Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

The book The Scarlet Letter is all about symbolism. People and

objects are symbolic of events and thoughts. Throughout the course of the

book, Nathaniel Hawthorne uses Hester, Pearl, and Arthur Dimmesdale to

signify Puritanic and Romantic philosophies.

Hester Prynne, through the eyes of the Puritans, is an extreme

sinner; she has gone against the Puritan ways, committing adultery. For

this irrevocably harsh sin, she must wear a symbol of shame for the rest

of her life. However, the Romantic philosophies of Hawthorne put down the

Puritanic beliefs. She is a beautiful, young woman who has sinned, but is

forgiven. Hawthorne portrays Hester as “divine maternity” and she can do

no wrong. Not only Hester, but the physical scarlet letter, a Puritanical

sign of disownment, is shown through the author’s tone and diction as a

beautiful, gold and colorful piece.

Pearl, Hester’s child, is portrayed Puritanically, as a child of

sin who should be treated as such, ugly, evil, and shamed. The reader

more evidently notices that Hawthorne carefully, and sometimes not subtly

at all, places Pearl above the rest. She wears colorful clothes, is

extremely smart, pretty, and nice. More often than not, she shows her

intelligence and free thought, a trait of the Romantics. One of Pearl’s

favorite activities is playing with flowers and trees. (The reader will

recall that anything affiliated with the forest was evil to Puritans. To

Hawthorne, however, the forest was beautiful and natural.) “And she was

gentler here [the forest] than in the grassy- margined streets of the

settlement, or in her mother’s cottage. The flowers appeared to know it”

(194) Pearl fit in with natural things. Also, Pearl is always

effervescent and joyous, which is definitely a negative to the Puritans.

Pearl is a virtual shouting match between the Puritanical views and the

Romantic ways.

To most, but especially the Puritans, one of the most important

members of a community is the religious leader; Arthur Dimmesdale is no

exception. He was held above the rest, and this is proven in one of the

first scenes of the book. As Hester is above the townspeople on a

scaffold, Dimmesdale, Governor Wilson, and others are still above her.

But, as the reader soon discovers, Arthur Dimmesdale is his own worst

enemy. He hates himself and must physically inflict pain upon himself.

“He thus typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but

could not purify, himself” to never forget what he has done (141). To

Dimmesdale, it is bad that Hester is shown publicly as a sinner, but

people forget that. What is far worse than public shame is Dimmesdale’s

own cruel inner shame. Knowing what only he and Hester know, the secret

eats away at every fiber of Dimmesdale’s being. As the Puritans hold up

Dimmesdale, the Romantics level him as a human.

The Scarlet Letter is a myriad of allegorical theories and

philosophies. Ranging from Puritanic to Romantic, Nathaniel Hawthorne

embodies his ideas to stress his Romantic philosophies through Pearl,

Hester, and Dimmesdale throughout all of this.