



The Portrait of The Artist in The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract: The Scarlet Letter is Nathaniel Hawthorne's profoundest book, in that it brings to bear itself upon some of his deepest preoccupations such as his conception of evil in human affairs, which is related to an associated idea of the self versus society, which in its turn, leads to the idea of the lonely man as well as to the issue of the position of the artist in his society. Indeed, The Scarlet Letter is, among other things, a symbolic fable of the artist in his relation to his environment—a theme which prefigures Henry James, especially the Henry James of the Biography of Hawthorne in the English Men of Letters Series. As a matter of fact, Hawthorne returned to the theme of the artist and his society again and again in his writings, and although his most outstanding essay on this subject is in his short story, “The Artist of the Beautiful”, the theme re-appears in his longer works too—in The House of Seven Gables (in the figure of the daguerro-typist Hollingworth), in The Blithedale Romance (through the characterization of the poetic-idealistic Coverdale), in The Marble Faun (in the persons of Kenyon, the American sculptor, and Hilda, the American painter).

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Each of the three main characters of The Scarlet Letter is, thus, an artist figure. Hence, Hester Prynne, who commences her climb back into social respectability through her needle-work and embroidery (her form or “art”) is an artist of sorts. Similarly, Arthur Dimmesdale, who commences his climb back into spiritual regeneration through his tongue-of-flame, i.e. his apparently miraculously achieved eloquence, is an aural artist, who, like the Shelleyan West Wind (in that poet's “Ode to the West Wind”) acquires magical power of persuasion over his

congregation. Likewise, Roger Chillingworth, with his preternatural sympathy with a sinner and his clairvoyance, and with his presentation as a stoop-shouldered figure wending his way through fields of herbs, is an artist too. He resembles more the medieval artist's conception of the necromancer and the alchemist, a sinister form of the artist symbolizing Erring Reason or Spiritual Pride in the mind of the medieval artist, a theme which comes to a consummation in the portrait of Johannes Faust in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Thus, Chillingworth is less the modern scientist, and more the conventional mountebank of Marlowe's, Ben Jonson's, and Thomas Greene's plays, as if only to emphasize Hawthorne's debt to the allegory-morality play tradition in English literature

It has been suggested that Hester Prynne is the symbol of Heart, Arthur Dimmesdale of the Soul or the Spirit, and Roger Chillingworth of the Intellect in *The Scarlet Letter*. It may be suggested, with the same amount of plausibility, that Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth are three different aspects of the artist in Hawthorne's conception. Thus, Hester Prynne is the decorative artist who finds, through her "art", the means to readjust herself (even if only partially) in her society. Her role as an artist subtly shades into her role as a Sister of Mercy within the scheme of the *Scarlet Letter*, as if Hawthorne was deliberately blurring the aesthetic and the ethical dimensions in his book to suggest that her art could solve people's miseries and pain. On the other hand, Dimmesdale is the aural artist, the artist of the spoken word, a Rhetor. Through his subjective sense of sin and damnation, he acquires his pentecostal power of speech, which springs out of his identification with the sinners of the world (conversely, Hester, during her period of social accommodation, acquires a preternatural sympathy with the concealed sinners around her- a power much like Roger Chillingworth's-but she never exploits it, as Chillingworth hatefully does). Arthur, in his turn, salves the spiritual wounds of his congregation through his newly acquired sympathy with human fallibility. Thus, both Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale are the artists of good works-their actions as artists per se have a therapeutic effect upon their society. At the same time, Nathaniel Hawthorne seems to imply in the book that both Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale may have acquired their respective forms of art without being under the pressure of their respective senses of transgression and sin. This interpretation of the tale seems to insinuate, in its turn, the conception of the Fortunate Fall (*Felix Culpa*) which had preoccupied most the logicians of Europe in the Middle Ages as well as Hawthorne's contemporaries like Horace Bushnell and Henry James, Sr. in America. In a way, the conception of the Fortunate Fall is, in itself, the converse of Calvinism, for, whereas

Calvinism seems to derive a pessimistic conclusion from Man's innate depravity, the theory of a Felix Culpa accepts, indeed, even seems to rejoice, in man's eternal sinfulness. Indeed, this fruitful tension between these two theological conceptions forms the very heart of Hawthorne's brilliant book. As against these two characters in the book, Roger Chillingworth (presented as an outlaw in his very first moment in the book, when he is seen standing next to a Red Indian, who was considered by the Puritans to be outside the pales of human morality and reason) is the bad artist who lives in total isolation and batters upon the suffering humanity (as symbolized in Dimmesdale) rather than contributing to the alleviation of human misery and sorrow. In other words, he has "violated the sanctity of the human heart in the coldness of his heart", as Hester and Dimmesdale, in their unusual roles as the spokesmen of the Hawthornean morality, put it in "The Forest Scene". As against the prying inquisitiveness of Chillingworth (who is the literary forerunner of Henry James' Gilbert Osmond in the Portrait of a Lady), who dissevers the Hawthornean "magnetic chain of humanity". Hester Prynne's and Arthur Dimmesdale's sin "had a consecration of its own", in that their illicit relationship had, at least a touch of human frailty and fallibility to it.

Hawthorne, then, seems to make social usefulness a criterion of art (was this, perhaps, a vestige of his Puritan heritage, which had to emphasize the good works to justify an apparently "useless" human product like art?). This emerges even more clearly in the subliminal nexus between the introductory sketch, "The Custom House", and the tale. Indeed, Hawthorne's guilt-complex in the context of the martial and judicial achievements of his Puritan forebears that he reports in the sketch is the single outstanding theme of the "introductory" Sketch. Much like the great modern Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats in his "Pardon, Old Fathers.." Hawthorne's guilty feelings in "The Custom House" are aroused by the fact that art is the most "useless" of social occupations (to paraphrase Oscar Wilde). Indeed, he suggests that his only claim to fame might rest upon his work as the Chronicler of the Town Pump House of Salem, but also invests their lives with historical significance—a supreme irony in itself) is altogether another matter. The hub of the matter is that the Artist, for Hawthorne, is responsible to his society.

Thus, both the "introductory" sketch, "The Custom House", and The Scarlet Letter, seem to be centrally preoccupied with the ethico-moral and aesthetic considerations that Hawthorne's mind is preoccupied with in his conception of the ideal artist. The Scarlet Letter may, hence, be also read as the Hawthornean portrait of the Artist as a Socially Responsible

Person. It is this particular aesthetic-ethical aspect of Nathaniel Hawthorne more than any other that makes him the literary forerunner of Henry James, the Anglo-American writer of novels like *Roderick Hudson*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Tragic Muse*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Golden Bowl* and other studies of the vicissitudes of the artistic temperament, or what Adeline Tuner, in her brilliant essay on James, has called it, *The Jamesian Museum World*.

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