



The Scarlet Letter & the House of the Seven Gables

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Considered a masterpiece of American literature and a classic moral study, *The Scarlet Letter* is set in Puritan Boston. Hester Prynne, a young woman married to a much older man, has arrived in New England before him and has not heard from him for many months. He is presumed lost at sea. She bears an illegitimate child and is sentenced to wear a red A as a badge of shame. By the end of the ensuing drama, it is her husband who is morally degraded, and her lover who is broken by his own sense of guilt. A time-worn mansion in Salem is the setting of *The House of the Seven Gables*, the story of a distinguished but troubled New England family -- the Pyncheons. A haunting, centuries-old curse, a forceful probing of national and personal guilt, a romance between the young heroine and an attractive stranger -- all intertwine in this work that Henry James declared "the closest approach we are likely to have to the Great American Novel." The text of The Toby Press edition is based on the first editions of these works, published in 1850 and 1851 respectively, and includes Hawthorne's preface to the second edition of *The Scarlet Letter*. It also features an introductory essay and chronology by Professor Michael J. Kramer, chair of the English department at Bar Ilan University.

The Scarlet Letter & the House of the Seven Gables Details

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From Reader Review The Scarlet Letter & the House of the Seven Gables for online ebook

Gretchen says

The House of Seven Gables - Okay but dry.

Lynnette says

This book will teach you what language used to be. So much more depth of character and description from what we see in today's writing.

Kc says

In C.S. Lewis's book *The Screwtape Letters*, the demon Uncle Screwtape says of Puritanism, "the value we have given to that word [Puritanism] is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years. By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life." Could Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* have been the beginning of this devaluing of all things Puritan? Let me say at the onset that I love this book. It's beautiful prose and characters clearly earn it a place in the cannon of American Literature. But reading it as an adult, I wonder if Hawthorne's characterization of the Puritans in early New England is completely fair. In my life I have listened to hundreds of anti-Mormons describe my religion and culture in ways that are completely unrecognizable to me from my own experience. Some of the worst misrepresentations of Mormonism come from people who "grew up Mormon," or whose ancestors were leaders in the church. Hawthorne, the great-great grandson of the judge at the Salem Witch Trials, may well have been to Puritanism what Fawn Brodie was to Mormonism - both describe the worst aspects of the religions they rejected and present it as the norm. When I first read *The Scarlet Letter* as a teenager I took it for granted that the description of the hypocritical, judgmental and unforgiving Puritans was accurate. Having spent the last decade reading "experts on Mormonism", who have never met me, describe me as bigoted, ignorant, self-righteous, and sexist, I'm ready to entertain the possibility that my pilgrim forefathers were not as bad as Hawthorne describes them. This book may have been the first American villainization of the pious, but it's still felt today. (Now I can celebrate Thanksgiving next month without feeling guilty.)

Sara Habein says

(I only read the introductory chapters from the editor and *The House of the Seven Gables*, so that is what my rating is based on. I've read *The Scarlet Letter*, and I didn't like it, but that was over ten years ago and I was a teenager, so I'm not sure what my assessment would be today.)

Robert L. says

I'm sure there are erudite reviews of this book on this page. Mine won't be. I think I'm fascinated by the decisions men make vis-a-vis the divinely ordered events of our lives. What is it in our hearts and minds that leads us in one direction or another? Hawthorne probes these things. He's masterful with the English vocabulary. The stories are told with stoutness, yet with an undercurrent of personal reflection and pensiveness.

Dona says

Had never read The House of the Seven Gables. I think it would have made a good sitcom or short HBO series. Many people think of Hawthorne as an old and moldy, but I think his insights and descriptions are timeless.

Christopher Richardson says

I listened to a recording of the book being read as I traveled to Denver daily to teach. Boy, it took a while getting to the root and plot of the story, but I guess the plot wasn't really the point. Hawthorne has such a beautiful way with words. It was the descriptions of the people and places, the discussion of human nature and just the beauty of the writing that was most enjoyable. Without giving away any plot points, it was a lot of fun to be in on the "secret" of what was happening and then have what was going on drawn out for such a long time. Hawthorne's vigil with Judge Pyncheon through the day and the night was almost to the point of being both laugh-out-loud funny and pretty creepy and macabre!! Definitely worth the work through the entire novel to see the joy of the family at the end!

Jacques Coulardeau says

This novel has become more than a classic. It is a myth, a cult. To cover this romance properly we would have to explore so many levels and details that thousands of pages would not be enough. I will concentrate on the child, Pearl, and then widen the discourse to the novel's historical value.

We must keep in mind that the twelve gates of the messianic Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation are twelve pearls in a wall of jasper on twelve precious gem foundations:

18 And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. 19 And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; 20 The fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolyte; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. (King James Bible, Book of Revelation 21:18-21, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/...>, accessed December 29, 2016)

Hence the child is the gate to this messianic Jerusalem that the Puritans pretended they were building in New England. Note the great pretention of these Puritans since this Jerusalem of the future has to be Messianic, has to be revealed by the Messiah, by Jesus, after his Second Coming and after the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment on Doomsday. This gives the fundamental meaning of the child in the book: She is a direct

criticism of any puritan, moralistic, fundamentalist we would say today, approach of religion. Especially since this Pearl will disappear at the end of the book and will exist somewhere else that is not mentioned but we understand is England since Roger Chillingworth gave her land in America and in England. Anyway Boston was certainly not the Messianic Jerusalem the Puritans had in mind. And that rejection is based on the blasphemous character of this pretention. They made themselves a direct embodiment of Jesus Christ and God. They pretended they were Jesus Christ and God.

This is fundamental. The book was published in 1850 and when it appeared it was absolutely clear that there was no separation between the state and the church in the USA. There was no separation between the state and religion and this is still true. But at the time there was no separation of the state and the church, not one particular denominational church but the church in general: any one could be a member of the church of their choice, well within the limits of the area where they were living, residing and working, but the state was a direct emanation of the church in general, an abstract omni-denominational church that excluded the Jews and the Catholics. The exclusion of the Muslims was of course “natural.” The end of the book is typical: the new governor on Election Day had to be instated by a sermon by the preacher and minister of the (only) local church. We must understand clearly that this story may be situated one century before or more, hence under English rule, but it is “revealed” to the public in 1850 and it is in phase with that public. That’s where the USA are coming from and how they accepted to be depicted in 1850.

The second element is that Pearl is seen as unchristian because she is born out of “fornication”, “adultery”, though in fact out of passion and love. This is clearly shown by the rejection this Pearl is forced to suffer along with her mother, as if this Pearl that should open onto the Messianic Jerusalem and the trees of life that bear twelve crops of fruit a year and whose leaves are the cure for the nations (which may imply all nations, at least all Christian nations in their diversity):

2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: 4 And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. . (King James Bible, Book of Revelation 22:2-4, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/...>, accessed December 29, 2016)

But this Boston could not be seen as such a Messianic Jerusalem since it was opening on the wilderness, or at best the ocean since this Pearl gate lived on a peninsula. There is no cure in Boston for those who are not perfect according to the decrees of the Puritans. There is no forgiveness, no tolerance, no freedom either there. One essential Christian value is missing and it is love. This story is a love story in Puritan garb or under Puritan duress. It is the glorification of love that is stronger than anything else, than any punishment, any estrangement, any rejection. Note, and it is only hinted at a few times, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale did not commit any sin against Roger Chillingworth since he had disappeared and had been “captured” by Indians and it was two years before he reappeared on Hester Prynne’s public exposition on the scaffold. The sin is in the fact they did not respect the proper rules like making their love public and sanctified by some marital rite. But love it is and it is clearly explained during the meeting of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in the forest when they decide to go away from Boston.

It is important here to understand a common trick of the 19th century and the play on names.

Chillingworth is simple: he is bringing the chill of dying and death. He is worth the chilling experience of mental torture. Dimmesdale is also simple since he is a dale of dimmer existence and things, the dale of unpublicized love, the dale of secret penance and punishment. But Hester Prynne is quite another story.

We could be satisfied with the Biblical Book Esther and the Jewish character during the Babylonian exile who became queen and saved the Jewish people. She thus becomes the savior of the community of Boston,

of the New Jerusalem, of the Puritans themselves. But that's not enough. Hester comes from Oistir in Welsh and Irish tradition and has a Germanic origin where it is connected with a beech tree, and is a reduced Anglicized form of a Gaelic word, Ó hOistir 'descendant of Oistir.'

This last element is complicated in Irish tradition: “** spl Ostuarii, doorkeeper to the monastery of Iona. The first of the family came over from Ireland with "Colum Cille," but causing the displeasure of that saint, he invoked a curse on him, by which it was decreed that never more than five of his clan should exist at the same time. Accordingly, when a sixth was born one of the five was to look for death, which always happened until the race was extinguished. A female who died about the middle of the 18th. century, in Iona, was the last person who could trace a lineage to the doorkeepers of this monastery.”

<http://www.cairnwater.co.uk/gaelicdic...>, accessed December 29, 2016. Hester then would represent the end of an exclusion, the final redemption beyond the curse. Hence the Puritan tradition would be identified as a curse.

If we go back to the “beech” another connection has to be developed in the runic tradition, the runes of Germanic and Scandinavian origin vastly present in the Anglo-Saxon world, hence in the English heritage. Two runes refer to a beech tree, both meaning black. “Nauthiz” carries a bunch of key concepts: “Need, resistance, constraint, conflict, drama, effort, necessity, urgency, hard work, need-fire, life lessons, creative friction, distress, force of growth, the consequence of past action, short term pain for long term gain.” (<http://runesecrets.com/rune-meanings/...>, accessed December 29, 2016) “Peorth” carries a very dense meaning. It is the “rune of fate and the unmanifest. Rune of probability and the role of luck in the evolutionary process of the all things. Universe at play.” (<http://runesecrets.com/rune-meanings/...>, accessed December 29, 2016) This meaning gives Hester a tremendous power in the story. She is fate and she is going to bring down the Puritan dictatorship in the field of love, mental and sentimental freedom, and through her own daughter she will bring salvation, at least escape.

And her surname “Prynne” is also meaningful. The origin is Norman and the name was introduced by the Normans after Hastings ‘1066). “‘Prin’ is a ‘descendant’ of the Latin ‘primus’ meaning ‘first’ and it was given as a baptismal name to the first born male child of a family. Some learned academics of the 20th century have suggested that the name may be a nickname for one with ‘lordly airs’, but this seems unlikely. The similarity with the surnames ‘Prince’ (originally the French ‘prins’), and ‘Prime’, which is directly from ‘primus’ cannot be avoided.” (<http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Pryn...>, accessed December 29, 2016) Thus she is the person of first importance who is going to lead this Puritan settlement to salvation.

To go back to Pearl, she is also the symbol of what must go along with forgiveness and love, which is repentance, but not the repentance that is imposed as a punishment onto the “sinner”, but the repentance that comes from the soul, from God, from the heart. The book clearly shows that public – though here imposed – repentance is torture but a bearable torture that strengthens the victim of the punishment, whereas secret repentance is an unbearable self-inflicted torture that gnaws at the heart, the soul, and the body of the person who is refused the possibility of public repentance. At the same time the book hints at the possibility that Roger Chillingworth used his knowledge in plants to slowly poison Arthur Dimmesdale to satisfy his own vengeance.

And this is because there is no forgiveness in this society, no possibility for the sinner, no matter who he is and what position he holds, to be forgiven if he repairs the harm he has done, in this case if he marries the mother, since the husband of this mother had disappeared two years before and re-appear under another name. Pearl becomes the symbol of this forgiveness at the very end of the novel, the being who is willing to forgive publicly in front of those who had refused to forgive for more than seven years. That desire of hers to be held by the Minister in front of everyone, and her desire to hold the Minister in front of everyone and eventually to kiss him and let him kiss her was a constant demand from her to her mother.

In other words, Pearl becomes the signpost on the road to love and also some kind of angel or even archangel

who shows the way to human salvation, and God's salvation is always on the side of repentance, reparation, forgiveness and love, never on the side of permanent or irreversible human punishment. In fact, the only judge is God, the only one who has the power to judge, what's more to try, is God, and God has entrusted humanity with the mission to enable sinners to repent and be forgiven, not to punish, or even torture or execute. This religious meaning is absolutely obvious all along and can only be the conclusion at the end. If Hester comes back to Boston it is to prove that the redemption has worked, that they have learned how to forgive the sins of others. Note it is never said or hinted that by forgiving the sins of others you open the possibility of your own sins to be forgiven by the same others. This egocentric way of forgiving is not Christian and is not envisaged in this book.

Pearl is thus the symbol of an open reading of the Gospels and in a way the signpost on the road to some better future for human beings on earth. This better future is definitely expressed by the post mortem contrition and repentance of Hester's first husband who adopts Pearl as his heiress, hence his own child. His repentance comes after seven years of vengeance, but it does come, and he is the only one to repent among the hostile people in Boston. Though the lack of hostility against Hester after her return seems to indicate the change has occurred, and Hester is there to remind everyone of the "episode" since she will be wearing her Scarlet Letter till death then does not part, in fact unites them forever.

If thus the sinners' child, Pearl, is redeemed at the end of the book and escapes the punishing Puritans, it is because she represents light, sunshine, God's illumination. She is the star that should lead us on the way to the future on earth and beyond: forgiveness and love, and we all must respect love as a divine and sacred value that is stronger than any law, rule, habit or custom, and the lack if not the refusal of respect for love is the direst and ugliest sin a human being, a creature of God can commit.

Hawthorne is the author that illuminates best the worst gothic context and produces a shiny romance with the darkest and bleakest material. And this romance becomes the testimony that in the middle of the 19th century a change was taking place in the USA: the recognition of the freedom to love not as a simple Christian obligation but as a human dimension. And this emphasis shows a debate at the time not only on love and society but on the concept of God himself.

The concept of God is ever present but never really expressed and specified in words. Not one single sermon by Arthur Dimmesdale is ever given. The final Election Sermon is only indirectly evoked. The concept of God obviously is that of the punishing God of the Puritans founded on the vision of Him we can get in many biblical texts or many Christian or non-Christian documents from the first century CE, after Jesus' death, from the Dead Sea Scrolls for instance. This very strict respect of the Law and its requirements has always survived in Christianity as a dark background for many centuries and then as a reference when Puritanism emerged as a religion per se.

One is pure or one isn't. If one is pure, one must not in any way live with someone who is not pure and if someone is not pure the community of the pure ones (that does not include the non-pure ones who are expelled from the community itself) has to reject him or her, and that rejection must become God's punishment, in no way human but entirely divine. This punishment has to be both public and totally interiorized. And here is one of the most important theme of the novel: Hester can satisfy these two characteristics with the scarlet letter and her interiorization of her « sin ». But her lover who is condemned by her (is it only her or do they agree on that point?) to remain unknown can only be punished inside his own self, hence he can only punish himself.

This excuses the « husband » who will avenge himself on this lover because this « husband » will become the punishing tool used by God, and yet the interiorization of the punishment by the lover himself will enable him to evade and escape the vengeance of this "husband" by making his sin, his contrition and his reparation public on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl, and the "husband" will in the end be frustrated of his vengeance and punished in his turn. Is that God's punishment?

Yet there is another concept of God that is emerging and ever present in the novel. It is the concept of a God of love. Love is threefold in this perspective. It is sensual first and it may lead to sin when it is not controlled and when it breaks a moral rule. Then it is love coming from human reason which may lead to insanity when a social reasonable rule is broken and no repair can be found, and there is no repair except through a social punishment that does not repair anything but is a repayment for the unreasonable fault. Finally, it is also spiritual and in this dimension love becomes Christian because it leads to forgiveness and love for one's enemies and love beyond mistakes and faults.

This love calls for repentance but not for punishment, at least not in the hands of men. Repentance is a great privilege for someone who « sins » but repentance has to be public in order to lead to forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness in society their God is not a really Christian God. If there is no repentance on the side of the “sinner” he or she is not Christian since she or he refuses to be forgiven or he or she makes forgiveness impossible. We can see that Hester in her repentance leads the whole community to forgiving her, whereas Arthur, her lover, not being able to repent publicly, is forced to repent in silence in his own soul without any possible forgiveness from anyone.

If there is no forgiveness there is no salvation possible, there is no Christian solution.

This leads to the ending of this book: Arthur is literally forced to live his repentance as a slow sacrifice in the eyes of God: he has to die to redeem himself, his society, Hester and Pearl, to « crucify » himself on the scaffold with his women at his feet.

But what about Hester who needs in the novel Arthur's sacrifice to be fully redeemed?

And what about Pearl who can only find the strength to kiss her father, hence to forgive him, hence to love him, when the sacrifice comes to its end?

Is Hester vain and selfish in her human love for Arthur by condemning him to suffer in silence?

Is Pearl beyond any Christian definition in her incapability to love her father except when it is too late to save him?

Is the romance a condemnation of puritanism and a vindication of human sensuality and sensitivity as the only way to redeem humanity?

Is the concept of God limited in time and space? And then is the future godless?

These questions that you are free to answer the way you want are showing a tremendous turning point has been reached in American history and probably in human history. But the point that has to be made is that hardly ten years later history will completely put this perspective upside down. Indians are seen as marginal or rejected to the wild forest in this book with the distant and undescribed exception of Apostle Eliot and his Indian converts who live far away from Boston. But slaves are not even mentioned, not even as indentured workers who were common in New England at the time of the story. And history will come back on this emerging love concept with the Civil War and one extra century of segregation and an unspecified number of decades more of PTSS, and we have not reached the end of this long-lasting hatred and un-forgiveness and lack of justice.

The freedom of love is maybe not that simple to develop in any society, human society, meaning a society torn between the two sides of man, or woman as for that, the loving nature of human beings some call libido and the death instinct often articulated on the survival instinct of the human species. But yet it is the first expression of the freedom of love in modern society, and as such it is just as dramatic as Romeo and Juliet, but it is also maybe less tragic. There is hope somewhere in this story, whereas I don't see any in Romeo and

Juliet.

Dr. Jacques COULARDEAU

Sara says

I had read The Scarlet Letter before and loved it. My focus was The House of the Seven Gables. A great tale with themes of the sins of the father being visited onto the children of a family. The house itself, built on the uneasy foundation of bloodshed and dishonesty is seemingly cursed by the wrongdoing of the patriarch of a New England family during the witch hunt, is a great metaphor of the Pyncheon family; itself teetering on its' faulty beginnings. "God will give you blood to drink"- an unforgettable line and brilliant curse, stolen by Hawthorne from the curse spewed by the real victim of the Salem witch hunt, Sarah Goode. No ordinary ghost story, the living characters in this book haunt more than the dead. A bit verbose for my taste, it is nonetheless a great example of American classical literature.

Marva says

even though this was for class, I enjoyed the story.

Kate says

Interesting look into the life of Puritans, but extremely hard to get into. It took my like 6 weeks to finish this book. It had some great written insights like this one:

"It is to the credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates. Hatred, by a gradual and quiet process, will even be transformed to love, unless the change be impeded by a continually new irritation of the original feeling of hostility." (pg. 190)

I say rent the movie, I haven't seen it, but you'd probably get the same effect.

Andy says

I went to Salem in Massachusetts earlier this year when I was in the US and wandered through the House of the Seven Gables, so I've really enjoyed this book just on that score alone - just being able to picture the book and the setting was great.

Michele Hickey says

Excellent!

Vildan Ar?can says

kind of borin? nope, nope it is a masterpiece if we evaluate the time that work was established, American literature suffers for an identity and here we encounter local color and that romance features like mystisity:))))

Mr. Pe Mr. Pe says

this is a great book and i recommend it to everyone
