

Chapter 15: The Scarlet Letter: Severing the Heritage

Nathaniel Hawthorne AD 1804-1864

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne was the 19th century American literary giant who did more to shift the American culture away from its national Christian heritage than anyone else. His hatred of the Puritans was deeply personal, relentlessly bitter, and marginally psychotic. Given that the Puritans represented a potent element vitally interested in retaining something of the Christian faith, it was Hawthorne's objective to sever this heritage from the memory of the American people. While Americans came to despise this entire class of Christians, at the same time their moral values were being reshaped to embrace witchcraft, adultery, incest and other sexual sin. Nathaniel Hawthorne championed this redirection of our national cultural and moral convictions.

Hawthorne's disdain for the Puritans can only be explained by his own religious apostasy and his commitment to a humanist (man-centered) worldview. By any honest measure, the Puritans were very committed Christians. Should a sincere believer perform a careful and honest review of various Christian sects throughout history, they would find the Puritans among the faithful. They were supremely orthodox, spiritually disciplined, and theologically balanced. Their sermons, treatises, biographies, diaries and prayers contain some of the most God-centered, spiritually uplifting material ever written. If we set the Hawthorne caricature side by side with the true historical records, there is no comparison. Certainly, any committed Christian should read a selection of the thousands of extant literary works produced by these men before accepting the word of an apostate.¹ To this day, millions of godly Christians are strengthened by books like *The Valley of Vision*, a compendium of Puritan prayers. Often considered the greatest evangelical preacher of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon is also referred to as "the last of the Puritans." Spurgeon himself heartily endorsed their work, "By all means read the Puritans, they are worth more than all the modern stuff put together."² Without exaggeration, the Puritan faith represents one of the strongest expressions of Christian orthodoxy in the 17th century.

In spite of their cultural importance and godly influence in America, England, and Scotland, most of the "Christian" West either ignores the Puritans or despises them. Among professing Christians, most are either ignorant of this heritage, or they are embarrassed by it. This cultural disposition is largely a product of Hawthorne's skewed characterizations of the Puritans. Throughout his books, they are presented as harsh, vindictive, and hypocritical killjoys. In the great war of the worldviews, some have said that the winners write the history books. If the Christian worldview has lost ground since the 18th century, we will have to write our own history books for now. This is the only way the truth will prevail in future generations.

Just as the world was ready and waiting for Darwin and Emerson, this nation was well prepared

¹ These are available through publishing houses such as Banner of Truth, Reformation Heritage Books, or from various online sources.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1998), 184

for Nathaniel Hawthorne's dismissal of the America's Christian heritage. Indeed, the Puritans were everything that the apostates of the 18th and 19th centuries hated. How are we to understand a world that finds it so natural to hate a people well known for their godliness and Christian piety?

Hawthorne's own Christian heritage can be traced to his great, great, great grandfather, William Hawthorne, who arrived in 1630 with John Winthrop and the first American colonists. He served a magistrate in the New England colony. Nathaniel Hawthorne hated this man for his austere dealings with the Quakers, specifically for the whipping of a certain Quaker woman named Anne Coleman. While he attributed this civil action to William Hawthorne, historical records indicate that the sentencing of Anne Coleman actually occurred under Richard Waldron, another magistrate, and Hawthorne had nothing to do with it.³

Nathaniel Hawthorne also disapproved of his great, great grandfather, John Hathorne, because of his involvement in the Salem witch trials. From historical records, it does seem that John Hathorne acted on flimsy, "spectral" evidence for his adjudication of certain cases.⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that Hawthorne was not interested in the details of these proceedings. It was the Puritan pastors who put an end to the trials on the basis of solid biblical reasons. But that wasn't important to Hawthorne.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's personal religious affiliation is hard to construct because it is virtually nonexistent. While his parent's church background was Congregationalist on his father's side and Unitarian on his mother's side, Nathaniel's life was fairly absent of church involvement. While at Bowdoin College, the young man made a point to miss evening prayers and public worship on Sundays (even at the risk of having to pay a small fine for his lapses). Hawthorne's writings reveal his rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity and his dismissal of Jesus Christ as Redeemer and King although he does acknowledge "God" at various points throughout his work. He repudiated family worship and Sabbath-keeping,⁵ he openly mocked the sermons that spoke of the Judgment of God, and he ridiculed the pastors who had been trained at the more conservative Andover Theological Seminary.⁶ Nathaniel's literary influences were multi-faceted. Though he spent some of his early years reading the Puritan John Bunyan, his worldview formed around Rousseau and Montaigne.⁷

³ Joseph Walton, *Incidents Illustrating the Doctrine and History of the Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, PA: Society of Friends, 1897), 402

⁴ We must allow that some of the Puritan magistrates were over-zealous in their civil duties and assigned civil punishments beyond that required by biblical law. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the governments controlling our socialist nations today are far more intrusive into the lives of the average citizen than what we find in the early colonial world.

⁵ James R. Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne In His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 64.

⁶ Brenda Wineapple, *Hawthorne, A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 2003), 47

Edwin Haviland Miller, *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 63..

⁷ *Ibid.* 49.

Michel de Montaigne was a French skeptic and early humanist thinker from the 16th century who influenced Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rene Decartes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Friedrich Nietzsche. That latter said of him, "That such a man wrote has truly augmented the joy of living on this Earth."⁸

Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody, the sister of Elizabeth Peabody, who was a central figure in the Transcendentalist movement in Salem.⁹ For his wedding with Sophia, Hawthorne requested the services of a liberal Unitarian minister named James Foreman Clark. The same minister buried him in 1864, and Transcendentalist poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson was among the pallbearers at Hawthorne's funeral. While most of the Transcendentalists and Unitarians in Hawthorne's time represented various stages of apostasy, the entire group made up a fairly close community. The interconnections between Hawthorne and the contemporary liberal Transcendentalists are too many to recount here.

If we were to take the historical records of men like Increase and Cotton Mather seriously, it does appear that New England came under severe spiritual attack during the formative years of the American republic. Regrettably, when Nathaniel Hawthorne recounted these demonic attacks, he did not repudiate Satan's work with clear biblical teaching (James 4:7, Acts 19:19, Gal. 5:20). Instead, he maintained an unhealthy fixation on the demon world throughout his life. At the age of 21, he wrote a short story called *Alice Doane's Appeal*, excusing witchcraft and ascribing autonomous power to wizardry. As par for the course, he described the Puritan Cotton Mather as "a blood-thirsty man" something akin to "the fiend himself".¹⁰ During his college years at Bowdoin, he would consort with a witch in the town.¹¹ Later in his life while visiting Florence, Italy, he allowed his wife Sophia to visit a medium and a necromancer.¹² As if that wasn't bad enough, his children were caught up in this demonic interplay as well. Sophia's sister (also a medium) insisted that Hawthorne's eldest daughter Una had "the gift of a medium" early on in her life. No doubt as a consequence of her aunt's counsel, the poor girl suffered from mental illness until her dying day.¹³ In a letter to his mother from college, Hawthorne suggested that he would become a writer but ominously forewarned her that "authors are always poor devils, and therefore Satan may take them." Commenting on this dark suggestion, biographer James Mellow says that this "becomes a persistent theme in Hawthorne's work: the hint that writing involved an almost diabolical form of knowledge, an acquaintance with the darker passions, the hidden sins and guilts of others-that an author was, in a sense, in league with the devil."¹⁴

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 135.

⁹ Elizabeth Peabody worked for Transcendentalist philosopher Bronson Alcott, who was a close friend of Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

¹⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Alice Doane's Appeal*, Source: <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HawAlic.html>.

¹¹ Miller, 70.

¹² Ibid. 437.

¹³ Ibid. 339.

¹⁴ Mellow, 26.

There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch,

11 Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.

12 For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee.

13 Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God. (Deuteronomy 18:10-13)

At the root of it, Hawthorne's real sin was his refusal to acknowledge the sin of witchcraft as a true violation of God's law. As a humanist who thought and acted independently of the law of God, he would accuse the Puritan magistrates of injustice by his own arbitrary humanist "standard." Occasionally, he tried to explain away all supernaturalism with scientific naturalism (which happens to be a demonic lie of another stripe). Woven into his stories is a surreptitious implication that the sin of witchcraft, homosexuality, adultery, or incest (as in the case of Alice Doane) were more acceptable than whatever the Puritans were doing during America's early days. This is how humanists and liberal thinkers since Hawthorne's day have turned the moral order on its head. It is a dangerous business to say the least.

As a young writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne was driven by a motivation to "achieve my destiny" and build "my monument."¹⁵ He was one of the first literary men to psychologize guilt, separating the idea of sin from the transgression of the law of a transcendent God. He picked at sin as a surgeon picks at diseased flesh. He was also a master at pointing out hypocrisy in the lives of Christians, while at the same time quietly excusing the more egregious evils of witchcraft and adultery. For example, Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown hesitates to join the devil's errand in the forest, saying, "We have seen a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs." The devil replies, "*I helped your grandfather, the constable when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem. And it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth to set fire to an Indian village.*" Practically every two-bit atheist and community college skeptic of our day has used this all too familiar argument to discredit "religion". The argument is usually stated thus: given that there have been a few Christians who have perverted justice and fought Indian wars (justly or unjustly) in the history of the world, all Christians then must be hypocritical fools.

Worst of all, Hawthorne's stories leave his poor, tortured, guilt-ridden protagonists with no hope for atonement. He ably demonstrates the futility of self-atonement and leaves the reader with one inescapable conclusion: the relief of guilt will only come by the eradication of the concept of sin and the standards of God's law. For Hawthorne, guilt must be handled as Hester deals with it in *The Scarlet Letter*. Whereas Hawthorne stopped just short of explicitly approving Hester's

¹⁵ Ibid. 52.

adultery, it was only fifty years later that Mark Twain recommended serial adultery for women. By refusing to acknowledge *any and all* possibility of atonement, Nathaniel Hawthorne pressed the entire Victorian world towards the only possible solution for humanist man: the elimination of the Lawgiver. If man would become the source of his own law, and God has no moral code to which man must be held accountable, then the problem of guilt is dealt with once and for all.

The progression of these humanist ideas moves quickly. After God is removed as the moral Source, humanist man soon realizes that he must dispense with all absolutes, whether in ethics, truth, or life purpose. He comes to believe the words of the self-conscious fool, put succinctly by one profession, Will Provine, Ph.D. from Cornell University who is quoted,

“Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear. . . There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That’s the end for me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning to life, and no free will for humans, either.”¹⁶

The 19th century Transcendentalists were not prepared for this level of self-consistency. Nevertheless, this was the direction they set for themselves.

By the end of his life, Hawthorne began to realize the implications of his ideas. In a letter to Sophia, he identified with the dismal Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* as one whose buried body would blest “the spot of earth which I occupied, while the grass flourished all around.” Having cast aside the atoning blood of Christ for his sins, he had abandoned all hope of life and resurrection after death.¹⁷ His final literary work, *Septimius*, is saturated in hopelessness. One would think it was Friedrich Nietzsche or Will Provine writing these words: “We are all linked together in a chain of Death, and feel no remorse for those we cause, nor enmity for we suffer. And the Purpose? What is Purpose? Who can tell when he has actually formed one?”¹⁸

Biographer Brenda Wineapple sums up Hawthorne’s dreary life with the three things he stood for: “Doubt, Darkness, and the Democratic Party.”¹⁹

“But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope

¹⁶ “How Would You Reply to This Poll?” *Your Origins Matter*,
<<http://www.youroriginsmatter.com/conversations/view/How+Would+You+Reply+to+This+Poll%3F27>>

¹⁷ Mellow. 308.

¹⁸ Wineapple, 365.

¹⁹ Ibid. 380.

in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead.” (1 Cor. 15:13-17)

The Scarlet Letter

Hawthorne was a true genius, and *The Scarlet Letter* was his *magnum opus*. Published in 1850, this classical work was more than just finely crafted literature. The spiritual effects of the book upon the nation were profound for several reasons. To this day, no other single publication of any genre has been so effective at severing a nation from its Christian heritage. The book is one of the most popular novels still read in the complete original text by American high school students.²⁰ This book works psychologically, it penetrates deeply into the consciousness of millions of people, reshaping religious perspectives and humanists convictions concerning the Christian faith, the historical church, sexuality, guilt, judgment, atonement, and God’s law.

Prior to 1820, most authors could not earn a living by writing novels. There was not much of a market for this genre of literature until the birth of the modern age. Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the very first popular literary giants, and *The Scarlet Letter* was one of the first mass-produced books published in the United States.²¹ The timing for his society transforming book was impeccable.

Throughout the story, Hawthorne takes the reader up and down the dark corridors of the hearts of unredeemed men. The stories he tells are morose because he favors those in rebellion to God and church over those who are in a covenant relationship with God. Even when the characters find redemption, it is only a pretense—a halfway redemption.

Testifying to his own state of mind while working on his masterpiece, Hawthorne said he wrote it “as if under compulsion.” Under what spiritual influence did the writer feel so compelled? He completed his towering literary work in just 19 days. Directly upon completion, he wrote to his friend Horatio Bridge, calling the creation, “a positively hell-fired story.”²² Herman Melville wrote a rather disturbing letter to Hawthorne on November 17, 1851, in which he confessed to have written a “wicked book” himself. In a particularly strange portion of the letter, he suggested the same “rushing demon” which had affected Hawthorne in his “solitudes” had also influenced him. Then he questions his own sanity, “My dear Hawthorne, the atmospheric skepticisms steal into me now, and make me doubtful of my sanity in writing you thus. But believe me, I am not mad, most noble Festus.”²³

Was there a powerful spiritual presence in Hawthorne’s life and family? What demons may have

²⁰ 20- Kelly, Melissa, “Top Ten Novels for American Literature Classes” *About.com*, <<http://712educators.about.com/od/novelsandshortstories/tp/amlitnovels.htm>>;

²¹ 21- Philip McFarland, *Hawthorne in Concord* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 136.

²² 22-Mellow. 303.

²³ Edwin Haviland Miller, *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 355.

tortured his mind and inspired his pen? If *The Scarlet Letter* was his magnum opus, why would he confess that the story was conceived or “fired” in the pit of hell? The power of the story is beyond question. The tale bears an influence over the reader that is hard to explain and even harder to withstand. In the end, the demons won control over Salem, and Christianity lost its grip in New England. It would seem that spiritual entities with far more power than anything mere humans could muster worked strongly in the hearts and minds of men like Nathaniel Hawthorne and his close friend Ralph Waldo Emerson to energize the apostasy. What did these spiritual powers accomplish through the literary work of the likes of Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson? History bears out a significant legacy.

When the book was published on March 16, 1850, there was some resistance against it on the part of the Christian church. *The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register* accused Hawthorne of perpetuating “bad morals.”²⁴ Another religious journal, the *Brownson’s Quarterly*, noted that none of the protagonists in the story “really repents of the criminal deed” and concludes that, “It is a story that should not have been told.”²⁵

What the reader is about to review is a tale fired in hell according to the author’s own admission. It is possible that this story has done more harm to the spiritual condition of American than any other single work of fiction. For Christian leaders, teachers, and parents to ignore its content and its influence over the direction of society would be a fatal miscalculation of the highest order. How could anyone understand the historical underpinnings of the worldviews that dominate in schools today without a right assessment of this critical book? Let me say that this study is not for the faint of heart or the undiscerning spirit. It is for those who are willing to do battle in the literary war of the worldviews.

Brief Summary of The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter tells the story of an adulteress in a pseud-Puritan colony in Massachusetts. Hester Prynne, unbeknownst to the townsfolk, commits adultery with the young pastor, Dimmesdale. Somehow, the magistrate convicts her of her crime and sentences her to wearing a scarlet “A” embroidered to the bodice of her dress. Her husband, a man named Chillingworth, returns from a sea voyage. He refuses to make himself known to the rest of the town, but neither does he return to his wife and child. Instead, he chooses to reside with Dimmesdale, the man who had committed adultery with Hester. Chillingworth finds ways to intensify Dimmesdale’s guilt and torture his conscience until Dimmesdale finally reveals his sin to the entire town at the end of the story.

Critique

From the very first page of the book, Hawthorne presents the Puritans as somber, rigid, hypocritical, graceless, and Christless. If you were to read more than two sentences of any Puritan sermon, diary, or treatise, you would find an entirely different theology. These people

²⁴ Wineapple. 217.

²⁵ Miller, 302.

include constant mention of the Lord Jesus Christ in their writings, something Hawthorne does not dare permit for his Puritans. Those who have read the real Puritans would find Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* supremely offensive, even slanderous. Arguably, Nathaniel Hawthorne was the most influential liar in American history. Mark Twain found virtue in lying, but Hawthorne did the most damage by his finely tuned deception.

In the first chapter, Hawthorne accuses the Puritans of excessive severity in civil punishments. He tells of the "undutiful child" that is whipped at the whipping post and the "antinomians" who are chased out of town. Obviously, Hawthorne would not take kindly to the biblical text Matthew 15:4-6, where Jesus commends the law allowing the death penalty for a young man who curses his father or his mother. Offensive though it may be to antinomians who reject God's law in the Bible, the Puritans did take biblical law seriously. Moreover, Hawthorne mischaracterizes the passage and the Puritans by extending the law to include the "undutiful child." There is a difference between the grown man who curses his father and beats on his mother (as described in Scripture) and the "undutiful child." Historians have yet to identify the "undutiful child" turned over to the civil magistrate in the Puritan colonies. Granted Jesus Christ and His views on the Old Testament are still mocked by secularists either on the street or in the church. Genuine Christians however, will be careful to fear God and avoid all mockery of Scripture and spite for Christ.

As will all apostates, Hawthorne fails to provide appropriate nuance concerning historical fact, historical context, and biblical truths. His goal is to set a new humanistic ethic and life next to the old Christian order so as to prove that the new "religion" is better. Of course, he had to place the old order in the worst possible light in order to pull this off. His first propositions are, in a nutshell: God's laws are unjust; the Puritans were evil, unrefined, old-fashioned, and hypocritical; the new order of things is much better.

Hawthorne finds it absurd that the Puritans would limit religious freedom. And it is true that the early colonists preferred that certain denominations such as Quakers, Congregationalists, and Baptists settle their own colonies. When proselytes from certain denominations would attempt to disrupt or to disunify other churches and communities, the magistrate would be forced to act. This makes little sense to the modern mind where there is almost absolute separation of church and state. Yet, Americans still limit religious freedom when it comes to practices like human sacrifice, smoking peyote, and Muslim jihad. Nevertheless, the bounds of religious liberty are never completely obvious. Does a Christian country prosecute human sacrifice, for example? Should the Immigration and Naturalization Service extradite all Muslims from the country or just those who are committed to religious Jihad? Most Americans seldom consider these sorts of nuances, and Hawthorne took full advantage of this confusion in order to condemn the Puritans for their stance. It does take wisdom to lay out proper boundaries for religious liberties. Over the centuries, the various Christian denominations have learned to live with each other in relative peace. Notwithstanding the earlier sectarian controversies, Congregationalist Puritans like Increase and Cotton Mather attended and supported the ordination of Baptist ministers in

Boston;²⁶ this is something else the Hawthorne would not have cared to admit.

Hawthorne's most successful ploy against Christian faith came with his attacks on the Puritan view of witchcraft. Admittedly, the Salem "witch trials" did demonstrate certain spiritual weaknesses that existed within the early American colonies. Around the same time frame, European witch hunts had eliminated thousands of alleged witches often using trumped up charges.

Before the age of humanism, Christian countries opposed witchcraft and took Biblical passages like Exodus 22:18, 2 Kings 23:24, and Deuteronomy 18:10 seriously. These texts recommend extradition or the death penalty for witchcraft. In an older era, such laws did not seem overly stringent. It is only after some 300 years of legalized witchcraft, Harry Potter, Ouija Boards, and Nathaniel Hawthorne that the national temperament has softened towards these social and moral abomination. Antipathy towards biblical texts like Exodus 22:18 among many Christians today is not uncommon. Is it possible that our culture has been influenced by witches and demons, or by Nathaniel Hawthorne perhaps?

We still maintain that there were serious problems with the Salem "witch hunt" proceedings because Puritan pastors admitted this to be the case. According to Increase Mather and other witnesses at the Salem witch trials, the court admitted "spectral evidence," or evidence based on dreams and visions instead of eyewitnesses. Biblical law requires two or three human witnesses (who themselves are not guilty of committing the same crime) to prove the innocence or the guilt of the party. What Hawthorne refuses to mention is that it was the Puritan pastors who put an end to the witch trials at Salem.²⁷ These are the very pastors he mocks in his stories.

The spiritual situation in New England in the late 17th century is worthy of consideration. Could there be a serious demonic attack upon the colonies at this time in Christian history? In retrospect 300 years later, it appears that something very bad happened at the beginning of the 17th century in this country. Harvard almost instantly turned against Christ and embraced liberal, Latitudinarian thinking. Within 75 years, the entire nation moved toward liberalism, unitarianism, and Deism. Humanist doctrines of socialism, communism, and feminism followed in the 19th century while witchcraft became an accepted norm in American life. (Today, the old Puritan East Church in Salem on the corner of Hardy and Essex Streets is a witch museum.)²⁸ In addition, during the 19th century, many cults found their way into the country, and the Christian faith lost significant cultural standing. Suffice it to say that something significant occurred in New England at the turn of the 18th century... and it had to be something of a spiritual nature.

²⁶ Michael G. Hall, *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 347.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 261, 262.

²⁸ Curley, Jerome, "Then & Now: History Within History-The Salem Witch Museum," *Salem Patch*, <<http://salem.patch.com/articles/then-now-history-within-history-the-salem-witch-museum>>

Internal Problems with the Story

There are multiple internal problems in Hawthorne's story that cannot be ignored as we consider this significant American novel which has played such a major role in high school literature classes during the demise of the Christian West. First of all, Hester Prynne is not convicted on the basis of two or three witnesses as would be required by Scripture (Deut. 19:15, 2 Cor. 13:1). In fact, from what we can tell that are no witnesses at the trial at all. Hester even refuses to testify. None of the townspeople are aware of the man with whom she has committed adultery, and for all they knew, she could have had the child by her husband. Technically, the story should have ended here. There was no legitimate civil case, and no basis for a story. Hester's stubborn refusal to implicate Dimmesdale throughout the story is strange. It is possible that she holds some hope for renewing a relationship with him. Whatever the case, she never comes across as humble, submissive, or repentant. We see in her behavior the developing persona of the 20th century feminist — a woman without law, completely free to act as she wills. Later in the story, Hester suggests that they run away to Europe together. Dimmesdale almost gives in to her appeal but later chooses to admit his guilt publicly. As is the case with many of the influential apostates, Hawthorne's agenda and conclusions are ambiguous. His writings are filled with doubts and vagueness. Nevertheless, there can be hardly a question that Hester Prynne is the heroine of the story as that is the way she is interpreted by nearly every literary critic who has reviewed the book. Most of the characters in the story are either scoundrels or the victim of scoundrels. The pseudo-Puritans are a misguided, despicable lot. Dimmesdale is a pitiable soul caught up in a misguided, absurd religion. Hester's husband, Chillingworth, is Hawthorne's villain because he plays on the conscience of Dimmesdale, convicting him of his sin and manipulating him towards a public confession. Evidently, Hawthorne does not like the conscience or people who stir the conscience. Hester's daughter Pearl is Rousseau's wild child — uncontrollable, rebellious, and free. She returns to Europe and becomes civilized (whatever that means). While it is clear that Hawthorne dislikes the Puritans, he presents Hester in the best possible light. She steadfastly opposes orthodox doctrine, she cares for the poor, and she acts as the female prophetess for women in the new age.

Theological Problems in *The Scarlet Letter*

The most serious problems with the book are theological. What makes this "classic" one of the most harmful books of the 19th century is its depiction of Christian theology? Hawthorne presents the worst possible Christian theological milieu in his hell-forged story. He sets the readers up for an anti biblical, humanist solution by creating a false dilemma in the lives of the protagonists. His is a cruel Christian world because it is based upon a cruel Christian soteriology (doctrine of salvation). In chapter three, the Reverend Wilson preaches a Gospel of damnation and repentance, carefully avoiding any mention of things like faith, grace, and Christ. It is this wry separation of faith and repentance which has done immeasurable damage to the church over the succeeding 150 years. Today, most churches prefer to preach a faith without repentance, which may be a knee-jerk reaction to Hawthorne's imbalanced pseudo-Puritans. In reality, one would have had to look long and hard to find even a single instance of a Puritan church that preached repentance without faith. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (referred to

in Chapter 8 of *Scarlet Letter*) was careful to never separate justification from sanctification. In fact, the confession requires the preaching of faith and repentance together in accordance with Paul's example in Acts 20:21.²⁹ Evidently, Hawthorne's Puritans failed to read their own Confession—strange Puritans indeed! Perhaps the most dreadful characterization of this crippled theology comes in Chapter 20 of the book where the Christian Bible is described as the "Hebrew" Scriptures. Imagine a Christian Bible without the New Testament! This is the height of the caricature. Hawthorne attempts to present a Bible without Christ because it is a Bible without the New Testament. What he may not know is that Christ insisted that the Old Testament spoke of Himself (Luke 24:27). Even if Hawthorne's real agenda was a complete repudiation of the Old Testament law with its inconvenient ethical code, he would still have contradicted what Christ said about the law during His ministry.

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:17.19)

Years ago, when I set out to study *The Scarlet Letter* for the first time, I did a computer word search of the text for the words "Christ" and "Jesus." I remember the eerie, sinking feeling that settled in my stomach as I came to realize that Hawthorne could only configure a Christ-less Christianity! He makes constant references to penitence and atonement, but it is self-atonement. Dimmesdale's "A" seared into his chest is one of the most vivid pictures of self-atonement in all of literary history. At the very climax of the story (in Chapter 23), Hester insists that they have been redeemed by all the suffering they have gone through. In this painfully twisted scene, Dimmesdale tells his congregants that God shows mercy by making people suffer for their sins, and this is how he is saved from being "lost forever? Of course, all of this makes a mockery of the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

There are two gospels presented by Hawthorne in the story, both counterfeits. The gospel of Hawthorne's pseudo-Puritans is law without grace, and repentance without faith in Jesus Christ. According to this pseudo gospel, one must self-atone by wearing a "scarlet letter" or by some other form of self-immolation. There may have been some fear of God amongst his characters, but they certainly lacked any true love for God and a willingness to keep His laws.

Then, set against the pseudo-Puritan gospel is the gospel of Hester and Hawthorne, which should be wry familiar to most Americans. This gospel presents some kind of love without law. It is a human definition of love, and from what we can tell, God is not the object of that love. It is a love that eludes definition: adulterers love their neighbor's wives, homosexuals love their friends, and cannibals love their victims—they taste good. Hawthorne's counterfeit gospel rejects both

²⁹ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 77, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 15.1

repentance and faith. Effectively, it is a gospel without atonement because there is no law broken. This element of the pseudo gospel is less obvious, but a careful reader will identify this gross autonomy in Hester's words and behavior.

Hawthorne leaves us with an empty gospel. Set against these false gospels is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This true gospel relies entirely on Christ's sacrifice for our sins and His resurrection from the dead. If we repent and turn to Christ in faith for salvation, we will be saved (Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 3:19, 16:31; Rom. 10:9).

Chapter 18 could have been written by the "Angel of Light" himself. It is the most daring chapter of all, especially for a 19th century author. Don't forget that Hawthorne is writing in the face of more than a thousand years of Christian social and moral structures which are not easily toppled. Nevertheless, this is a chapter that preaches the "gospel" of modern humanism loud and clear. It rushes into the soul like a "Flood of Sunshine," which happens to be the title of the chapter. For a brief moment, Dimmesdale is released from the "dark world" of Puritanism into that Flood of Sunshine. He becomes a "loving and cheerful man" for a few minutes as he runs back into the arms of the adulteress. Hester gives him the gospel of autonomy, suggesting that they run away to the continent together. Briefly, Dimmesdale experiences great freedom and a release of his burden of guilt. According to Hawthorne, Hester has "habituated herself to a latitude of speculation." She even recommends that they go outside of the settlement of the Christians and into the open wilderness with the natives where they will be "happy." Thus, Hester's freedom from guilt is associated with freedom from the demands of God's law.

In the same chapter, Hawthorne himself tries to excuse their "sin" as a sin of passion, as opposed to the "worse" sins of principle or purpose. Ergo: they really didn't mean to do it, and they violated no principle. They just got a little too emotional, a little too excited, and they didn't let their better judgment prevail. Towards the conclusion of the scene in the forest, Hawthorne insists that the two adulterers are meant to be together forever, eternally conjoined. He defines love outside of the bounds of the law of God. Surely Rudyard Kipling described modern man accurately as the one "who started by loving his neighbor, and ended by loving his wife." By now the reader should recognize this to be pure humanism, rooted in the ethical autonomy of the ancient Greeks.

Throughout the story, Hester refuses to submit to the laws of the state and the church concerning her adultery. She even imagines herself embracing the pagan ways of the Indians who could care less about the marriage covenant.³⁰ Hester comes to the point where she loses all respect for Christian laws and the Christian faith. Meanwhile, Mr. Dimmesdale finds it more difficult to escape the "prison" of Christianity. His faith in the new-found religion of humanism is not nearly as strong as Hester's. Even as he decides to continue his adulterous relationship further with Hester, he offers one more "Will you forgive me for this too?" up to the heavens.

³⁰ When Lewis and Clark set out across America and came upon Indian tribes, they found that it was not unusual for the natives to sell their wives (or even rent them) to the white men.

Importantly, this chapter presents the brightest moment in the whole wretched tale. It is a most hopeful and joyful moment because there is a pseudo joy that comes to a man or a woman who casts off the old moral order. For the last 150 years, the entire Western world has struggled hard to fully realize this chapter. Indeed, the gospel of Hawthorne has yielded fruit—bad fruit, but fruit nonetheless.

Some Christians point to Dimmesdale's public confession in the last chapter as proof that the story ends well. But the confession itself is presented as "self-atonement" in its shame and humiliation. There is no answer to be found in Christ, and Dimmesdale dies a miserable man. The reader cannot help but feel an emptiness and sadness in this poor man's demise.

There should be very little debate on the central moral thrust of the story because the author plainly gives it to us—three times (Chapter 24): "Be true. Be true. Be true." This becomes the highest ethic for the humanist. There is nothing here about obeying God, believing in Christ, and loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. The humanist ethic is simply, "Don't hide who you really are. Be yourself. Be true to yourself. If you are a cannibal or a murderer or adulterer, just admit the fact. Don't pretend to be somebody that you are not." However, Jesus Christ opposes this unbridled human autonomy. For Christ, the highest ethic for the Christian is to love God and keep His commandments (John 14:15, 1 John 5:2). It is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (1 COL 10:31).

The conclusion of the story does retain some intentional vagaries that are concerning to the Christian reader. If the author has an opportunity to recant or to adjust his trajectory, it would be at the end of the story. However, Hawthorn leaves us hanging, and we are even more concerned. After a hiatus in Europe, Hester returns to the town and dons the "scarlet letter" again. But now the townsfolk look upon the symbol with "awe and reverence." What does this mean? If the "scarlet letter" represents adultery, one should never look upon sin with awe and reverence. Or if the "scarlet letter" represents self-atonement, it is a false atonement, and this reverence would only detract from the glory due the cross of Christ. Adultery is a shameful thing and ought not to be viewed with anything but horror and reproach. Once more, Nathaniel Hawthorne launches a full frontal attack on the law of God.

In her waning years, Hester becomes a prophetess of sorts, providing counsel to those who come to her with "unyielded, rebellious hearts." From the beginning to the end of the story, she is the archetypal woman rebel of the 19th century. She bows to no one, and she opposes the old order with everything that is in her. This woman rebel is vividly reincarnated 60 years later in the form of Margaret Sanger, Margaret Mead, and other feminists. The modern independent woman is looking for "sex before marriage, and a job after marriage," to use Gloria Steinem's familiar words. In order to advance sexual independence for women, the floodgates opened to abortion on demand and the abortifacient pill (producing about a billion dead babies worldwide since 1980).

To the women who seek her counsel, Hester tells of some new truth that will come in the future. Nothing more about this truth is revealed, except that it is a truth that Hester will find more to her liking. This "truth" cannot be the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ because Hawthorne has already rejected 1,800 years of Christ. Therefore, this new truth must be something like a "new" humanist truth such as what we find in the Humanist Manifesto. Most likely this new truth will look a great deal like the old lie told in the garden: "You shall be as gods [determining] good and evil" (Genesis 3:5.8).

Conclusion

Hawthorne still halfheartedly recognizes some remnants of a Christian view of reality. Throughout, his characters offer lip service to God as Creator and Providential Sustainer. He also revels in his depiction of human guilt, yet he doesn't quite know what to do with it. Sigmund Freud will later explain it away completely for the liberated humanist of the 20th century.

Hawthorne's view of Satan is a little difficult to discern. It is clear from Hester's interaction with the witch, Mistress Hibbins, that the author wants to deny the supernatural, explaining these powers as something mechanical and scientific (confined to the material universe). At one point, he describes Mistress Hibbins as "insane," not demon. possessed. Clearly, he prefers Hester's autonomy over Mistress Hibbins weirdness. Hawthorne is moving towards humanism in his 19th century thinking as he attempts to separate what Hester is doing from the "mythical world of witchcraft." The Bible disagrees on this point, stating that "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft" (1 Sam. 15:23). Whether or not Hawthorne intends this to be the case, Hester and Hibbins are effectively of the same mind.

Of course, Hawthorne does interact with the Christian ideas of God, religion, providence, mercy, guilt, and atonement in his book because he must work from the baseline of a Christian heritage. However, the mere mention of these things does not imply that the author conveys the light perspective concerning them. What really matters is how he treats these subjects. It is important also to take note of what is missing from his message. There is no Christ, no Holy Spirit, no Trinity, no respect for God's law, and no effectual atonement. Hawthorne is abandoning the Christian faith and taking the world with him.

Nathaniel Hawthorne places the Christian reader in a false dilemma by first creating a straw man of Christianity scarcely recognizable by any true disciple of Christ. Either Hawthorne deliberately misrepresents the Christian gospel, or he misunderstands it, because the gospel of Christ is centered on the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

As the age of apostasy progressed, it is interesting that the Christian gospel came under a bout assault on this very point. It is the cross that has been the most offensive element to the modern humanists. A good many of the 19th century writers did retain some respect for the doctrines of the providence of God and the sovereignty of God. But they had to obfuscate the cross of Christ even though it is by the paver of the cross that the powers of darkness are crushed. The devil cannot tolerate the message of the cross!

The Scarlet Letter is a frontal attack on the Seventh Commandment. It Hawthorne's best shot at stripping back a social standard that had been in place for 1,500 years. If he was alive today, no doubt he would be delighted to learn that adultery has become commonplace in most Western societies. There are now websites dedicated to helping people commit adultery, and the social stigma is virtually gone.³¹ The divorce rate has increased by orders of magnitude in England and America since the 1830s. Most households are headed by single women like Hester Prynne, and fatherlessness is ubiquitous. What a crowning achievement for Nathaniel Hawthorne's vision!

"He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and had' counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" Web. 10:28, 29)

To listen to an audio recording where LDS youth discussed this chapter as well as statements by the Presidents of the Church on novels and other genres of literature, visit [Guardians of an Altar](#).

³¹ Helen Croyden, "Adultery Dating Websites: Three 'Happily' Married Men Explain Why They Go Online Looking for Affairs" *Mirror News*, <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/adultery-dating-websites-three-happily-1202044>>