.

Conway in much the same way that it did Holmes:

I cannot describe the effect of that book on me further than to say that against the shadow it cast on my sunlit vision I saw defined a new cause to be added to my list: the angel with the scarlet letter on her breast, giving sympathy and counsel to the sorrowful women who sought her, assuring them that at some brighter period a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.¹³

All of these criticisms made by Hawthorne's contemporaries are a complete antithesis of those made by Emerson. Emerson was not an enthusiastic reader of Hawthorne's and was in no way reluctant in saying so. Elizabeth Peabody in an effort to enlarge the social circle of Hawthorne, attempted to "bring Emerson to his knees," and compel him to

¹¹Keningale Cook, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Belgravia, XIX (November, 1872), 75.

¹²Robert Cantwell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, The American Years (New York, 1948), p. 442.

¹³Moncure D. Conway, "My Hawthorne Experience," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 21.

become an appreciative reader of Hawthorne.¹⁴ Emerson was so conscious of the deep tone of melancholy in The Scarlet Letter that he was said to have gone about at one time telling people not to read Hawthorne's books.¹⁵ At one time he supposedly remarked of Hawthorne: "Nathaniel Hawthorne's reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man."¹⁶ At another time he was to have stated that "He holds a dark steed hard," but that the steed had a way of taking the bit in his mouth and bringing Hawthorne to wonder what his genius had done for him.¹⁷ On the day after Hawthorne's funeral, Emerson wrote in his journal: "I have found in his death a surprise and disappointment. I thought him a greater man than any of his works betray, that there was still a great deal of work in him, and that he might one day show a purer power."¹⁸

The Thomas DeQuincy family were ardent admirers of Hawthorne and enthusiastically enjoyed his works. In 1850, after the publication of The Scarlet Letter, Miss DeQuincey wrote to a friend that she and her father were rabid admirers of Hawthorne. She wrote:

There is no prose writer of the present day, in whom I have half the interest that I have in him. His style is in my mind so beautifully

¹⁴Anne Russell Marble, "Gloom and Cheer in Hawthorne," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 28.

¹⁵Francis Gribble, "Hawthorne from an English Point of View," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 62.

¹⁶Bliss Perry, The Heart of Emerson's Journals (Boston, 1909), p. 182.

¹⁷Moncure D. Conway, "The Secret of Hawthorne," The Nation, LXVIII (June 30, 1904), 509.

¹⁸E. W. Emerson, The Early Years of the Saturday Club (Boston, 1918), p. 346.

refined, and here is such exquisite pathos and quaint humor, and such an awfully deep knowledge of nature, not that hard, unloving, detestable false reading of it that one finds in Thackeray.¹⁹

Mary Halleck Foote, a girlhood friend of Mrs. Hawthorne, had never known a book that drew forth such a variety of criticism. It seemed to her a wonderful book full of "genius and thrilling power." Yet she thought that it was a painful book to read and was stunned by its relentless honesty.²⁰

According to H. F. Chorley in 1850, Hawthorne did a skillful job in administering the touch of the fantastic befitting a period of society in which ignorant and excitable human creatures conceived each other and themselves to be under the direct rule and governance of the "Wicked One or some type of evil spirits."²¹ He believed that Hawthorne had done an excellent job of presenting the misery of each of his characters. The misery of Hester is portrayed in every page. Chorley thought that Hester's terrors concerning her strange elfish child present retribution in a form which is new and natural. Her slow and painful purification through repentance is crowned by no perfect happiness, such as that which awaits the decline of those who have no dark and bitter past to remember. The gradual corrosion of the heart of Dimmesdale under the insidious care of her husband is appalling.²² Chorley said that we are not satisfied that passions and tragedies like

¹⁹Caroline Ticknor, Hawthorne and His Publisher (Boston, 1913), p. 83.

²⁰Robert Cantwell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, The American Years (New York, 1948), p. 440.

²¹H. F. Chorley, "The Scarlet Letter," The Athenaeum, No. 1181 (June 15, 1850), p. 634.

²²Ibid., 635

this are legitimate subjects for fiction. But if sin and sorrow in their most fearful forms are to be presented in any work of art, they have rarely been treated with a "loftier severity, purity, and sympathy" than in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter.²³

One critic writing for the North American Review asserted that Pearl is the only consistent mortal in the book. Although she is termed an elfish and imp-like personage, one can readily see that she is only a capricious, roguish, untamed child.²⁴ Chillingworth has very little of the common attributes of an ordinary man. He seems more of a personification of an abstract idea. He is so unnatural that it would be difficult for one to assign him a place among angels, devils, or men. Dimmesdale is realistic enough to feel greater pain in receiving undeserved praise conscious as he is of his unworthiness in not facing open ignominy as Hester did.²⁵ Hester excites a strong sympathy for herself because she suffers like an immortal being.²⁶

In 1851, Mary Russell Mitford remarked that The Scarlet Letter is like a new star sprung into the Western horizon "which will not fail to cast light over both hemispheres."²⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes also praised it:

²³Ibid.

²⁴"Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter," North American Review, CXLVIII (July, 1850), 142.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 140.

²⁷Mary Russell Mitford, Recollections of a Literary Life, as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, VI (New York, 1940), p. 352.

I snatch the book, along whose burning leaves
His scarlet web our wild romancer weaves.²⁸

Charles Johnson stated that there is in the novel that something which holds the reader until the end like Coleridge's use of the "willing suspension of disbelief." The story seems to hover on the borderline between the natural and supernatural like Coleridge's Geraldine.²⁹

However, all the criticisms that Hawthorne received were not as favorable as these. Arthur Cleveland Coxe related that The Scarlet Letter is after all little more than an experiment and need not be regarded as a failure. It is Hawthorne's attempt to rise above the composition of such petty tales as Fanshawe to the historical novel. It is called a novel because it has all the groundwork of one and might very easily have been elaborated into the details, usually included in the term; it is called historical because its scene painting is in a great degree true to a period of our colonial history which ought to be more fully delineated.³⁰ Coxe related his sentiments about the book in the following words:

We wish Hawthorne would devote all of his powers which he partly discloses in the book to the portraiture of that period so that we could become better acquainted with the habits and customs of that time.³¹

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Charles F. Johnson, "Three Americans and Three Englishmen," as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of American and English Authors, p. 354.

³⁰Arthur Cleveland Coxe, "The Writings of Hawthorne," The Church Review, III (June, 1851), 503.

³¹Ibid.

The majority of Hawthorne's critics agreed that The Scarlet Letter is an artistic piece of writing. In 1851, Mr. Rufus Wilnot Griswold remarked "that the frivolous action of almost any story can be easily depicted by the practiced sketcher, but a work like The Scarlet Letter can be put on the canvas only by an artist such as Hawthorne."³² He believed that it is a distinction of such works that while they are acceptable to the many, they surprise and delight only the few who appreciate the highest arrangement and careful finish of a novel. Griswold expressed his opinion emphatically in these words: "The Scarlet Letter will challenge consideration in the name of Art, in the best audience which in any age receives Cervantes, Le Sage, or Scott."³³

In 1852, one critic stated in Littell's Living Age that what other authors have turned into adulterated sentiment, Hawthorne has treated with a consummate delicacy and moral restraint.³⁴ This critic also observed that it is impossible to fail to notice how skillfully the background of the story is filled in and in what excellent keeping with the foremost figures are the puritan, somber shades which are intermingled with the story. He says that the patriarchal era of New England life has found no such vivid and graphic painter as Nathaniel Hawthorne.³⁵

This critic also asserted that Hawthorne was familiar with every mood of austere Puritan life and that his searching in somber places had

³²Rufus Wilnot Griswold, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," International Magazine, III (June, 1851), 157.

³³Ibid.

³⁴"Nathaniel Hawthorne," Littell's Living Age, XXXIII (April 3, 1852), 17.

³⁵Ibid., 18.

taught him much psychology of human nature. He also said that Hawthorne does not draw merely upon what he sees and hears for description, but has the capacity for grasping an idea and brooding over it until it becomes philosophical.³⁶

Not only did Hawthorne's artistic construction of the novel receive high appraisal, but his character delineations also were favorably criticized. One critic remarked that Hawthorne's delineation of Hester in her life of penance is masterly.³⁷ He has attached a mystic shadow to her dwelling. Children too young to understand why she should be shut out from society, creep closely enough to behold her doing needle-work, working her garden, or cleaning the yard; and then noticing the scarlet letter on her breast, scamper off with fear. She stands apart from moral interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that re-visits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt.³⁸ Hawthorne has portrayed her as being an average individual and merely one among the many; yet he has given her a certain air that sets her apart from the individual that one meets everyday in the common walks of life.

In 1853, Mr. Henry T. Tuckerman stated that this unique romance may be considered as an artistic exposition of Puritanism as modified by New England colonial life. Mr. Tuckerman stated that in truth to costumes, local manners, and scenic features The Scarlet Letter is as reliable as the best of Scott's novels. Tuckerman thought that in the

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

anatomy of human passion and consciousness, it resembles the most effective of Balzac's illustrations of Parisian or provincial life; while in developing the sentimental aspects of the life it depicts it as as true to humanity as Dickens.³⁹

Even Hawthorne was affected by the emotion portrayed in The Scarlet Letter. In 1855, he remarked, "Speaking of Thackeray, I cannot but wonder at his coolness in respect to his own pathos, and compare with my emotions, when I read the last scene of The Scarlet Letter to my wife."⁴⁰ Hawthorne said that his voice swelled and heaved as if he were tossed up and down on an ocean current as it subsides after a storm. However, he was in a nervous state of mind from having gone through a great diversity of emotion during the months he had spent writing The Scarlet Letter.⁴¹

In 1856, Evert A. Duyckinck noted that it was a generally conceded fact that in Hawthorne's day that The Scarlet Letter is a psychological romance and not merely a novel. It is a tale of remorse, a study of character, in which the human heart is "anatomized" carefully with a striking and dramatic poetic power; it is a drama in which "thoughts are acts."⁴² The material has been fused in the writer's mind and springs forth an entire creation.⁴³

In 1860, critics were still discussing the powerfulness of the theme of The Scarlet Letter. In the May, 1860 issue of The Atlantic

³⁹Henry T. Tuckerman, "The Prose Poet, Nathaniel Hawthorne," Natural Portraits as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticisms of English and American Authors, VI, p. 369.

⁴⁰Nathaniel Hawthorne, English Notebooks, I (Boston, 1892), p. 552.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck, eds., Cyclopedia of American Literature (New York, 1856), p. 503.

⁴³Ibid.

Monthly, the consensus of the criticism was that Hawthorne had made his genius known by illuminating his theme with passion. He had left the impression in most of his novels of being "mentally and morally impassioned" as he did in The Scarlet Letter.⁴⁴

One critic has said that the book forced itself into acceptance and attention by its own power; the author's name became familiar to the reading public of America and England. It "captivated nobody, but took everybody captive;" its powers could not be resisted.⁴⁵ Most of the critics in 1860 agreed that there is that powerful, fascinating something pervading the atmosphere of The Scarlet Letter that makes us want to read on until the end even though we may be shrinking from the story.

In 1860 Samuel Smiles said that we see the mystery of Hester and her disgrace on every page of the book. She is strangely contrasted to her elfin child, Pearl. We are held by the scene of Hester pleading in the forest with the faithless preacher to leave the community, while the mysterious Pearl stands nearby deeply interested in the conversation between the two. Then we see a picture of the wronged husband silently seeking his revenge unaware of those about him except Hester.⁴⁶

Randall Stewart related that objections to the intense and unrelieved gloom of the story were made by Hawthorne's sympathetic critics,

⁴⁴Nathaniel Hawthorne, " The Atlantic Monthly, IV (May, 1860), 615.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Samuel Smiles, Brief Biographies, as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, VI, p. 353.

who suggested that he use the Shakespearian device of mingling comedy and tragedy.⁴⁷ Hawthorne was in complete agreement with this but could not correct the fault in a satisfactory manner. While making plans for The Scarlet Letter's publication, he wrote to Mr. Fields: "I found it impossible to relieve the shadows of the story with so much light as I would gladly have thrown in." Later he wrote: "When I get home, I will try to write a more genial book; but the devil himself always seems to get into my inkstand and I can only exorcise him by pensful at a time."⁴⁸

One critic in 1860 remarked in Living Age that the torturing hypocrisy and remorse of Arthur Dimmesdale in the midst of his famous reputation as a preacher and a Christian are described with a very subtle power and the depth of the psychology used in doing so is unequalled in Hawthorne's own time. The husband who inflicts torture is placed before us with marvelous force.⁴⁹

However, this critic said that the characters of The Scarlet Letter are as far removed from us as those in some old Greek tragedy. The halo of romance thrown around them isolates them from us to an extent even though the doom of the couple may strike at our hearts.⁵⁰

In 1860, a critic writing for the Atlantic Monthly averred that two characteristics of Hawthorne's genius stand out in the conduct and characterization of The Scarlet Letter. The first one is the relationship

⁴⁷Randall Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 98.

⁴⁸Arlin Turner, "Hawthorne as a Self-Critic," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXXVII (April, 1938), 132.

⁴⁹"Nathaniel Hawthorne," Living Age, LXV (June 16, 1960), 715.

⁵⁰Ibid., 716.

of the subordination of external incidents to inward events. Hawthorne relied almost entirely for the interest of his story on what is felt and done within the mind of his characters. His most picturesque description, and narratives are one tenth matter and nine tenths spirit.⁵¹ The second characteristic is connected with the first. With his insight of the individual soul he combines a far deeper insight of the spiritual laws which govern the individual souls.⁵²

In 1862, Mrs. Fanny Aiken Kortright wrote in a letter to Hawthorne that she believed that The Scarlet Letter would endure "as long as the language in which it is written and should that language become dead, the book would be translated."⁵³ Hawthorne enjoyed many appraisals such as this before his death in 1864. On the whole the majority of the early criticisms were favorable toward The Scarlet Letter.

⁵¹"Nathaniel Hawthorne," Atlantic Monthly, V (May, 1860), 618.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife (Boston, 1884), p. 354.

CHAPTER III

CRITICISMS OF THE SCARLET LETTER (1864-90)

One of the remarkable aspects of criticisms on The Scarlet Letter between 1864 and 1890 is the predominance of British comments in relation to American. To be sure, this is not particularly surprising, for British interest in American literature had been increasing rapidly. During the late fifties, the number of articles on American literature in the British magazines doubled.¹ It was in this period that the importation of American books in England became so great that critical attention to them was unavoidable. There was a slight dropping off in the number imported during the Civil War. Afterwards there was a constant increase, so that the nineties produced the greatest amount of critical discussion.²

According to Clarence Gohdes, the better critical circles of America regarded Emerson as the outstanding writer of America, but Hawthorne was proclaimed the artist. Sidney Colvin described him as "one of the masters who in his English, has seemed classical with the most ease."³ Approval of Hawthorne was almost universal in the British critical circles after 1850.

¹Clarence Gohdes, American Literature in Nineteenth-Century England (New York, 1944), p.138.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

Gohdes said that so far as the quantity of books was concerned, the readers of the United States, for the century as a whole, were more numerous than those of the British Isles. However, for limited periods certain American works were read more in England than in America.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, Dred, Hiawatha, and The Scarlet Letter had a larger sale in the British Isles within a year or two of their first publication.⁴ Similarly, for limited periods, the critical approval of certain American authors was more enthusiastic abroad. Hawthorne, Cooper, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and the humorists in general, were examples of this group.⁵

Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter was not given as much attention in America after Hawthorne's death as it had been during his lifetime. As the imagination of the American turned to the new frontier, the country as a whole became enlivened by the spirit of democracy of the period. At the same time the romantic impulse was heightened by the disillusionment with the middle-class economic status and by a scientific temper that came to demand more reality in the writing. This was the age in which the people wished to break with European tradition and do their own thinking. Emerson's individualism together with his keen sense of perception prepared him to be the spokesman of the new movement.⁶ Obviously, at this time the critical approval of Hawthorne, the romanticist, was not as enthusiastic in America as it was in Europe.

Julian Hawthorne, Hawthorne's son, writing near the end of the period and considered later in this chapter, concluded that Hawthorne's

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 141.

⁶E. E. Leisy, American Literature (New York, 1929), p. 151.

style of writing was not popular in America and that his readers of a period were fewer than the public estimated. He asserted that widely as Hawthorne's name was then known, not one in a thousand of those who were familiar with it ever read a line of writing. He believed that Hawthorne claimed whatever popular vogue he could through a page of sound criticism here and there and the admiration of the best contemporary intellects.⁷

In 1864, Henry Tuckerman said that The Scarlet Letter may be considered an exposition of Puritanism, modified by New England colonial life and manners; in portraying the costumes, local manners, and scenic features, The Scarlet Letter is as reliable as the best of Scott's novels.⁸ According to Tuckerman, The Scarlet Letter's exemplification of the anatomy of human passion resembles the most effective of Balzac's illustrations of Parisian or provincial life; in developing the sentiment of life it depicts it as true to humanity as Dickens.⁹ Tuckerman also believed that beneath "the picturesque details, and intense characterization, there lurked a profound *malice* which Hawthorne described with the most remarkable trait or genius."¹⁰

In 1868, one writer stated in the North British Review that a country that could boast of three such contemporary authors as Emerson in philosophy, Longfellow in poetry, and Hawthorne in pure fiction could not be considered a barren or unhopeful soil for the cultivation of the richer fruits of the imagination.¹¹ He said of Hawthorne:

⁷Julian Hawthorne, "Hawthorne's Philosophy," The Century Magazine, XXXII (May, 1886), 84.

⁸Henry Tuckerman, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Atlantic Monthly, LXXXI (June 11, 1864), 522.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 518.

¹¹"Nathaniel Hawthorne," North British Review, XL (September, 1868), 173.

As a literary artist, and in respect of that characteristic so difficult to analyze or define, but to which common consent has assigned the name genius, it is questionable whether, among the distinguished and remarkable men whom America has produced, there is anyone of higher rank than Nathaniel Hawthorne--if, indeed, his equal. He has no glittering brilliance to arrest vulgar notice, no high-pressure enthusiasm or sweeping passion hurrying away with whirl-winds great and small that come within its range. He is calm, dreamy, subtle, with an imagination most penetrating, a refined--almost a fastidious taste. And in his hands the pen becomes a very magician's wand "creating," as he himself says, "the semblance of a world out of airy matter, with the impalpable beauty of a soap-bubble."¹²

One critic stated in Once a Week that next to Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne was unquestionably the best prose writer that America had yet produced because his style was admirable and entirely his own.¹³ He believed that many native-born English writers envied Hawthorne the facility with which he could develop character and paint the finest shades of passion by means of the most artistic language. He stated that there was over in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, as in many of his writings, a combination of playful humor and philosophy which gave life and naturalness to the characters that he delineated and the theme that he discussed.¹⁴

According to another critic, Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter developed the theme of adultery in a highly artistic manner, whereas many writers would have degenerated into sickly sentimentalism or repulsive ugliness. He believed that Hawthorne embodied combinations of moral and spiritual forces in his characters and inspired them with life and its problems and left them to speak for themselves.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., 176.

¹³"Nathaniel Hawthorne," Once a Week, XVIII (June 27, 1868), 562.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵"Nathaniel Hawthorne," North British Review, 176.

Hawthorne always seemed to be attracted to the unusual in humanity, yet most critics agree that he never chose evil for his study from a love of it. This critic said that nothing could exceed the purity, tenderness, and at the same time the harrowing thoughtfulness, with which the sin of The Scarlet Letter is portrayed. He believed that The Scarlet Letter is a "delicacy, not of any one scene, but pervading the entire story with a sustained tone that could be achieved only by a mind in which the highest delicacy of feeling is native and inherent."¹⁶

This same critic thought that Hawthorne's works considered as a whole were deficient in what might be called architectural structure. There seemed to be a lack of converging unity. He believed that Hawthorne's greatest deficiency in writing The Scarlet Letter was his failure to embrace in one grasp the scene, characters, circumstances, and their developments. He described each as a distinct unit related to the others only by the moral and spiritual bond which he had created for them.¹⁷

According to a critic in the North British Review, 1868, Hawthorne's writing flowed in a "placid, gentle rill, always sweet." He said of The Scarlet Letter:

So far as mere language is concerned, there are few writers that can produce effects of awe and weird-like mystery with so simple, but ever appropriate language. He builds his magic edifice with small and plain materials, but disposed with such cunning art, that others more imposing and gorgeous would be felt to be vulgar and ostentatious in comparison.¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., 178.

¹⁷Ibid., 192.

¹⁸Ibid., 175.

This same critic stated that several instances of colorful speech in The Scarlet Letter were susceptible of being converted into more figures of speech, expressing a truth that might have been hard to render in more literal terms, and some of them were intended for no more. Many of the expressions of The Scarlet Letter lost their power when taken from the text.¹⁹ Throughout The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne used dull, dreary color to gain effect. The following is an example:

. . . dark flabby leaves, unknown to men of science, were found growing on a grave which bore no tombstone nor other memorial of the dead man, save these ugly weeds that have taken upon themselves to keep him in remembrance. They grew out of his heart, and typify, it may be some hideous secret that was buried with him, which he had done better to confess during his lifetime.²⁰

This critic said that Hawthorne's aim in characterization was to delineate the most contradictory sides of a man in all of his contrasting, struggling actions and reactions. He thought that Hawthorne displayed with the skill and coolness of an anatomist, the conflicting passions and tendencies, as they are brought to light by some crises or critical event and its consequences.²¹

In 1871, a critic writing for the London Quarterly and Holborn Review, stated that Hawthorne's novels, including The Scarlet Letter, are great allegories in which human tendencies are artistically exhibited to the reader. He said that no man had ever used the English language with more perfect grace and self-control than Hawthorne, and that no man had more skillfully brought out its "most secret chords and

¹⁹Ibid., 189.

²⁰Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, 1939), p. 230.

²¹Nathaniel Hawthorne, " North British Review, 183.

harmonies." He thought that Hawthorne's words fit his thoughts as neatly as the "coverings which nature provides for her finest and most delicate productions."²²

In 1872, Keningale Cook began an article for Belgravia with these words: "Hawthorne ought to have been born in England. He has nothing of the pushing spirit of the Yankee."²³ According to Cook, Hawthorne was considered by some as one of the leading novelists of his time. Cook said that Hawthorne evidenced in The Scarlet Letter that he was well aware of a "site" on which to build up the fictions of his imaginations. He chose a "site" that would be solid and lifelike, yet sufficiently removed from the realities of life so that he could shed some light of ideality upon his characters.²⁴ Hawthorne observed that the European novelist was allowed the privilege of producing characters in accordance with his own view of their everyday life with regard to their relationship with nature. Cook said that Hawthorne thereby produced an atmosphere of enchantment which the American romancer needed in his novels.²⁵

Cook made a favorable comparison between the style of Hawthorne and Wordsworth. In each he saw the same gentle tranquility of disposition, the same clearness and innocency of mind, the same transparent flow of expression. In each there was the gentle contemplation, delicate and clear imagination, power of minute observation and

²²"Nathaniel Hawthorne's Life and Writings," London Quarterly and Holborn Review, XXXVII (October, 1871), 78.

²³Keningale Cook, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Belgravia, XIX (November, 1872), 72.

²⁴Ibid., 76

²⁵Ibid.

knowledge of nature, and soft, yet forcible ways of speech.²⁶ In comparing Hawthorne to another English author, Cook stated that Hawthorne and Dickens had a common faculty of painting somber pictures. He believed that Dickens had a greater power of stamping his pictures upon the reader's mind, but whenever the treatment of a subject which called for real pathos was needed, Hawthorne drew his readers into a higher and clearer light than did Dickens. Cook thought that Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter was mystical in style, but not obscure or colorless and that he was too hard upon himself in the following criticism: "The book, if you would see anything in it, requires to be read in the sunshine."²⁷

During the latter part of this period, American and English critics began to analyze The Scarlet Letter from the standpoint of its psychological value. One critic, writing for the Argosy, stated that Hawthorne was no hero-worshipper, but that he saw too clearly into human nature and detected its seamy places too easily to be a sentimentalist in any form.²⁸

In 1872, Stephen Leslie observed that Hawthorne's idealism in The Scarlet Letter did not consist in portraying the reflection of deep emotion through vulgar objects, but that he described the strongest passions by indirect touches and under a side-light.²⁹ Reverend

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 74.

²⁸H. A. P., "Nathaniel Hawthorne in Undress," Argosy, XII (February, 1872), 115.

²⁹Stephen Leslie, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Cornhill Magazine, XXVI (December, 1872), 727.

Dimmesdale, who was revered by a congregation unaware of his sin and who was watched constantly by the diabolical Chillingworth, was a striking figure.³⁰ He yielded under pressure to the temptation of escaping from the scene of torture to be with Hester. As he returned from the meeting he had a strange experience in which he was tempted to do some evil deeds. According to Leslie, the mode of setting forth the agony of a pure mind blemished by an irremovable blot of sin, was undoubtedly impressive to the imagination in a high degree; yet Leslie said that he was inclined to think that a poet of the highest rank would have produced the effect by a more direct means.³¹ Hawthorne did not convey to his readers so much the pure passion as he did the effects of it. He was more interested in the psychological problem than moved by sympathy for the despairing persons. The reader was moved to pity for Dimmesdale, but he was also interested in him as an experiment in analytical psychology.³²

In 1875, George Barnett Smith said that The Scarlet Letter was the greatest embodiment of remorse ever achieved.³³ In 1879, Anthony Trollope was deeply impressed by Hawthorne's literary acclaim because of The Scarlet Letter and expressed his feelings in these words: "He will have plunged you into melancholy, he will have overshadowed you with

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 729.

³²Ibid., 728.

³³George Barnett Smith, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Poets and Novelists as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, VI (New York, 1940), p. 355.

imaginary sorrows; but he will have enabled you to feel yourself an inch taller during the process."³⁴ Trollope said that The Scarlet Letter was perhaps the best known American novel on the English side of the waters. He believed that the reader's interest would never flag for a moment because there was not one episode of digression; Hawthorne never deviated from his story, but carried his readers to the end quickly, excited and at times almost shuddering.³⁵

Along with the favorable criticisms made by the English, Hawthorne also received the unfavorable. In 1872, one critic said that Hawthorne had never been a favorite with the multitude of readers in England or in his own land. He believed that the few who could appreciate Hawthorne's genius would hesitate to assign him a place among the first writers of his age.³⁶

In 1879, Charles Stoddard related that Hawthorne was severely criticized for preceding the story of The Scarlet Letter with the Custom House Account because it detracted from the book. Stoddard thought that it did not detract from the story, but was one of the finest pieces of autobiographical material he had read.³⁷

In the latter part of this period, the artistic construction of The Scarlet Letter was praised highly. In 1883, James Baldwin manifested this idea in stating that one would search a long time before he would find a story constructed with more "artistic skill, purer graces of style,

³⁴Anthony Trollope, "The Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne," North American Review, CXXIX (September, 1879), 74.

³⁵Ibid., 74.

³⁶"Nathaniel Hawthorne," National Graphic (August, 24, 1872), 168.

³⁷Charles Stoddard, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Harper's Magazine, XLV (October, 1879), 692.

more refined in sentiment, superior in characterization and psychological thought."³⁸ Baldwin thought that it was a work for the "artist, thinker, and student, and not for a superficial reader."³⁹ John Nichol said that The Scarlet Letter was "the most profound, the boldest, the most riveting, analytical romance of our tongue."⁴⁰

In 1883, James H. Morse related that at this time Hawthorne was still a power in American literature, and one not likely to be forgotten. He said that the new and complete edition of Hawthorne's books in two volumes, issued by Houghton Mifflin Company, marked the demand for his novels, and that the excitement caused by the publication of Doctor Grinshaw's Secret showed that the sources of Hawthorne's power was no less curiously explored then than they had been thirty years ago.⁴¹

In 1886, Robert Buchanan described The Scarlet Letter as being the most finished work of art of all of Hawthorne's novels. His opinion was that if Victor Hugo had been as "fettered" by art as Hawthorne and had confined Les Travaillés de la mer to the compass of The Scarlet Letter, it would have been double its present value.⁴²

James T. Fields related in 1886 that the publication of The Scarlet Letter drew immediate and wide attention to Hawthorne and from that

³⁸James Baldwin, English Literature and Literary Criticism as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, p. 354.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰John Nichol, American Literature as quoted in The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, p. 354.

⁴¹James H. Morse, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Critic, LIX (February 17, 1883), 65.

⁴²Robert Buchanan, A Look Round Literature as quoted in The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, p. 354.

period everything that he wrote was eagerly welcomed and read.⁴³ Both in America and in Europe he was placed among the leading writers of the time, and his books were translated and republished all over the continent.⁴⁴ Fields said that from that time on, Hawthorne was acclaimed with the "first men of his era, and all lands were eager to do him homage."⁴⁵ Hawthorne's rank among authors was among the highest; people attempted to compare him with this and that writer of books, both in America and in Europe, but there was no one "precisely of his exceptional school."⁴⁶

W. L. Courtney stated that the fascination of the mystical would be difficult for most artists to analyze, but that when it was kept in control by one with the exquisite artistic sense of Hawthorne, it affected us with an immeasurable force. He thought that Hawthorne's characters did not always stand out with distinctness, "but that the management of the incidents, the grouping of the accessories, the natural background of color and tone and scenery, were all admirable."⁴⁷

Julian Hawthorne's reaction to the style of The Scarlet Letter was that it had not the "carpenter's symmetry of a French drama, but the spontaneous, living symmetry of a tree or flower, unfolding from the force within."⁴⁸ He believed that

⁴³James T. Fields, "Hawthorne," The Critic, CXLV (October 9, 1886), 177.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷W. L. Courtney, "Hawthorne's Romances," Fortnightly Review, XL (October, 1886), 516.

⁴⁸Julian Hawthorne, "Problems of The Scarlet Letter," The Atlantic Monthly, LVII (April, 1886), 473.

It combines the strength and substance of an oak with the subtle organization of a rose, and is great, not of malice aforethought, but inevitably. The story goes to the root of the matter. The reader may choose his depth according to his inches but only a tall man will touch the bottom.⁴⁹

W. L. Courtney, whose analysis was in agreement with a number of critics before and after his time, thought that the finest scene of all was the night vigil of Dimmesdale on the scaffold; but that even in this scene, the effect depended more on the imaginative vividness with which the picture was drawn than on the suggestion of contrasted feelings.⁵⁰

Hawthorne's insight into the emotions and the perception of the contrasts of passion strike the imagination with rare force and mastery. Courtney thought that one of the finest passages for this comparison was the scene in which the minister returned from a meeting with Hester and found that his moral nature had been temporarily perverted. Hawthorne was merely analyzing the power of mental reaction after some strain of feeling and excitement.⁵¹

Courtney declared that the triumph of the semi-morbid psychology of The Scarlet Letter was the elfin child, Pearl, who was so fond of the scarlet A that she would not go to her mother unless she was wearing it. This was a morbid, yet striking bit of technique.⁵² Courtney thought that Hawthorne was full of such touches, sometimes insisting on them "with an almost painful emphasis, but rarely exceeding the artistic requirements of his pictures."⁵³

⁴⁹Ibid., 471.

⁵⁰Courtney, 521.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 522.

⁵³Ibid.

To him, Hawthorne's characters were not realistic enough because he made them depend upon such shadowy personalities as Roger Chillingworth. Dimmesdale was realistic enough, but Pearl seemed to be an elfin child separated from everyday life. Hester Prynne did not affect the reader as a woman who loved and suffered.⁵⁴

A surprising discovery in this research has been that the greatest amount of critical attention given to The Scarlet Letter from 1864 to 1890 was written in the years 1868, 1879, and 1886, and almost exclusively by British critics. During this period the American critics gave more attention to The Marble Faun, The House of the Seven Gables, and to the biography of Hawthorne rather than to The Scarlet Letter. The articles which were in the American periodicals concerning The Scarlet Letter were mainly reprints from the British Journals.

To sum up the consensus of the critics' opinion of The Scarlet Letter at this time, the novel was not as highly acclaimed in America during the period as it was in England. Judging from the amount of criticism given to it by the American critics, The Scarlet Letter lay practically dormant until the late eighteen-nineties. But the British were impressed by it and praised Hawthorne for his artistic genius, and also for his psychological insight into the emotional problems of his characters.

⁵⁴Ibid., 518.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICISMS OF THE SCARLET LETTER (1890-1914)

At the turn of the century, there was an apparent re-awakening to the fact both at home and abroad that Hawthorne had produced a literary masterpiece worthy of recognition. The Scarlet Letter received more attention and criticism during this period than it had at any other time since its publication.

According to Hamilton W. Mabie in 1893, The Scarlet Letter was the foremost story yet written on this continent.¹ In a list of the most popular novels in America given in The Forum Magazine in 1893, The Scarlet Letter ranked third among the most popular novels. J. Selwin Tait and Sons, New York publishers, asked from all the important libraries in the United States a report of the most popular novels. From each library a list of the one hundred and fifty most called-for works of fiction was received. The lists were analyzed and a table was made of the relative popularity of each book. David Copperfield was on 92 per cent of the lists, Ivanhoe on 88 per cent and The Scarlet Letter on 87 per cent.² Mabie said that when a book of such quality finds so

¹Hamilton W. Mabie, "The Most Popular Novels in America," The Forum, XVI (December, 1893), 512.

²Ibid., 512.

wide a reading, "it proves that the finest art does not fail to charm when it allies itself with the deepest life."³

In 1894, Thomas Bradfield said that The Scarlet Letter is a work which if not the most artistic outcome of Hawthorne's powers, is "supremely daring and original in conception and finished in workmanship."⁴ He thought the little group of figures in the story worthy to be portrayed by the powerful discerning art of Rembrandt.⁵

An unnamed critic in 1897 said that Hawthorne's consummate skill in sending his penetrating vision into the mysteries of the human soul had won for him the world's instant recognition at home and abroad.⁶ It was quite evident that Hawthorne's fame was secure and that The Scarlet Letter had earned a place among the best literary pieces of the day.

William Cranston Lorton stated in 1898, just forty-eight years after The Scarlet Letter's first publication, that Hawthorne would probably be amazed to find his novel elevated to the classic level where most men dare not confess ignorance and timidly hint disapproval.⁷ Mr. Lorton thought Hawthorne one of the "most original creative geniuses, most perfect artists in form, most consummate masters of style yet born on American soil."⁸ Lorton also observed that Hawthorne was

³Ibid., 513.

⁴Thomas Bradfield, "The Romances of Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Westminster Review, CXLII (June, 1894), 207.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Bookman, VI (December, 1897), 332.

⁷William Cranston Lorton, "The Scarlet Letter and Its Successor," The New England Magazine, XVIII (August, 1898), 697.

⁸Ibid., 700.

probably not a general favorite among the most refined because of his mysticism. Lawton believed that the greatest flaw lay in the external rather than in the spiritual problem of the book.⁹

Henry James, famous late nineteenth century novelist and critic, thought that one of the apparent reasons that The Scarlet Letter achieved fame when it was first published was in the fact that Hawthorne had used a theme that had not been used over and over again by the novel writers of his day.¹⁰ James has described the theme of The Scarlet Letter in these words:

It achieves more perfectly what it attempts and it has about it that charm, very hard to express, which we find in an artist's work the first time he has touched his highest mark--a sort of straightness and naturalness of execution, an unconsciousness of his public, freshness of interest in his theme.¹¹

James stated that his greatest criticism of the book is on the arrangement of the characters so that they appear as so many pictures on the wall that fail to make any contribution to that which lives and moves. According to James, the characters do not come out into reality as much as they should and the interest of the story lies not in them, but in the situation which is insistently kept before us.¹²

James also thought that Hawthorne's use of symbolism is overdone at times; as a result of this, it ceases to be impressive. He also believed that the idea of the mystic A imprinted upon Dimmesdale's breast in sympathy with the letter embroidered on Hester's breast is

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, 1899), p. 107.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 108.

overdone and that Hawthorne should have suggested the comparison and then dropped the idea instead of weakening it with exaggeration.¹³

James said that the scene in which Dimmesdale feels impelled to stand in the spot where Hester paid her penance, and seeing Hester and Pearl returning home, calls them to come and stand beside him, is one of the most beautiful scenes in the whole book; but it is almost spoiled by the introduction of one of Hawthorne's superficial conceits. James said that the material which leads up to the scene is good and is one of the most striking pages of the book.¹⁴ To clarify James' point, a portion of this scene is here reproduced:

But before Mr. Dimmesdale had done speaking, a light gleamed far and wide over all the ruffled sky. It was doubtless caused by one of those meteors which the nightwatchers so often observe burning out to waste in the vacant regions of the atmosphere. So powerful was its radiance that it thoroughly illuminated the dense medium of cloud betwixt the sky and earth. The great vault brightened like the dome of an immense lamp. It showed the familiar scene of the street with the distinctness of mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light. The wooden houses, with their jutting stories and quaint gable peaks; the doorsteps and thresholds, with the early grass springing up about them; the garden plots, black with freshly-turned earth; the wheel track worn and even in the market place, margined with green on either side; all were visible, but with a singularity of aspect that seemed to give another moral interpretation to the things of this world than they had ever borne before. And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynne with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl between these two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendour, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all that belong to one another.¹⁵

James said that this is a poetic and impressive statement, but immediately afterwards when Hawthorne says that "the minister, looking

¹³Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, 1929), p. 249.

upward to the sky, behold there the appearance of an immense letter-- the letter A marked out in lines of dull red light," we feel that he has gone too far with his symbolism.¹⁶

James believed that the fault of the book lies in the lack of reality, the superficial qualities of the characters, and the abuse of the use of symbolism. He said that Hawthorne's novel is not of the first rank, "but an excellent second-rate one; it borrows a charm from the fact that his vigorous, but not strongly imaginative mind was impregnated with the reality of his subject."¹⁷

In 1901, William Dean Howells asserted that the scenes in The Scarlet Letter are as nearly as possible identified with actual places in Boston. Howells said that Hawthorne with an inward sense of stern reality in his material has each detail of the story in motive, action, and character substantiated so that from first to last it is visible, audible, and tangible.¹⁸

Paul Elmer More stated that all the world agrees that The Scarlet Letter is a masterpiece of mortal terror and remorse. More, like many other critics, agreed that we are lost in the admiration of the author's insight into the suffering of the human heart; yet we are not moved to tears because the story awakens no sense of shuddering awe such as that which is commonly aroused by such great tragedies of literature.

¹⁶James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 115.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁸William Dean Howells, "Heroines of Fiction," as quoted in Charles W. Moulton, ed., The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, VI, 372.

Although it is not emotional, yet neither is it shallow nor cold.¹⁹

More thought that The Scarlet Letter is

. . . a story of intertangled love and hatred working out in four human beings the primal curse,—love and hatred so woven together that in the end the author asks whether the two passions be not, after all, the same, since each renders one individual dependent upon another for his spiritual food, and each is in a way an attempt to break through the boundary that separates soul from soul.²⁰

More stated that from the opening scene of the book, the whole plot moves about this one conception of our human isolation as the penalty of transgression.²¹ When one reads these last words of Arthur as he lies dying in Hester's arms, he wonders whether the love between the two was redeemed of shame and "made prophetic of a perfect union beyond the grave."²²

"Shall we not meet again?" whispered she, bending her face down close to his. "Shall we not spend our immortal life together?"

"Hush, Hester, hush!" said he . . . "It may be that when we forgot our God—when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion."²³

In 1904, Hawthorne's centenary was celebrated, and noteworthy observations and criticisms were made of The Scarlet Letter and Hawthorne's works in general. During this period and afterwards, Hawthorne's literary accomplishments were given more recognition than they had ever received before.

It was during this period that an experiment was made in the

¹⁹Paul Elmer More, "The Solitude of Nathaniel Hawthorne," Atlantic Monthly, LXXVIII (June, 1901), 588.

²⁰Paul Elmer More, "The Solitude of Nathaniel Hawthorne," Shakespeare Essays (Boston, 1904), p. 33.

²¹Ibid., p. 37.

²²Ibid.

²³Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, 1929), p. 303.

publication of The Scarlet Letter in a privately printed edition limited to one hundred and twenty-five copies on Japanese imperial paper and one copy on vellum, printed in France. With the exception of two drawings, the custom House in Salem and Hawthorne's birthplace by C. Graham, The Scarlet Letter was illustrated by a Frenchman, A. Robaudi.²⁴

Francis Gribble at this time related that the theme of the book rather than its merits accounts for its success. He said that the book has long been superseded in its plot but has nevertheless survived; its remorseless drama has kept it alive.²⁵ He thought that the scene in which Reverend Dimmesdale denounces his own sin is not only one of the most powerful in literature, but also one which later writers have imitated. Gribble said that it is repeated in Les Miserables, and in the countless melodramas based upon Les Miserables where the Magistrate points to the prisoner in the dock, exclaiming: "Here, take the fetters off those honest hands and rivet them on mine."²⁶

However, Gribble was critical of the unreality of the characters in The Scarlet Letter. He said that Hawthorne's characters are not individuals exalted into types, but types introduced to us as individuals. He thought that Hawthorne had made no attempt to individualize the type. One cannot weep for Hester Prynne because one cannot feel that she is of flesh and blood. She is the embodiment of an idea. One is not made aware of her suffering and pathos, but of the tragedy of the situation.²⁷

²⁴Carolyn Shipman, "Illustrated Editions of The Scarlet Letter," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 49.

²⁵Francis Gribble, "Hawthorne From an English Point of View," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 65.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

Charles Townsend Copeland praised Hawthorne for drawing his materials from his immediate surroundings. Copeland says that Hawthorne shrank instinctively from drawing upon antiquity, the Middle Ages, or other countries for his materials. In doing so he restricted his artistic gift, "but what he left unattempted is as eloquent of that gift as what he so perfectly achieved."²⁸ Copeland also contended that between the death of Hawthorne and the birth of the present moment, no writer of incontestable genius has composed romance in English prose.²⁹

Benjamin De Casseres said that Hawthorne deals with pain as though it were a conscious being—"a survival in his brain of the Puritan belief in a personal devil."³⁰ Hawthorne's mind is a lodging house for the distraught.³¹ Annie Russell Marble said that Poe's imagination with all its magic, was at times disordered, and even diseased; but Hawthorne's never lost its delicacy.³²

In 1906, Leon Vincent said that The Scarlet Letter shows no trace of effort in the composition, for it reads as if it had come "like a breath of inspiration."³³ Economy of phrase is one of Hawthorne's virtues; he uses no superfluous sentences and his stories are rich in ideas heavy with suggestion.³⁴

²⁸Charles Townsend Copeland, "Hawthorne's Use of His Material," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 57.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Benjamin De Casseres, "Emperor of Shadows," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 61.

³¹Ibid.

³²Annie Russell Marble, "Gloom and Cheer in Hawthorne," Critic, XLV (July, 1904), 28.

³³Leon H. Vincent, American Literary Masters (Boston: 1906), p. 297.

³⁴Ibid.

In 1907, Lucy Leffingwell Cable said that The Scarlet Letter was a triumphant success in its day, but would not prove so today if it were offered fresh to the readers of this generation. She said that the new generation demands a more vivid and a more realistic touch than Hawthorne ever gave to his characters or their environment. He placed his story in the early days of New England; yet his characters in the essentials of the story do not belong there. Miss Cable thought that Hawthorne lacks the "ability to portray in all its complexity, its intricacy, its heat and fervour, the actual present life about us."³⁵

In 1911, Alphonso Newcomer observed that the characters of The Scarlet Letter are probably best described as possessing the quality of seeming at once real and then unreal. They act normally and move among natural surroundings. They are not like the caricatures of Dickens or the characters of the old romances who do impossible things; neither are they like the characters of everyday life. They reject a large part of the actions and motives that enter into every day life and govern their every thought by the principles of good and evil which the ordinary man knows well enough, but is scarcely aware of.³⁶

In 1911, Reuben Halleck wrote that Shakespeare proposed no harder problem than the one in The Scarlet Letter, the expiation of sin. Halleck said that the combination of the Puritan and the artist has given to American literature "a masterpiece, somber yet beautiful, ethical yet poetic, incorporating both the spirit of the past and the

³⁵Lucy Leffingwell Cable, "Old Salem and The Scarlet Letter," Bookman, XXVI (December, 1907), 398.

³⁶Alphonso G. Newcomer, American Literature (Chicago: 1911), p. 111.

eternal present."³⁷ John Macy in 1913 agreed with Halleck that every word, detail, and scene of The Scarlet Letter is set in its place with sure artistry.³⁸

To sum up the consensus of the criticisms of this period, both favorable and unfavorable, The Scarlet Letter received more favorable than adverse criticisms. Hawthorne was highly praised for the artistic construction and style of the story, the refreshing theme, and the psychological penetration into the depths of human passion. He was criticized mainly for his superficial characterization and exaggerated use of symbolism. On the whole the critics adjudged Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter a masterpiece and believed its place in American literature was secure.

³⁷ Rouben Post Halleck, History of American Literature (New York: 1911), p. 216.

³⁸ John Macy, The Spirit of American Literature (New York: 1913), p. 86.

CHAPTER V

CRITICISMS OF THE SCARLET LETTER (1914-1956)

From 1914 to the present, Nathaniel Hawthorne was given more recognition for The Scarlet Letter than in any other period. With the passing of years The Scarlet Letter's artistry has not dimmed, but has grown in fame. The most outstanding and noted present-day American literary critics have recognized its literary value and feel that its place in American literature is secure. For the most part only the major criticisms of the twentieth century have been used in this chapter. Only representative articles concerning Hawthorne in the scholarly journals have been cited.

According to Henry A. Beers in 1915, The Scarlet Letter was already a classic only fifty years after Hawthorne's death; its author had achieved immortality through his one great masterpiece.¹ Beers thought that it is developed logically and is free from elements of fantasy that Hawthorne's other novels contain, but that it is less characteristic of its author than some of his lesser works, because he never relieves the gloom or relaxes his hold on his theme.² Percy Boynton believed that Hawthorne attempted what Wordsworth did, to take the material of everyday life out of the realm of the commonplace.³

¹Henry A. Beers, "Fifty Years of Hawthorne," Yale Review, IV (January, 1915), 301.

²Ibid.

³Percy H. Boynton, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," A History of the American Literature (Boston, 1919), p. 243.

In 1923, William C. Brownell stated that Hawthorne's novels have not the reality of novels. They show their unreality not only in their characters, but also in their pictures of life in general. He believed that The Scarlet Letter is nothing but a postlude of passion.⁴

Amy Louise Reed attempted to approach Hawthorne's works from the biographical and historical standpoint. It was her conclusion that Hawthorne's heroes and his nature villains are created from the same materials and that both are varieties of self-portraiture.⁵

In 1927, James O'Donnell Bennett remarked of The Scarlet Letter in his Much Loved Books:

For a writer given to musing, Hawthorne is compact. Sometimes a passage adorns his page like a "marble frieze."⁶

It utters itself in passages that are as sincere and strong as steel, but as dramatic as the tirades of a French play. Its economy of means is one of the marvels of literature.⁷

E. E. Leisy commented that The Scarlet Letter apart from its service as a transcript of Puritan life has artistic excellence of the highest order.⁸ It was the opinion of Leisy that the New England "Faust" with its crises in the forest scene in which freedom is offered, only to be followed by the expiation scene, is "unmatched for depth, intensity, and style in American prose fiction."⁹ It is the study of society and its conventions.

⁴William C. Brownell, American Prose Masters (New York, 1923), p. 93.

⁵Amy Louise Reed, "Self-Portraiture in the Work of Nathaniel Hawthorne," Studies in Philology, XXIII (January, 1926), 51.

⁶James O'Donnell Bennett, Much Loved Books (New York, 1927), p. 106.

⁷Ibid., p. 108.

⁸E. E. Leisy, American Literature (New York, 1929), p. 97.

⁹Ibid.

Ludwig Lewisohn said of The Scarlet Letter:

It is not the mere gloomy projection of an inner sense of guilt. Like all high literature, it accepts life as tragic, but simultaneously represents the human spirit as triumphing at some point over the evil rooted in the hearts and embodied in the institutions of men.¹⁰

A statement was made by Vega Carl in Pasteboard Masks that Hawthorne was a very conscious artist who wrote about the more obscure aspects of life and with considerable clarity.¹¹ Barrett Wendell thought that in comparing Hawthorne's work with his English contemporaries' work, one became aware of its "classical form, of its profoundly romantic sentiment, and of its admirable and artistic conscience."¹² Hawthorne's artistic conscience impelled him to realize in his work "those forms of beauty which should embody the ideals of his creative imagination."¹³

In spite of the favorable critical analysis of the artistic style of The Scarlet Letter, there were still recurrences of unfavorable mention of the characters and the weakness of the climactic scene. In 1935, Fred Lewis Pattee commented that the scaffold scene, which is the climax in the plot, is ludicrous. Hawthorne's intention was tragedy, but the gripping power of emotion and realism were lacking. He said when the story was read, it was read only with the thought of Hawthorne's method, literary devices, and his highly finished style.¹⁴

¹⁰Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America (New York, 1932), p. 182.

¹¹Vega Carl, Pasteboard Masks (Cambridge, 1931), p. 43.

¹²Barrett Wendell, A Literary History of America (New York, 1932), p. 43.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Fred Lewis Pattee, The First Century of American Literature (New York, 1935), p. 547.

According to Walter Taylor there broods over The Scarlet Letter an air of tragic inevitability which is comparable only to the "chiseled severity" of Sansón Aconisteg. The web of causation is so closely woven that scene after scene unfolds with "the unhurried, measured tramp of doom."¹⁵ Once Hester expressed the inevitability of her fate in these words: "There is no good for him,--no good for me. There is no good for little Pearl! There is no path to guide us out of this dismal maze."¹⁶ Taylor said that only in the greatest of literature is "this high seriousness, this tragic sense of life and fate, achieved."¹⁷ In 1936, Percy Boynton observed that the enduring quality of The Scarlet Letter is due to the fact that the central figure, Hester, is altogether convincing and that the two men are at least believable. It contains more "flesh and blood and less allegory and embroidering than any other of Hawthorne's works."¹⁸

Arthur Hobson Quinn also believed that the characters appeared to be real flesh and blood, because they are born of passions and emotions of love, hate, and revenge. Hester redeemed her own character, which reveals that she was realistic enough to "assert the will to live down her shame."¹⁹

Quinn declared that the modern timeless quality of The Scarlet Letter made for its everlasting fame. He stated that the central plot

¹⁵Walter F. Taylor, A History of American Letters (Boston, 1936), p. 176.

¹⁶Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, 1929), p. 232.

¹⁷Taylor, p. 177.

¹⁸Percy M. Boynton, Literature and American Life (Boston, 1936), p. 245.

¹⁹Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction (New York, 1936), p. 136.

is old, yet it is enlivened by a new and American setting. It was the opinion of Quinn that "all critical disquisitions upon the correspondence of the American of the nineteenth century, or of our national immaturity, vanish before this book."²⁰

Ivor Winters asserted that Hawthorne was not adept at creation of "human beings" for his story. The characters in The Scarlet Letter are unsatisfactory if one approaches the book from the standpoint of a novel. Winters believed that the characters drew their "life not from specific and familiar human characteristics, but from the very precision and intensity with which they render their respective ideas."²¹

Homer used the repetitions of the unchanging effects of his wine dark sea, rosy fingered dawn, and his ship launched into the holy brine to emphasize the unchanging human environment.²² Hawthorne's repetitions like Homer's are cumulative in their effect. Likewise he gives the impression that the world is always the same by reminding his reader of the strength and beauty as well as the misery and corruption that are possible for human nature to contact.

In an article entitled "Hawthorne's Literary Theory," Charles H. Foster stated that The Scarlet Letter as a piece of art transcends all other American novels.²³ According to Foster, The Scarlet Letter rises to the modern equivalent of Greek tragedy. He thought that there is

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ivor Winters, Manly's Curse or Hawthorne and The Problem of Allegory (Binghamton, 1938), p. 17.

²²C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (London, 1941), p. 21.

²³Charles H. Foster, "Hawthorne's Literary Theory," ESQ, LVII (March, 1942), 241.

this difference: the Greeks achieve a bold stern etching, but Hawthorne makes a rich painting, filled with spots of color that are flowers or sunlight, which induces in the reader an hour of deep meditation.²⁴ He remarked of Hawthorne:

He can be regarded as the meeting ground of several tendencies in seventeenth century literature: the melancholy tinged with the beauty, characteristic of Sir Thomas Browne, the love of nature found in the lyric poets and Isaac Walton, the severe and lofty classicism of Milton, and the allegoric attitude and art of John Bunyan. Hawthorne's dual mastery of form and content is unsurpassed in American literature. It is not expecting too much of the future to believe that he will be given his rightful place in the Hall of Fantasy as an Artist of the Beautiful.²⁵

Foster said that idealization is the key to The Scarlet Letter, which is an attempt to make a "drama truer than history illustrative of a universal truth."²⁶ He thought that Hawthorne was like Sophocles in that he aimed at an idealization which was not a beautiful "realm of escape from actuality, but was actuality shaped so that it was a universal truth."²⁷ He compared Hester to Antigone.

In 1944, Laurence Sargent Hall was convinced that an American tragedy like Hawthorne's could have come from none but a democratic writer and "at the present time it represents about the most satisfactory expression in art of the basic morality of democratic life."²⁸ He thought that beside Hawthorne's candid and at the same time imaginative probing into the depths of contemporary American life, "Whitman seemed picturesque, Emerson, visionary, and Thoreau, crabbed."²⁹

²⁴Ibid., 249.

²⁵Ibid., 254.

²⁶Ibid., 247.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Laurence Sargent Hall, Hawthorne, Critic of Society (New Haven, 1944), p. 75.

²⁹Ibid.

Hawthorne's romances appeared to Hall more as social documents than romantic tales. The Scarlet Letter is the isolation of the human heart, but Dimmesdale's isolation depends not on a crime against human nature and a personal love-conflict, but on the sense of the growing rift between him and society. Dimmesdale is lost because he has at last rejected the true relationship to society, whereas, Hester is saved because she made no secret of her sin.³⁰

According to Leland Schubert, The Scarlet Letter may be thought of as a drama, a tragedy.³¹ Henry A. Beers stated that the greatest difference between The House of the Seven Gables and The Scarlet Letter is the difference between romance and tragedy.³²

In 1944 the popularity of The Scarlet Letter with the reading public, as well as the critics, was attributed by Frederick I. Carpenter to the fact that the novel dealt with "the timely and timeless problem of sin."³³ Carpenter declared that The Scarlet Letter has been considered a classic from the first, but that it has lost some of its "once perfect qualities" because the problem of sin has been treated in other novels with greater realism. He thought the logic to be too ambiguous. According to him, the imperfection of ambiguity makes The Scarlet Letter a classic in that it illustrates a fundamental conflict in modern thought.³⁴

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Leland Schubert, Hawthorne, the Artist (Chapel Hill, 1944), p. 140.

³²Ibid.

³³Frederic I. Carpenter, "Scarlet A Minus," College English, V (January, 1944), 173.

³⁴Ibid., 174.

Carpenter said that time and time again the reader is confronted with the question, "was the action symbolized by the scarlet letter wholly sinful?" Time and time again he is confronted with different answers. The traditional moralists would say "Yes, Hester broke one of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, she sinned and shall suffer for it." In other words, Hester's passionate weakness caused the tragedy.³⁵

The romanticist would say, "No, she did not sin. She acted as any other person would have acted who is guided by human instinct." Therefore, the tragedy resulted from the intrinsic evil of society, because she was only daring to follow the natural laws.³⁶

Between the two extremes are the transcendentalists who seek to mediate. The transcendentalists say that Hester's sin was not because she broke one of the commandments. Her real sin was when she deceived her lover in the identity of her husband. Hester had sinned against truth, because the highest law of love is truth. Hester admitted this:

O, Arthur forgive me! In all things else I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue to which I might have held fast, and did hold fast through all extremity; save when thy good . . . were put to question! Then I consented to a deception. But a lie is never good, even though death threatens on the other side.³⁷

Carpenter thought that The Scarlet Letter received all of its greatness in the dramatic objective presentation of these conflicting moralities.³⁸

Alexander Cowie, a 1948 critic, stated that there is no humor in The Scarlet Letter, and the impish characteristics of Pearl help to

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 175.

³⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, 1929), p. 232.

³⁸ Carpenter, 175.

heighten the tension rather than to relieve it.³⁹ Cowie thought that the characters are never stressed more than their significance to the allegory. He believed that the lack of reality of the characters helped to relieve the tragic nature of the book.⁴⁰

One of the recent Hawthorne critics, Rudolph Von Abele, asserted that The Scarlet Letter is a book with flaws. He feels that the flaws are the more important because as a whole it is the best novel that Hawthorne wrote.⁴¹

In making a critical analysis of the novel, he concluded that the flaw is in Hawthorne's obvious, constant engagement in the "objectification of its fundamental theme," that the book is not concerned with sin itself, but the dilemma or outcome of it.⁴² Von Abele also saw irony in the fact that the elite is distinguished so much from the masses that Dimmesdale can not confess his sin as Hester did, because he will poison the elite by his fall.⁴³ He thought that the success of The Scarlet Letter rested on the fact that the whole book had become a symbolic vehicle. The symbolism does not stand in isolation with a group of events collected around it, but emerges step by step through the novel.⁴⁴

Russell Blankenship remarked in 1949 that The Scarlet Letter is

³⁹Alexander Cowie, The Rise of the American Novel (New York, 1948), p. 337.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Rudolph Von Abele, "The Scarlet Letter: A Reading," Accent, XI (Autumn, 1951), 211.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 212.

almost unanimously rated as one of the indubitable masterpieces of American literature. The work is not historical and does not owe its rating to a collection of historical materials. Hawthorne used only the "dark shadows of the Puritan background" for the setting. Almost anyone can write a history, according to Blankenship, "but only an artist can paint the gloomy shadows of The Scarlet Letter."⁴⁵

Blankenship declared that Hawthorne would be considered a competent novelist in any country, and until other writers had made some great advances, Hawthorne would continue to occupy first place in our literary world.⁴⁶ However, he believed that some of Hawthorne's defects were serious enough to keep him from being classified with Fielding, Thackeray, Hardy, and Conrad. He wrote in such an allegorical strain that one suspected him of using his characters as "mere symbols of ideas."⁴⁷

While sending by steamer the sheets of The Scarlet Letter to Richard Bentley in London, James T. Fields wrote, "It is a work for which we anticipate a large sale."⁴⁸ According to one 1950 critic, this was a modest beginning for a book that promptly made an international reputation, and has been reprinted innumerable times since then.⁴⁹

The organization of a Centennial Committee in March, 1950, to pay tribute to Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter is proof enough that the

⁴⁵Blankenship, p. 375.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 376.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸"The Centenary of The Scarlet Letter," Publisher's Weekly, CLVII (April 1, 1950), 1691.

⁴⁹Ibid.

American reader and critic have not forgotten Hawthorne and that The Scarlet Letter holds as secure a place in American fiction as any book after a century and half of publishing. The Centennial Committee with Mark Van Doren as Chairman was organized to pay tribute to Hawthorne through the sponsorship of a centennial pamphlet, special observances in Salem, a television dramatization of The Scarlet Letter, and other observations.⁵⁰

During the "Studio One" dramatization of The Scarlet Letter on April 3, 1950, Mark Van Doren presented a scroll to Hawthorne's descendants to be placed in Salem's Essex Historical Institute. The program was carried on forty-one TV stations.⁵¹

In 1950, John E. Hart attempted to exemplify Hawthorne's self-portraiture in The Scarlet Letter instead of evaluating the work itself. Hart asserted that Hawthorne became a writer to throw off his hatred for his past. As a keen observer of himself, he reached certain attitudes and conclusions. He saw that to avenge his feelings through the intellect was to decay like a Roger Chillingworth, to disguise his feelings through religion was to become a hypocrite like Dimmesdale, to reveal his feelings by relying wholly on himself as an artist was to live in solitude like Hester Prynne. He saw that art was useless unless it was accepted by society. Like Pearl, only by showing freely both mind and heart to the world could he gain a release from the past.⁵²

⁵⁰"Scarlet Letter Centennial to be Observed in April," Publishers' Weekly, CLVII (March 2, 1950), 1202.

⁵¹ Cf. No evidence was found that the Centennial pamphlet was ever published. An interchange of correspondence with Mark Van Doren, Columbia University, brought no confirmation of the pamphlet's publication.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³John E. Hart, "The Scarlet Letter--One Hundred Years Later," New England Quarterly, XXIII (September, 1950), 395.

According to Quinn in 1951, the greatness of The Scarlet Letter lies in the "dramatic plot, the analysis of the characters, the contrast between them and the background of Puritan strength and weakness."⁵³ Many writers often use illicit passion as an excuse for sentimentality, but if it is ever dignified, it is in The Scarlet Letter. There are few details of the sin; it is the effect of sin upon the characters with which Hawthorne is concerned.⁵⁴ It is the study of the futility of human punishment.

It is the belief of Mark Van Doren that no portion of the book is inferior, but that all is necessary and potent. No other American novel of the nineteenth century has lost so little of its prestige with the passage of time. Van Doren said that Hawthorne feared that he was not contemporary "for such writing cannot grow stale any more than the theme can wither."⁵⁵

Van Doren thought that Hawthorne was well situated to view the tragedy of Hester, Dimmesdale, and the Puritan code they had violated. He could be impartial "because he stood so far away; but he could be moving because he saw himself in both parties to the war."⁵⁶

Like Henry James, Van Doren agreed that the only spot of color is the scarlet letter A, which Hester so artistically embroidered. The reader is never permitted to forget this or the picture of Dimmesdale continually carrying his hand over his heart. For some novels the

⁵³Arthur Hobson Quinn, The Literature of the American People (New York, 1951), p. 111.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 312.

⁵⁵Mark Van Doren, The Best of Hawthorne (New York, 1951), p. 430.

⁵⁶Ibid., 428.

repetition of these details might seem excessive, but Hawthorne is writing a romance, a tragedy which frees him of some of the restrictions placed upon lesser writers.⁵⁷

After carefully analyzing the story, Stanley T. Williams concluded that the semi-scientific study that Hawthorne makes of his characters chills them. At times Chillingworth seems an incarnation of the passion for revenge.⁵⁸

According to Williams, the sting of the story lies not in the church laws which are given no special emphasis but in the pangs of conscience which not even the Puritans had controlled completely.⁵⁹ The sin and its consequences could happen in any age. The "cool familiar stare" which rebuked Hester, the festering wound of Dimmesdale's hypocrisy, the self-torment of Chillingworth's revenge, all these emotions "transcend the seventeenth century setting in which Hawthorne had chosen to portray his questions concerning the moral law."⁶⁰

Although the twentieth century critics are in great disagreement as to the literary merit of the theme and the reality of the characters, they do agree on the perfection of the artistic construction of the book.

The consensus of the literary critics is embodied best in this idea of Arthur Hobson Quinn's: "We are not so much aware of the moral as we are of the art of a wonderful story teller who holds and heightens

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Stanley T. Williams, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Literary History of the United States / Robert E. Spiller, et al. eds. / (rev. ed., New York, 1953), p. 425.

⁵⁹Spiller, p. 426.

⁶⁰Ibid.

our interests until the end."⁶¹ Mark Van Doren stated that "it is an achievement of deliberate art, grown competent and unconscious by careful exercise."⁶² John Macy remarked that Hawthorne thoroughly knew the nature and methods of art and set every word, detail and scene in place.⁶³ The statement was made by one critic that it is too easy to underrate Hawthorne's "interfusion of fact and fancy in this story of New England seventeenth century life." He stated that the prime virtue of The Scarlet Letter is "stylistic: its unity and perfection of tone."⁶⁴

In The Cavalcade of the American Novel Edward Wagenknecht related that The Scarlet Letter has a classical obviousness about it, and that there is no trace of obscurity in any of the characters or their relationships.⁶⁵ Both Wagenknecht and Russell Blankenship agreed that the simplest elements of the story are placed in a series of tableaux which correspond roughly to an act of drama. The feelings of remorse, sorrow, and despair are so "skillfully woven into the story that it becomes a lasting work of art."⁶⁶

A critic writing for the American Literature magazine in 1955 remarked that the interlocking structural detail which Hawthorne chose as a suitable vehicle for the theme of The Scarlet Letter is the most convincing evidence that the reader possesses of Hawthorne's artistic

⁶¹Quinn, p. 187.

⁶²Mark Van Doren, The American Novel (New York, 1926), p. 88.

⁶³John Macy, The Spirit of American Literature (New York, 1913), p. 86.

⁶⁴Quinn, p. 425.

⁶⁵Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 46.

⁶⁶Blankenship, p. 371.

genius, as a writer of novels; "but it is even more important to see that Hawthorne deliberately chose his complex method as the most effective way in which he could communicate to others his vision of life."⁶⁷

In 1955, Hyatt H. Waggoner contributed a new evaluation of Hawthorne. In this perceptive evaluation, Waggoner made a close revealing study of the novelist's life, his writings and the artistic problems of Hawthorne's entire career. This study is of major significance to the whole evaluation of Hawthorne the man and artist. Waggoner declared that The Scarlet Letter, one of Hawthorne's most widely read and admired novels, has inspired the most inconclusive debate about its meaning. He concluded that if The Scarlet Letter is an allegory at all, it cannot be an allegory of the older type with clear-cut abstractions. If it were, there would not be so much disagreement about its meaning. "It is rather a work of symbolism which Hawthorne made his own in the best of his tales."⁶⁸

Waggoner stated that:

The cemetery, the prison, and the rose, with their associated values and the extensions of suggestion given them by the image patterns that intersect them, as the ugliest weeds are later discovered growing out of graves, suggest a symbolic pattern within which nearly everything that is most important in the novel may be placed.⁶⁹

. . . The clearest tones in the book are the black of the prison and the weeds and the grave, and the redness of the letter and the suggesting of moral and natural evil and natural goodness, but not moral goodness.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Hugh W. MacLeon, "Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter: The Dark Problem of This Life," American Literature, XXVII (March, 1955), 12.

⁶⁸ Hyatt H. Waggoner, Hawthorne, A Critical Study (Cambridge, 1955), p. 119.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

The Scarlet Letter is, as Hawthorne stated, a dark tale, but its mesh of good and evil are not equally strong in all its parts. Hawthorne was right in not wanting to be judged by the book, but he too must have thought that it was his best book.⁷¹

The critics have varied in their opinion of the reality of the personages of The Scarlet Letter. The majority of the twentieth century critics have also objected to Hawthorne's constant use of unrelieved gloom. The major point upon which they agree is the literary merit of the stylistic virtues of The Scarlet Letter which make it a great American classic and masterpiece.

⁷¹Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

TRENDS IN THE REPUTATION OF THE SCARLET LETTER

Like all great books, The Scarlet Letter has continually stimulated criticism. With the exception of the period during 1864-1890 when most of the attention given to The Scarlet Letter was by the English, the novel has been accepted in most literary circles with few reservations and has been considered an immortal American classic. There was a renewed interest in The Scarlet Letter in the late nineteen-twenties, and this interest has continued to grow until there appears to be a greater Hawthorne revival at the present than there was in 1898 when Henry James drew so much attention to him by the publication of a small book entitled Nathaniel Hawthorne, which includes a pertinent and critical analysis of The Scarlet Letter and an unbiased estimate of its value. In the past twenty years Hawthorne's works have been included in more anthologies of literature and The Scarlet Letter has been rated as one of the outstanding classics in American literature.

As Russell Blankenship points out, The Scarlet Letter cannot be compared satisfactorily with such novels as Les Miserables, Vanity Fair, The Return of the Native or Lord Jim, because they encompass much greater segments of life in their subject matter. He says that it should be compared with a story that captures some type of mood and uses only a short space to embody that mood.¹ It belongs with masterpieces

¹Russell Blankenship, American Literature (New York, 1949), p. 376.

such as the tales of Poe, Hardy's Under the Greenwood Tree, Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome and some of Hawthorne's own short stories.² George E. Woodberry agrees that there is nothing in method or in perception in The Scarlet Letter that cannot be found in Hawthorne's best short stories. Woodberry maintains that that which distinguishes it is the "union of art and intuition as they had grown up in Hawthorne's practice and had developed a power to penetrate more deeply into life."³

George Snell stated that when The Scarlet Letter is placed beside some of its American contemporaries such as the Deer-slayer, it becomes a literary masterpiece. Snell says that no book which appeared by the middle of the century in America, except Moby Dick, could be compared with The Scarlet Letter.⁴

Criticisms of The Scarlet Letter in the twentieth century have not greatly changed from those of the nineteenth century. The main difference in the criticism now is that the theme has come to be recognized as timeless and universal. However, the novel has lost some of its prestige in the literary world because of the other books that have been written on the same theme which objectify it with more realism. Some of the present-day critics declare that Hawthorne's characterization is superficial and that his characters are too apparently used as instruments to carry out his allegorical theme. He is still criticized for his lack of humor to relieve the gloom of the story. But both nineteenth

²Ibid.

³George E. Woodberry, Nathaniel Hawthorne as quoted in the Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, p. 189.

⁴George Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction (New York, 1947), p. 123.

and twentieth century critics agree that The Scarlet Letter is a deliberate construction of art, and they praise it very highly for its stylistic qualities. Russell Blankenship declared that "even though the book is short, the passage of years has not dimmed its artistry" and that it stands "secure" in its place in American fiction.⁵

With the exception of the period from 1864-1890, the reputation of The Scarlet Letter in America has not fluctuated a great deal since its first publication. Unlike Herman Melville's Moby Dick, which received a favorable reputation at first publication, was obscure for many years, and then revived again in the twentieth century, The Scarlet Letter has held to approximately the same level and will continue to be recognized as one of America's great classics. Perhaps this idea can be better expressed in these words contributed by Benjamin de Cesseres to a symposium celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Hawthorne's birth:

Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale . . . shall outlive in shadowy immortality the flesh and blood beings that mimic their ways here below, and the turrets and spires of our civilization shall long be gangrened in the mids of oblivion when the shadow-makers that have gone shall still with potent red smite the souls of generations unborn, and from them as from us, shall burst the fountains of exalted wonder.⁶

⁵Blankenship, p. 376.

⁶"Hawthorne, A Century After His Birth," Review of Reviews, XXX (July, 1904), 233.

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