Symbolism In Hawthorne?S “The Scarlet Letter” Essay, Research Paper

Hawthorne?s The Scarlet Letter is considered the first symbolic novel in American Literature. His use of symbolism in the novel presents a complex view of sin and its effects. Utilizing characters, colors, settings, and objects Hawthorne?s extended metaphors shape and develop throughout the plot. Three main symbols used in expressing Hawthorne?s message are the forest, the use of sunlight and shadows, and the use of colors.

The use of colors in The Scarlet Letter is one of the more obvious symbols in the plot. Hawthorne openly states the meanings in some instances. The color black is the color of sin and the devil. Black is the color cast in shadows, the color that Chillingworth, a man of pure evil, is referred to by, and the color worn by Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale wears black because he is a greater sinner for not openly accepting his original sin. Chillingworth is known as the “black man,” as stated by Pearl, because he possesses the greatest sin possible. The title of the “black man” is also refers to the devil himself. Hester states this to Pearl in regard to her sin. Darkness is commonly known as a negative connotation and Hawthorne uses it extensively. The color red is the symbol of honesty and truth. Pearl is always wearing red because she, although is the product of sin, is not a sinner herself. She is constantly honest and truthful. The scarlet letter is in fact a symbol of truthfulness. The letter A is worn in the acceptance and repentance of sin and is therefore a symbol of truth. Heste wears the color gray as a symbol of being partially honest. Hester has accepted her sin of adultery but still possesses sin in the form of dishonesty towards Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. Until her opening up to Dimmesdale and the village she will not be totally ridden of her sin. Hawthorne uses color to express that hiding truth makes one uglier and will cause more pain with time.

Hawthorne uses sunshine to symbolize purity, honesty, and hope and shadows to symbolize sin. Pearl is constantly in the sunlight. Her honesty makes her pure and protects her from sin. Hester is seen in the shadows because she is burdened by the scarlet letter and her continuing sin of dishonesty. An example is when Hester and Pearl are walking through the forest when a dark cloud came over the sky and Pearl said, “Mother?the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom”. Pearl knows that there is a cause for this contrast in light but she does not know the meaning of it. The sun fears the “A” and avoids Hester for possessing the impurity of it. Hawthorne symbolizes sunshine best in the chapter appropriately titled, “A Flood of Sunshine.” Hester declares that Dimmesdale will not have to leave alone, and she takes off her bonnet and throws down the scarlet letter. “All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth bust the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf.” With the release of sin the whole forest is washed in the sun?s rays. Hester and Pearl are not the only characters where sunlight or the absence of is used. Very early in the plot the physician is sent to examine Hester and Pearl in the prison. This scene is a very dark one because Chillingworth is in the act of revenge. In the scenes at the house of Dimmesdale and himself he commits the sin of revenge. These scenes are also described as dark ones. Hawthorne?s message in the symbolism of light and darkness infers that with sin one will be rarely seen in a pleasant setting. The ugly sinner will be broadcasted with his surrounding darkness.

The forest is a symbol of freedom from society and Puritan beliefs. Hester and Dimmesdale seek refuge in the forest to explore their inner thoughts. In the forest Hester brings out many hidden emotions, Hester shows her love for Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is shocked and tries to hush Hester but realizes that he is in the safety of the forest and no one else may hear them. The act of Hester speaking to Dimmesdale openly in their society is unheard of. In the forest they may feel free to do as they wish and not have to worry about any one else knowing. In the forest all of these cares from normal life are thrown away. When Dimmesdale asks Hester for help he shows that he thinks of her as an equal. That may be one of the reasons Puritan society would not allow such displays of emotion because the man was supposed superior. Hester replies passionately with her plea to him as to not give up. “Begin all new! Preach! Write! Act! Do anything save to lie down and die!” The forest brings out the truth of its occupants. Hester even uses the forest to tell Pearl of how she came about the scarlet letter. “Wilt thou let me be at peace, once I tell thee.” Hawthorne sends the message that somewhere somehow there will always be a place where the truth will come forward.

In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne creates the first use of symbolism in American Literature. In this symbolism he conveys his message to be truthful in all circumstances. He uses the characters, surroundings, and colors to accomplish this task. In doing so he presents a complex few of sin and its effects on his characters in a piece of work called The Scarlet Letter.