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Teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne's
The Scarlet Letter

from
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by
Douglas Grudzina



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General Introduction to the Work

About the Author

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE (1804 – 1864) FIRST ENTERED the United States literary scene as a writer of short stories. With the publication of *Twice-Told Tales*, a collection of previously published stories in 1837, he made his mark as a writer of long fiction. His work became extremely popular even among other successful writers of the period such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allen Poe, and Herman Melville.

Although Hawthorne did not consider *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to be his best work, its well-drawn characters and sympathetic attitude toward human weakness have made it an enduring classic.

Despite his literary success, Hawthorne always desired—and sought—political appointments. He knew firsthand the vagaries—and often the disloyalties—of the United States political machine. This sense of betrayal and distrust of governmental authority is evident in the Custom House introduction and in many of the characters and incidents in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Philosophically, Hawthorne was closely related to the Transcendentalists who asserted that the human conscience was the ultimate determiner of all right and wrong, and that at some point in the future, government would not be necessary once humans learned to listen to the dictates of their consciences and govern themselves.

Hawthorne and Melville, however, while *desiring* a world in which the human conscience replaced the government, were somewhat less optimistic about humanity's ability to reach that state. Human passions ran too deep and too strong for the individual to ever really be his/her own government of one. These “anti-transcendentalist” sentiments are evident in much of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Feminist Approach Applied to *The Scarlet Letter*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgement. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate the portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



Activity One

Comparing Hester Prynne with Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth

1. First have students reread Chapter 5 (about Hester's life after her scaffold humiliation), Chapter 13 (the evolution of Hester's reputation), Chapter 17 (Hester's conversation with Dimmesdale), and Chapter 18—focusing on Hester's actions, attitude, and reaction to her initial sin.
2. Secondly, have students reread Chapter 4 (Hester's first conversation with Chillingworth), Chapter 9 (Hawthorne's close-up view of Chillingworth), Chapter 10 (a view of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale's relationship), and Chapter 23 (the ruin of Chillingworth's plan and Chillingworth's death)—focusing on Chillingworth, his relationship to Hester, and his reaction to her initial sin.
3. Finally, have students reread Chapter 2 (especially Dimmesdale's reaction to Hester's refusal to name the baby's father), Chapter 7 (especially Hester's demand that Dimmesdale intercede for her with the governor), Chapters 11 and 12 (contrasting Dimmesdale's interior guilt with his inability to confess as well as his stated reasons for being unable to confess), Chapters 17 and 18 (Dimmesdale's inability to see beyond his sin and his reaction to the idea of fleeing), Chapter 20 (Dimmesdale's almost juvenile reaction to his "liberation"), and Chapter 23 (Dimmesdale's final disclosure and death)—focusing obviously on Dimmesdale's actions and reactions to the initial sin.
4. Discuss with the class (or divide the class into smaller, gender-mixed groups of 4 or 5 students to discuss and answer) the following questions:
 - Of the three, who can be said to be the most successful in worldly terms?
 - Of the three, who can be said to be the most satisfied with his/her life?
 - What is the source (or sources) of this satisfaction?
 - Would you classify Hester as a weak or strong person? What evidence in the novel supports your classification?
 - Would you classify Chillingworth as a weak or strong person? What evidence in the novel supports your classification?
 - Would you classify Dimmesdale as a weak or strong person? What evidence in the novel supports your classification?
 - What, then, might Hawthorne be suggesting about gender differences and gender equality?

Psychoanalytic Criticism Applied to *The Scarlet Letter*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining the Effects of Repression on Physical and Emotional Health of the Characters

1. Have students do some general research in the psychological phenomenon of “repression.” Then have them reread the following passages that trace the changes in physical appearance and mental and emotional health of Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale. Then have them, either as a whole class or in small groups, discuss the questions that follow:

First Description of Chillingworth, Chapter 3

He was small in stature, with a furrowed visage, which as yet could hardly be termed aged. There was a remarkable intelligence in his features, as of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself and become manifest by unmistakable tokens. Although, by a seemingly careless arrangement of his heterogeneous garb, he had endeavoured to conceal or abate the peculiarity, it was sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne that one of this man's shoulders rose higher than the other.

Chapter 9

A large number—and many of these were persons of such sober sense and practical observation that their opinions would have been valuable in other matters—affirmed that Roger Chillingworth's aspect had undergone a remarkable change while he had dwelt in town, and especially since his abode with Mr. Dimmesdale. At first, his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like. Now there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still the more obvious to sight the oftener they looked upon him.

Chapter 10

Old Roger Chillingworth, throughout life, had been calm in temperament, kindly, though not of warm affections, but ever, and in all his relations with the world, a pure and upright man. He had begun an investigation, as he imagined, with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of truth, even as if the question involved no more than the air-drawn lines and figures of a geometrical problem, instead of human passions, and wrongs inflicted on himself. But, as he proceeded, a terrible fascination, a kind of fierce, though still calm, necessity, seized the old man within its gripe, and never set him free again until he had done all its bidding.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *The Scarlet Letter*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Archetypal Images in the Novel

1. Divide the class into four groups (or a number of groups divisible by four) and assign each group one of the following possible archetypal images:
 - COLORS: especially the color of the scarlet letter itself, and the references to red roses
 - WATER: consider the proximity of Hester's cottage to the beach and the scenes in which Pearl plays in and by water
 - GARDENS: especially the description of the weeds and wild rosebush just outside the prison door (Chapter 1), the comparison of Governor Bellingham's garden with the gardens of Old England (Chapter 7), and the various descriptions of the forest
 - YIN AND YANG: especially the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth
2. Have each group examine the book for the use of these images, keeping in mind their archetypal significance.
3. Have each group report back to the class.