Nathaniel Hawthorne

A GREAT DEAL HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the mystery of Nathaniel Hawthorne's personality, and some critics have even gone so far as to surmise that there may have been a secret side of his nature that he was guarding from his friends and family. If there be any answer to such speculations it might well be sought in his masterpiece, the hauntingly beautiful and seamlessly constructed *Scarlet Letter.* For certainly that tale is open to different interpretations.

We can start by analyzing the exact nature of the heroine's offense to the moral and legal code of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1640s. Hester Prynne was a virtuous and noble-minded young English woman living in Amsterdam and married childlessly to an elderly and partially crippled scholar whom she venerated but did not love. Her marriage had been one of convenience, and she had accepted it. When her husband decided to immigrate to the New World, he sent her on ahead, while he remained for a time "to look after some necessary affairs," but promising soon to follow. He did not follow, however, and it seemed likely that he had been lost at sea—a common enough fate for those who ventured to cross the Atlantic—and Hester found herself in the anomalous position of being a beautiful single woman with a possibly still living husband in a small Puritan Boston. After the passage of a year or more she fell in love with a handsome and deeply spiritual bachelor minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, the idol of the community, who returned her passion, and the two embarked on a clandestine love affair which resulted in her pregnancy. Hester insisted that he should remain anonymous in the affair, allowing her to bear the disgrace alone, on the theory that he must not destroy his value to the adoring members of his flock. Reluctantly, his conscience torn, he agreed to her plan.

As Hester was known to be the wife of a man not proven dead, the crime exposed by her condition was not merely fornication but adultery for which in Puritan Boston the penalty was capital, as can be seen by modern readers of Governor John Winthrop's diary in an entry describing the arraignment and hanging of a couple so accused. But because of the ameliorating circumstance of her husband's disappearance, Hester is sentenced only to the public disgrace of wearing the token of her sin on her breast for life and standing with her baby for some hours on the town scaffold exposed to the scornful gaze of the crowd.

All of this, of course, does not strike a modern reader as a crime at all. And even in 1850, when the novel was published, it was hardly an unforgivable one. But of course Hawthorne, as an historical novelist, was correct in setting forth the horror and contempt with which Bostonians of the 1640s regarded it. What may surprise a reader today is how clearly, however much he may deprecate the rigor of Hester's punishment and the cruelty and occasional hypocrisy of her tormentors, he seems to share their view of the gravity of her guilt.

He concedes, it is true, that her judges are harsh. "Out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart and disentangling its mesh of good and evil than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester now turned her face." But he is quick to emphasize the moral contrast between the "image of Divine Maternity" so finely represented by the greatest painters, and the sorry picture of Hester standing before the sneering crowd, her bastard child in her arms. "Here was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant she had borne."

What Hester thought of her supposed guilt we shall come to, but there is no doubt that her lover shared the feelings of the crowd. Calling upon her to reveal his part in the affair, he actually envies her for her suffering: "Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without." He has no doubt that they have committed a mortal sin.

Hester has a different view. There is in her nature "a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic—a taste for the gorgeously beautiful" which her creator is far from finding exempt from fault, perhaps fearing the lion's share of it in his own personality. In Hester it finds expression in her needlework. Hawthorne goes on to say: "Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. Like all other joys she rejected it as a sin. "This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong beneath." To be feared by whom? By Hawthorne himself.

He even suggests that Hester's disillusionment as to virtue in other women was attributable to her own downfall. "O Fiend, whose talisman was that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing, whether in youth or age, for this poor sinner to revere?—such loss of faith is ever one of the saddest results of sin." Hawthorne supposes that adultery has bound her to support her lover in his trials. "Here was the iron link of mutual crime, which neither he nor she could break. Like all other ties, it brought along with it its obligations."

There is no question that Hawthorne expects us to admire Hester's indomitable courage and resolution in facing her isolation from the community and her selfless generosity in returning good for bad, as witnessed by her tending and nursing even those poor and sick souls who despise the hand that succors them. But when the heroine's life begins to turn from passion and feeling to thought, when she discovers that the world's law has no law for the mind, when she dares in her speculations to undermine the very foundations of the Puritan establishment and to discern that the whole system of society must be torn up and built anew for women to take their proper place in it, Hawthorne fears that she has lost the way to true penitence, that she "was wandering without a clue in the dark labyrinth of mind" and was even wondering if she should not put an end to her and her child's existence. "The scarlet letter," he concludes grimly, "had not done its office."

It is clear then that Hawthorne gravely faults Hester for her failure properly to rue her deed. He asks the reader: "Had seven long years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery and wrought out no repentance?" And when Hester goes to meet Dimmesdale in the forest and casts the token of her disgrace to the withered leaves, Hawthorne fears that she is compounding her sin. "It may be that it was the talisman of a stern and severe, but yet a guardian spirit, who now forsook her, as recognizing that, in spite of his strict watch over her heart, some new evil had crept into it, or some old one had never been expelled." Hester even tries to justify their act to her lover when she exclaims: "What we did had a consecration of its own." And she plans to flee the colony with him.

But this is only a renewal of their adultery, and it is frustrated—fortunately, no doubt, in the author's point of view—by Dimmesdale's public confession and death. In the end Hawthorne sums up the case against Hester:

> She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate and as shadowy, as the untamed forest. . . . Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from the estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established, criticizing with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other woman dared not tread. Shame, despair, solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.

But that is not the final judgment that I derive from the novel. It leaves me with the picture of a brave and passionate woman gloriously liberated by cruel suffering from the bondage of ignorance and superstition and taking her place in the freer intellectual atmosphere that was dawning in the Europe she had left behind. The dark forest that surrounds and threatens to engulf the small, struggling New England colony represents the wild force of uninhibited nature, and the Puritan community symbolizes the desperate effort of man to impose some kind of order upon it. Hester's flight to the woods is her attempted escape from the rigors of the arbitrary moral code of the pioneers. But it is doomed, and Hawthorne appears to take his stand with the elders of the colony.

But does he really? This to me is the question that pervades his book and gives it much of its peculiar flavor and interest. Hawthorne's personality was a deeply divided one. On the one hand, as a romantic and a lover of colorful history, he greatly admired the rugged Puritans, true to their stern God and resolute faith, bravely fortifying their little settlement against the dark menace of the surrounding wilderness and also against the intrusion of modern heresies from the Old World on which they had turned their backs. He found a greater appeal in the Massachusetts Bay Colony than he did in what he regarded as the shallower, more material, and often irreverent society of contemporary Boston. His loyalty was essentially to the past, and his religion was the old one.

But there was the other Hawthorne, the intellectual curious scholar who was deeply interested in, if not always approving of, the tumultuous changes of his own day, and the author of a campaign biography of his close friend President Franklin Pierce. This side of Hawthorne is in constant and obvious sympathy with his heroine in every step of her story. How he reconciled in his own mind and heart such sympathy with the sternness of his inherited and cherished puritanical moral code must have been through his unpuritanical belief in a divine mercy that would redeem both Hester and her persecutors. It may have been this same faith that made him refer the question of slavery to the Almighty in his much—and to my mind justly—criticized answer to the abolitionists in his life of Pierce in 1852:

> But there is still another view, and probably as wise a one. It looks upon slavery as one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream.