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“One Accord of Sympathy”: The Relationship Between Narrator, Reader, and Puritans

Conflicting accounts of ambiguous narration in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* have unsurprisingly been a topic of dissent about the narrator’s purpose. Through incomplete and uncertain narrative report, Hawthorne involved his contemporary readers and has continued to involve subsequent readers in a search for truth and understanding that is at once obscure in report and direct in the narrator’s final plea for transparency. Aside from this role as storyteller, the narrator functions to elicit sympathy from readers, directly inviting the audience in the commission to become a compassionate ally to the estranged Hester Prynne as she reenters society. Sharing in heroine Hester’s hardships and public ignominy, readers become outsiders in a harsh Puritan community without sympathetic capabilities. The narrator’s role as rumormonger and gossip, accepting both explanations of a rational contemporary audience and superstitious Puritan community, simultaneously defies Puritan inflexibility and establishes intimacy that includes readers in this community. As both community insiders privy to the narrator’s gossip and sympathetic outsiders connected with Hester, readers must eventually become united with the Puritan community in sympathy. While sympathy distances readers and rumor establishes familiarity and intimacy, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale’s Election Sermon ultimately becomes the rhetorical device of unification that synthesizes the multitude of Puritan society, narrator, and reader in one voice of sympathetic unity.

SYMPATHETIC READERS BECOME OUTSIDERS

The narrator invites reader involvement in “our story” (47) almost immediately, aligning allegiances with Hester by offering the reader a flower from the wild rose-bush outside the prison doors. Readers are extended an invitation to join Hester in the immorality and shame of being an outsider in a Puritan community with strict adherence to unwavering morals: “Finding [the rose-bush] so directly on the threshold of our narrative... we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader” (46). Hawthorne describes the way these wild roses “offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he [goes] in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom” (45). The wild rose-bush is part of nature that can “pity and be kind” (45) to these criminals, while the New England Puritans are portrayed as incapable of sympathy. The vibrant beauty of the flower becomes an explicit symbol of sympathy for prisoners and criminals in contrast to the harsh, grey backdrop of Puritan prison. Through this action of offering, the narrator both takes on a sympathetic mode and extends it to the reader, connecting readers with criminals who are similarly offered flowers when entering and exiting the prison doors. If readers are to accept this fragrant offering, they will enter the prison and cross the threshold into society alongside Hester Prynne as she mounts the scaffold.

Sympathy with criminal sin creates a distinct separation between the reader and Puritan community that the narrator considers void of sympathy. Caught between the force of harsh judgment from the townspeople who consider death an acceptable punishment and Hester’s public shame, reader sympathies incompatible with Puritan ideology force reemergence into society with Hester. Gordon Hutner describes this as a moment of exposure: “The attention that Hawthorne gives to the crowd’s punishing gaze documents a primal moment when secrets are exposed to public examination” (43). Hester’s public scrutiny is described through the

conversation of town gossips whom the narrator negatively deems “self-constituted judges” (49). Stephen Railton aptly refers to these Puritans as an “interpretive community” (484) whose purpose is to teach readers “how not to read *The Scarlet Letter*” (486) through their utter failure to respond to the moral the story represents. In this moment of public examination, Hawthorne exposes both Hester and readers to the communal judgment of Puritan society, reinforcing the opening alliance. Harsh scrutiny increases reader sympathy for Hester as both parties undergo a nightmarish moment of unwanted exposure. Even more dreadful, this scene becomes the reader’s reality, just as Hester realizes it is hers: “[She] assured herself that the infant and the shame were real... these were her realities—all else had vanished!” (55).

The narrator frequently describes a sympathetic type of exposure that connects self-aware sinners within the Puritan community, further associating the term with corrupt unity. Hester feels a fleeting relief when “a human eye” (76) falls upon the letter, but a stinging pain makes her feel as though she has sinned again in these moments. The narrator questions her solitude in sinfulness: “Had Hester sinned alone?” (76). Like the occasional Puritan who shares Hester’s uncommon sense of understanding, the “human eye” of the reader sees and sympathizes with Hester’s brand. Hester believes that this “sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (77) is a function of the scarlet letter, and the narrator questions if this truth would reveal this mark “on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s” (77). This statement provokes readers to begin an internal search for their own hidden sin. Like Hester, Roger Chillingworth and Reverend Dimmesdale both recognize an unusual sympathetic connection with sin. Chillingworth vows that an additional sympathetic sixth sense “will make [him] conscious” (68) of the presence of Hester’s secret lover, and Hester claims that Dimmesdale “hast sympathies which [others] lack” (99). Mistress Hibbins has the ultimate sympathetic detection of sin, able to

“[affirm] a personal connection between... many persons... and the Evil One (204). William Manierre describes the “awakening of the sympathetic response [as]... [the characters’] mutual involvement which establishes a harmony or accord between them.... [with] sin, evil, or wrongdoing” (499). In sympathizing with the adulteress Hester Prynne, readers become part of a mutual involvement in corruption against society that requires an introspective search for iniquity. Because of this implicit association with corruption, sympathy unifies deviants in *The Scarlet Letter* with readers in knowledge and self-awareness of sin.

Hawthorne’s use of sympathy both creates a division between the sympathetic and unsympathetic and unity among those with the same sensibilities. Eliciting sympathy within the Puritan community requires an internal agent who is connected to both deviants and society insiders. Reverend Dimmesdale fills this role as respected minister with secret “sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind... that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs” (123). Dimmesdale is frequently described as an integral part of the community with the power of persuasive speech. The minister’s eloquent appeal to Hester to reveal his own identity as her lover is described with the capability of “[bringing] the listener into one accord of sympathy” (62). Dimmesdale’s rhetoric has the power to bring the community together, and the narrator must similarly elicit unanimity of consciousness among the sympathetic outsiders of the Puritan community and an internal community without sympathy. Before this can be achieved, however, readers must become community insiders. Therein lies the task of *The Scarlet Letter*—to bring both the Puritan community and contemporary audience into sympathetic harmony with Hester’s ignominy, requiring not only readers’ understanding of Hester, but also an understanding and awareness of the superstitious Puritanical beliefs.

READERS AS INTERPRETORS BECOME INSIDERS

While the rhetorical device of sympathy makes readers outsiders in the Puritan community, ambiguity creates an active reader that becomes a central part of the community's gossip and speculation. The narrator connects sympathetic readers with the internal Puritan community by providing incomplete, ambiguous, and frequently supernatural explanations that reduce reader knowledge, relaying events the same way Puritans would have understood them. Superstitions are lent some level of potential credibility, reflecting explanations that Puritan New England would have considered viable even if these possibilities were implausible to Hawthorne's contemporaries. Mary Gosselink de Jong describes this dialogic interplay between narrator and reader as co-interpretation: "Describing the boundaries of what can be known, the narrator [addresses]—and so attempt[s] to create—a reader who joins [him/her] in searching for understanding" (360).

Throughout this search for understanding, secrets are manipulated to establish intimacy with readers. Matei Calinescu describes secrecy as a "significant link in the chain of communication, temporarily or permanently occulted by the decision of an individual or group" (444). The intentionality behind the disclosure and withholding of information, according to Calinescu, creates both "insiders" and "outsiders" (444). Readers are "made privy to certain significant events that have a nonpublic, personal, secret dimension" (Calinescu 448) and easily become the topic of gossip. This information is then skillfully concealed, revealed, or modified to make readers an active part of the prediction process about the meaning of this information as pieces of the truth are exposed or, rather, remain hidden. Rumor and gossip, according to Scott Harshbarger, establish social intimacy as a collective effort to make sense of events and create an authentic rhetorical context in which hysteria often leads to supernatural explanations. The

narrator, according to Harshbarger, functions as a gossip “[who] tells his story by telling stories” (36). Reading about various—and often conflicting—reports, the reader assumes a “willingness to suspend disbelief, appropriate to the reception of rumor” (Harshbarger 37). Through this rhetorical technique of secrecy and disclosure, the narrator remains an anonymous authority, while establishing a social intimacy with the reader. Hawthorne’s technique of narrative report transforms readers into insiders.

Though Hester’s ignominy is revealed directly, the truth of Pearl’s father, the name of Chillingworth, and the actual meaning of the scarlet letter itself remain shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. When Hester refuses to reveal the identity of Pearl’s father to Roger Chillingworth, her former husband declares that “there are few things... hidden from a man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery” (68). This investigation, initially undertaken “with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of truth” (113), results in an obsession and fascination that possesses Chillingworth. His madness over time becomes “eternal alienation from the Good and True” (165). Hawthorne uses Chillingworth’s downfall as instruction for readers to seek truth in *The Scarlet Letter*, while not obsessing over an unknown solution to these mysteries. Readers are instructed to play an active role in modifying truth as information is revealed, while entertaining a willingness to suspend the need for absolute truths.

The narrator creates an atmosphere of uncertainty by offering both rational and superstitious perspectives to help the reader understand rationale considered reasonable for a distant Puritan community. Elaine Tuttle Hansen describes the narrative presentation of a dual perspective: “Among several possibilities of various phenomena, [the narrator] will cautiously offer some sort of supernatural view, “not altogether” fact, “yet almost so” (147). According to Hansen, the narrator frequently uses the “whether.... or” structure to offer a rational option and

supernatural alternative supported by the authority of an internal witness, while not offering readers the explicit truth of either statement (149). For example, Chillingworth's timely arrival in the community to care for the ill minister "had an aspect of mystery, which was easily heightened to the miraculous" (105). The narrator proceeds to plant questions in the readers' mind about why a learned physician had come to Boston and responds to these questions with rumor "that Heaven had wrought an absolute miracle by transporting [Chillingworth].... Through the air and [set] him down at the door of Mr. Dimmesdale's study!" (105). This providential and miraculous explanation may have seemed logical to faithful Puritans but outlandish to Hawthorne's contemporaries. Despite this, the narrator gives some credibility to the community's explanation by saying that some "very sensible people" were willing to consider the idea as an explanation for Chillingworth's arrival. Hansen considers that the "evidence presented... perhaps outweighs... the detachment of the narrator who is unwilling to commit himself to any specific view" (151). Wavering commitment to any one explanation allows supernatural Puritan ideas to gain some reader credibility, and readers begin to understand events of *The Scarlet Letter* using Puritanical logic.

Hawthorne increases understanding of the Puritan community by modifying and limiting reader knowledge in accordance with the internal community's increasing knowledge over the novel's seven-year timespan. The narrator reveals more about characters as they become important to the narrative within the limited boundaries of what can be known. The narrator introduces Pearl's story when convenient and reintroduces Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, reminding the reader of their earlier appearance. These explanations are consistent Puritan understanding throughout. Initially, the narrator explains that "It was understood that [Roger Chillingworth] was the physician as well as friend of the young minister, whose health had

severely suffered of late by his... self-sacrifice to the labors and duties of the pastoral relation” (96). The narrator essentially relays two pieces of information that readers later know are false: first, that Chillingworth is a friend of the minister and, second, that his health suffers because of stress related to pastoral duties. This passive construction implies that this is instead the community’s understanding of these two characters at this time. The narrator frequently uses this tactic of passivity to align reader awareness with the Puritan community’s changing interpretation of events and characters.

Truth for both internal and external communities is increasingly indeterminate as *The Scarlet Letter* suffers a breakdown in all interpretation. The novel becomes a story of reactions to ambiguity that leaves readers as uncertain as the Puritans. When Chillingworth removes the vestment Dimmesdale wears over his bosom, the reader is not made privy to what Chillingworth sees there. Readers merely see Chillingworth’s response “with what a wild look of wonder, joy and horror!” (120). Even later when Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold, it is revealed “in very truth” that near his heart was a “gnawing and poisonous tooth of bodily pain” (128), but readers are left unaware of what marks Dimmesdale’s chest. The shape of the meteor that illuminates the sky when Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl are at last united on the scaffold is never clarified. According to the narrator, the credibility of this type of symbolic phenomena usually rests with a single eye-witness who sees the event “through the colored, magnifying, and distorted medium of his imagination [that] shape[s] it more distinctly in his after-thought” (133). The narrator concludes that this explains why the minister’s guilty imagination shaped a letter “A” in the sky. However, the reader is left even more confused by the sexton’s observance of the same phenomenon that “a great red letter in the sky – the letter A, which [he] interpret[s] to stand for Angel” (136). According to Hansen, this scene puts the reader in a position to determine how the

sexton's interpretation and the narrator's interpretation can discordantly coexist and realizes "the rationality of the narrator has been betrayed by the events he narrates" (154). The inclusion of these events makes readers strongly consider superstitions of the age that may be contrary to even the narrator's explanations and conclusions (Hansen 155). Full immersion in Puritanical superstition includes readers in the internal Puritan community with the power of active judgment and interpretation.

THE UNIFICATION OF READERS AND PURITANS

Rhetorical techniques that paradoxically exclude and include readers from the Puritan community must be resolved before the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, and Reverend Dimmesdale's Election Sermon becomes the voice through which the narrator creates a unified audience both internally and externally. The minister's oratory power has already been characterized with the power to unite listeners in "one accord of sympathy" (62). Like the treatment of many major events, the contents of Dimmesdale's Election Sermon are uncertain, though the narrator makes it clear that the "profound and continual undertone... gave the clergyman his most appropriate power" (206). Attention, however is given to the townspeople's "united testimony" (209) in response, declaring that Dimmesdale had superseded all others in wisdom and holiness during his speech. Through his "expression of anguish," Dimmesdale speaks to "suffering humanity [and] touch[es] a sensibility in every bosom" (206). Dimmesdale's Election Sermon has successfully awakened a sympathetic sensibility that had earlier been a considered a Puritan deficiency. When Reverend Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold to face his grim fate and beckons Hester and Pearl to join him, the unified Puritan judge has been completely transformed since Hester's scaffold shaming. In response to this moment of exposure, the Puritans' "great heart was thoroughly appalled, yet overflowing with tearful

sympathy” (214). The internal Puritan community has finally been rendered capable of one sympathetic heart through the revelation of sinful knowledge. Sympathy has united Puritans in a mutual sensibility and newfound self-awareness, and the tortured minister becomes the link between Puritan society and readers that evokes sympathetic unity the reader and narrator have established since the beginning.

Despite this, the narrator uses Reverend Dimmesdale’s internal decay as a direct moral lesson for all readers: “Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister’s miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence: -- Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred” (218). A sensibility of truthfulness creates sympathy, as the final scaffold scene illustrates. *The Scarlet Letter* characteristically leaves readers with more uncertainties than answers as the scrupulous narrator dutifully provides multiple accounts of Dimmesdale’s revelation on the scaffold. Most report that a scarlet letter of his own was imprinted on the minister’s flesh, possibly from self-inflicted torture, Chillingworth’s treatment, or a symbol that ate away his flesh from the inside. Other spectators who “professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale” (217) contend that there is nothing there and Dimmesdale admitted no connection with Hester’s guilt. With elusive truth obscured once more, the reader is explicitly given the authority to “choose among these theories” (217). Reader and Puritan alike, finally united in sympathy, are now left with the task of interpreting the ambiguous conclusion that breathes life anew into the embellished legend of the mysterious scarlet letter and its wearer.

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