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Cade S. Miller

Murray State University

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Cade Miller

Prof. Gina Claywell

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The Scarlet Letter and Novel Structure

The Scarlet Letter is an example of a novel working at peak efficiency. The novel's structure is quite possibly the closest to perfection a writer can get and is no doubt a great contributor to the novel's everlasting success. The amount of deliberation that Nathaniel Hawthorne put into properly structuring his story of romance should never be overlooked, and aspiring writers will gain much by examining both the reasons why Hawthorne chose the structure he did and the benefits that were afforded to him in doing so. Most importantly, writers should pay due attention to the way in which Hawthorne is able to establish a bond early in the novel between the narrator and the reader along with his creation of conflict and suspense through the novel's scenes and four acts, both of which are essential building blocks for any story.

In regards to *The Scarlet Letter*'s narrator, Hawthorne faced a major challenge because he would largely be presenting a story to an audience that is more or less featured in the work, Puritans; on a broader scale, even Hawthorne notes the novel's risk of being too dark: "It will weary very many people, and disgust some" ("Letter" 227). Essentially, Hawthorne would be working against a hostile, or at the very least suspicious, audience and would be forced to pull some great magic trick so the reader could offer his tale a fair reading. Hawthorne devoted himself to "finding the proper rhetorical tools of persuasion to render his audience sympathetic" (Bayer 251). John Bayer points out that Hawthorne relied on narrative techniques from the oral

tradition, before the era of print; more specifically, Hawthorne relied on Hugh Blair's lectures on rhetoric, published in 1783, "which contained persuasive tactics inherited from a time when oratory dominated writing" (Bayer 252), which Hawthorne studied while in college. One of Blair's lectures states, in reference to introductory discourse, "presuming the disposition of the Audience to be much against the Orator, he must gradually reconcile them to hearing him" (qtd. in Bayer 261). What came from this was a comprehensive understanding of the roles for the audience, reader, narrator, and author by Hawthorne so he could then manipulate the reader into empathizing with and, perhaps more importantly, trusting the narrator. It is also important to define the terms *reader* and *audience*. The term *reader* is reserved for the individual person reading a work, whereas the term *audience* is to describe a collective group of readers. What is seen in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a transition from the narrator's addressing the reader directly in "The Custom-House" to addressing the audience in *The Scarlet Letter*.

While "The Custom-House" could simply be seen as a way for Hawthorne to set up *The Scarlet Letter* or, as often thought, to lengthen the original story for stand-alone publication, it is actually doing something much more subtle, although greatly important for the survival of the work: It is establishing a bond between the narrator and the reader. Hawthorne does this by utilizing an apologetic and airy tone throughout "The Custom-House" before leading the reader into the much more somber tone of *The Scarlet Letter*. By beginning "The Custom-House" with language such as "the indulgent reader" and "the intrusive author" (Hawthorne 7), along with the instance where he imagines what his forefathers would think of him: "A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life... may that be?" (Hawthorne 12), Hawthorne quickly acknowledges his readers' suspicions for the storyteller and lets them know that it is okay to be suspicious of him; furthermore, by also exposing the reader to his own personal experience in

supposedly discovering Mr. Surveyor Pue's manuscript and being released from the Salem Custom-House, Hawthorne has subtly manipulated the reader into sympathizing with him. As Bayer states, "If the reader can be made to sympathize with Hawthorne's personal experience... [they] will be more receptive to his role as [narrator] in *The Scarlet Letter*" (254). So now with a bond successfully established between the narrator and reader, Hawthorne may move into the true tale of *The Scarlet Letter* without fear that his reader will turn on him.

This bond also allows Hawthorne's narrator to influence the way in which the reader interprets certain characters and symbols because the reader trusts the narrator's judgment. The reader is exposed to this, for example, through the narrator's treatment of Arthur Dimmesdale versus Roger Chillingworth. It is clear from the narrator's descriptions of Chillingworth that Chillingworth is not meant to be looked upon kindly by the reader; as Fred Marcus points out, the narrator's "treatment of Roger Chillingworth is much more severe than his treatment of Hester or the minister" (Marcus 457). The narrator's first mention of Chillingworth causes Hester to "immediately become as still as death" (Hawthorne 51), and at this the reader cannot help but ask, "What type of person must one be in order to cause someone to become 'still as death?'" Thus, the reader is already suspicious of Chillingworth. The narrator's treatment of Chillingworth only becomes more hostile as the novel develops, notably, in Chapter X when Chillingworth spots something upon Dimmesdale's chest and begins to dance with joy, to which the narrator declares: "Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom" (Hawthorne 92). Also in Chapter X, Pearl refers to Chillingworth as the Black Man: "He hath got hold of the minister already. Come away, mother,

or he will catch you!” (Hawthorne 90), which is an example of further influence by the narrator on the reader regarding how to interpret Chillingworth.

The narrator treats Arthur Dimmesdale more as a victim than a predator, a great sufferer as a result of his actions. The reader is exposed to this painful decline in character for Dimmesdale through the whole novel; this is certainly reflected in the narrator’s voice, notably in Chapter XI when the reader is enlightened to Dimmesdale’s internal struggle. The narrator describes Dimmesdale as “suffering under bodily disease, and gnawed and tortured by some black trouble of the soul” (Hawthorne 93); the narrator also notes how the “public veneration tortured him” (Hawthorne 95), along with Dimmesdale’s self-mutilation: “In Mr. Dimmesdale’s secret closet, under lock and key, there was a bloody scourge” (Hawthorne 96).

However, the most significant benefit that Hawthorne gains by establishing this narrator-reader bond is that he is able to force the reader to sympathize with Hester which would not have been an easy task given the nature of her actions and the conservative ideology of Hawthorne’s audience, as Arthur Coxe objects, “we are astonished at the kind of incident which [Hawthorne] has selected for romance” (258). It is not a coincidence that when Hester is introduced to the reader, she is introduced as a protective mother first. Before her name is even said, Hester is introduced as “the young woman—the mother of this child” who “stood fully revealed before the crowd... her first impulse... to clasp the infant closely to her bosom” (Hawthorne 40). Thus, the reader’s first visualization of Hester the sinner is as a mother which no doubt alters the reader’s perception of her through the rest of the novel.

The only reason Hawthorne is able to achieve having his narrator influence the reader so strongly is because he established his narrator’s voice early by using “The Custom-House” to do so. It would be very interesting to see how the exclusion of “The Custom-House” may have

altered the reception of *The Scarlet Letter* by its nineteenth-century audience; it is quite possible that *The Scarlet Letter* may not have become the staple in American literature that it is today.

Another way that Hawthorne utilizes structure in his novel is with conflict, using a method that Hawthorne developed due to his inability to write within the standard novel form at the time. As Michael Cowley states, the novel in Hawthorne's era functioned as a "chronicle of events" and Hawthorne had had "no great talent or practice as a chronicler" (12). In fact, Hawthorne had written a romantic novel as a young man that he was so ashamed of that he "destroyed every copy on which he could lay his hands" (Cowley 12). To work around his inability to write using the common novel form, Hawthorne relied on his skill as a short story writer to structure his novel closer to what he was used to, using individual scenes to present the story. Essentially, *The Scarlet Letter* could be thought of as a collection of short stories, each of which "is a posed tableau or a dramatic confrontation" (Cowley 12). This allowed Hawthorne to present the reader with a roller coaster of conflict, with each chapter introducing a new sub-conflict to entertain the reader. For example, in Chapter XV, Pearl inquires about the scarlet letter upon her mother's bosom and the connection to the minister consistently clutching his chest. Another example includes Chapter XVII, when Hester and Dimmesdale discuss boarding a ship and sailing away. The conflicts at the scene level are often small, although important, because it holds the reader's attention; it is these smaller conflicts that keep the reader turning pages, in order to discover what is to come.

Perhaps what deserves the most praise, though, in Hawthorne's novel is its uniformity: There is not a wasted page, paragraph, or even sentence throughout the entire work. The novel moves so seamlessly between major plot points and character point of views that the reader, as John Gerber states, "is likely to be unaware until pages later that a fundamental break in the book

has been passed” (34). Gerber speaks of *The Scarlet Letter* as four fundamental acts, each of which is controlled by different characters. This strategy used by Hawthorne, to have these different movements initiated by different characters, presents to the reader not only the chance to see the tale through multiple sets of eyes—which is a great benefit—but also contributes to steadily developing conflict all the way through the novel.

Act I begins with the New England crowd working as a catalyst toward conflict “since none of [the main characters] can logically create the social situation which is the necessary antecedent to the spiritual complication” (Gerber 28). Act II begins with Chillingworth investigating the identity of Hester’s lover, by becoming the personal physician to Dimmesdale. Act III introduces the reader more intimately to Hester and Pearl, giving new life to the story after the extreme somberness of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale’s interactions. Finally, Act IV is centered on Dimmesdale’s internal struggle and his granting of peace to Hester through he revealing to the public himself as her lover.

While Hawthorne presents conflict at the scene level, he also develops conflict through entire acts. For example, Act II sees “the health of Mr. Dimmesdale... [beginning] to fail” (Hawthorne 80), which is one small conflict in itself. However, this smaller conflict is expanded upon once Chillingworth becomes Dimmesdale’s personal physician, which then creates conflict between the two men as Chillingworth strives to discover the identity of Hester’s lover and Dimmesdale struggles internally with the morality of his actions. Thus, one could take any of the four acts in *The Scarlet Letter* and read it as a lengthy short story.

Furthermore, Hawthorne uses these sub-conflicts to contribute to the novel’s overall objective, which is the “study of isolation” (Gerber 26) as a result of sin. The novel’s first three acts work to “multiply sin, intensify isolation, and diminish the hope of reunion” (Gerber 28),

and is executed through the community's shaming of Hester and forcing her from the community in the novel's first act, the isolation of Dimmesdale in the second act (while he is not physically forced out of the community, Dimmesdale does withdrawal from it as he tries to find peace as a result of his action), and Dimmesdale and Hester coming together to relieve their isolation by boarding a ship, leaving the community, and starting anew in the third act. However, the fourth act sees Dimmesdale reverse the isolation premise during the novel's climax when he professes his identity as Hester's lover, granting peace to not only Hester since she no longer has to protect his identity, but also to himself since he no longer has to hold such a shameful secret. *The Scarlet Letter* develops its conflict so smoothly that it is almost as if it a roller coaster ascending to the top of a peak, only to come racing back down in the fourth act, finally slowing to a complete stop in the novel's twenty-fourth chapter, when the narrator explains what happened to Hester and Pearl after Dimmesdale's death.

Hawthorne has essentially created a dynamic that sees conflict ensuing through individual scenes, acts, and the novel as a whole, which is why it should come as no surprise as to why *The Scarlet Letter* has entertained readers for so many decades. The novel has taken the most essential element in storytelling and incorporated it into every single measure of the work. As Janet Burroway points out, "in literature, only trouble is interesting" (168)—and *The Scarlet Letter* is certainly not short of "trouble."

However, it is not only that *The Scarlet Letter* possesses a great amount of conflict in general and develops it steadily through the novel, but also that Hawthorne heightens this conflict by using the strategy of "narrative delay" (Railton 490) to create suspense. The most significant example of narrative delay is the narrator withholding the identity of Hester's lover, which forces the reader to continue (How could one possibly not finish a story when such a

premise is presented?). However, Hawthorne utilizes this technique in other places also. One instance includes Hawthorne's decision to delay Hester's appearance until after he has properly set the scene outside the jail. By the time Hester is physically introduced to the reader, Hawthorne has stated that many of the women in the crowd had "appeared to take a peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction might be expected to ensue" (Hawthorne 38), which in turn creates a "peculiar interest" in the reader to discover what "might be expected to ensue."

Furthermore, as Railton points out, Hawthorne's habit of delaying information in *The Scarlet Letter* is also an attempt to inspire his audience to "suspend judgment" (490). He does this by consistently raising questions but refusing to provide answers, leaving the reader with a strong presence of ambiguity, forbidding them to make conclusions given the lack of evidence. Examples of this include the narrator's asking "Could it be true?" (Hawthorne 44) at the sight of Hester atop the scaffold in Chapter II; Governor Wilson, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth's raising questions concerning the identity of Pearl's father in Chapter VIII; and perhaps most significantly, the narrator's questioning of the meaning of the scarlet letter in "The Custom-House," stating that "how it was to be worn, or what rank, honor, and dignity, in by-past times, were signified by it, was a riddle which... I saw little hope of solving" (Hawthorne 26), which—even at the novel's conclusion—is never actually explained.

The importance of structure in regards to a novel's success is clear. Furthermore, if one were to need an example on how to properly structure a novel, they would need to look no farther than *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel demonstrates a near perfect strategy for developing conflict and influencing the reader's perceptions of characters through techniques that are not solely for Hawthorne. Any one of these techniques can be imitated or adapted for one's own work, and, perhaps, even produce an award-winning title.

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