

The Scarlet Letter (Nathaniel Hawthorne , 1850) [end of Chapter II]

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there 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 that she had borne. [...]

Yet there were intervals when the whole scene, in which she was the most conspicuous object, seemed to vanish from her eyes, or, at least, glimmered indistinctly before them, like a mass of imperfectly shaped and spectral images. Her mind, and especially her memory, was preternaturally active, and kept bringing up other scenes than this roughly hewn street of a little town, on the edge of the western wilderness: other faces than were lowering upon her from beneath the brims of those steeple-crowned hats. Reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, passages of infancy and school-days, sports, childish quarrels, and the little domestic traits of her maiden years, came swarming back upon her, intermingled with recollections of whatever was gravest in her subsequent life; one picture precisely as vivid as another; as if all were of similar importance, or all alike a play. Possibly, it was an instinctive device of her spirit to relieve itself by the exhibition of these phantasmagoric forms, from the cruel weight and hardness of the reality.

Be that as it might, the scaffold of the pillory was a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy. Standing on that miserable eminence, she saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home: a decayed house of grey stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a half obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of antique gentility. She saw her father's face, with its bold brow, and reverend white beard that flowed over the old-fashioned Elizabethan ruff; her mother's, too, with the look of heedful and anxious love which it always wore in her remembrance, and which, even since her death, had so often laid the impediment of a gentle remonstrance in her daughter's pathway. She saw her own face, glowing with girlish beauty, and illuminating all the interior of the dusky mirror in which she had been wont to gaze at it. There she beheld another countenance, of a man well stricken in years, a pale, thin, scholar-like visage, with eyes dim and bleared by the lamp-light that had served them to pore over many ponderous books. Yet those same bleared optics had a strange, penetrating power, when it was their owner's purpose to read the human soul. This figure of the study and the cloister, as Hester Prynne's womanly fancy failed not to recall, was slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle higher than the right. Next rose before her in memory's picture-gallery, the intricate and narrow thoroughfares, the tall, grey houses, the huge cathedrals, and the public edifices, ancient in date and quaint in architecture, of a continental city; where new life had awaited her, still in connexion with the misshapen scholar: a new life, but feeding itself on time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall. Lastly, in lieu of these shifting scenes, came back the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement, with all the townspeople assembled, and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne--yes, at herself--who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom.

Extract from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850):
Study how the reader's construction of Hester's situation hinges on point of view and vision.

GUIDAGE POUR LE COMMENTAIRE

IDEES à CLASSER dans les 3 parties:

- 1) All the more so when the framing and focussing effects are at their utmost.
- 2) Because we share the man's point of view, it is an invitation to read Hester's soul.
- 3) The narrator's attention is immediately drawn to Hester's beauty.
- 4) The kaleidoscopic vision we get is that of a stasis, of a confinement in an overwhelming and death-like present.
- 5) What first might appear as a hammering of the adulterous mother motif is rather iteration with a noteworthy change: the letter A = between branding and heraldry.
- 6) He resorts to Catholic images in order to construe a Protestant context.
- 7) Hawthorne's text is endowed with a gothic quality.
- 8) Expressions of concession pervade the narrative.
- 9) Travelling from one point of view to the other, sometimes in the same sentence entails a particular kind of omniscience and forces the reader to encompass the whole scene.
- 10) Whoever the focalizer, the narrator systematically reveals both sides of the same coin.
- 11) Contrast is between Hester and the rest of the world.
- 12) What we are presented with is a *palimpsest* of images.
- 13) It is difficult for the reader to identify the characters' positions clearly in the scene.
- 14) The nature of the images is itself ambiguous.
- 15) Ambiguity lies even in her perception of the images. They are visions imposed on her, while at the same time the process is described as a more active one.

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- 16) Our vision of the situation is even more complex: it is not only multilayered and multifocal. The text hinges not only on dialectics but also on *mise-en-abîme*.
- 17) The passage from one point of view (the spectators') to the other (Hester's) is very intricate and we can quote two hinge-lines that exemplify the ambiguous nature of narrative point of view in the text.
- 18) Although the narrating mode is that of *telling*, the passage is more akin to a literary *scene*; what counts is that the reader mentally shares the whole flow of Hester's visions, in their order of appearance, in their quality and in their mode of appearance.
- 19) Hester is characterized by contrast.
- 20) The *mise-en-abîme* is multiple.

PART I:

At first _____, Hester is characterized by contrast: she is the sinner among the Puritans; she is alone on the scaffold in front of the crowd ("all the townspeople assembled" (43)), she _____ "the taint of deepest sin" (6) and can be compared to a Madonna "only by contrast" (4-5) in the narrator's _____. The text opens with the pictorial _____ of "the image of Divine Maternity" (3), which at once introduces the predominant theme of sight in the passage and stresses the irreconcilable traits of Hester and that of the Virgin Mary.

Yet the narrator's attention is immediately drawn to Hester's beauty ("this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien" (1-2)) and her likeness to a Madonna seems to contradict a blunt _____ of her sins. The icon then becomes enigmatic and instantly worthless as a code to decipher Hester's character.

It is also very equivocal to resort to Catholic images in order to construe a Protestant context. The _____ ("Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans" (1)) entails a blurring of values that undermines the blame put on the adulterous mother.

The same can be _____ about the choice the narrator makes to frame the text with external focalisation, at the beginning and at the end of the extract. What first might appear as a hammering of the adulterous mother motif is rather iteration with a noteworthy change: what is originally presented as a sinful couple ("this beautiful woman (...) with the infant at her bosom" (1-2)) is now more individualized and focused on the letter A ("Hester Prynne (...) herself (...), an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom." (43-45). The oxymoronic juxtaposition of the infamous initial of adultery and the admiration for the embroidery _____ confusion between branding and heraldry, between sin and virtue.

Another instance of the dual interpretation of some elements of the setting is the reference to the "half obliterated shield of arms over the portal" of her "paternal home" in Hester's memory (24-25), this "token of antique gentility" (25) being the _____ to the "poverty-stricken aspect" (24) of the same house. Whoever the focalizer, the narrator systematically reveals both sides of the same coin: just as the house belongs to the two realms of riches & poverty, Hester belongs to both the virtuous and the sinful sphere. In the same manner, the "new life" which is _____ in line 40 is not completely separated from the old one: on the contrary, it "feed[s] itself on time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall" (40-41).

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Even the vision that is given of men and women in the patriarchal society in which she lives is never totally black or white: the _____ that emerges from the text is not depicted on a gender basis; contrast is between Hester and the rest of the world ("the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty" (7)). One could also _____ the passage when she sees her face "glowing with girlish beauty, and illuminating the dusky mirror" (30) in which she beholds her husband's (?) "dim" (32) "Yet" (33) "penetrating" eyes (34).

"Yet" appears as a key word to comment on the text, and expressions of concession pervade the narrative as the narrative instance not only depicts the elements of the scene but also analyzes them in a very dialectic way. One cannot but notice the phrase "that miserable eminence" (23) as the best _____ of the state of brinkmanship Hester finds herself in.

PART II:

We have just discussed the fact that Hester metaphorically stands on the moral line between two worlds, and it is striking to see that when we realize that, the narrative also stands on the edge of two points of view. The passage from one point of view (the spectators') to the other (Hester's) is very intricate and we can quote two hinge-lines that exemplify the ambiguous nature of narrative point of view in the text. The first _____ is in lines 9-10: "the whole scene, in which she was the most conspicuous object, seemed to vanish from her eyes", in which Hester is at once the object and the subject of vision. The second _____ is when the narrative _____ back to external point of view in line 43: "all the townspeople assembled, and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne - yes, at herself", in which Hester is both the watcher and the watched. The term "point of view" is itself used in line 21 in a very dual manner, as it refers to both the stage-like scaffold of the setting and the vantage point from which Hester can embrace the story of her life. Travelling from one point of view to the other, sometimes in the same sentence entails a particular kind of omniscience and forces the reader to encompass the whole scene.

For indeed, although the narrating mode is that of *telling*, as the _____ interventions of the narrator prove ("Yet"(9), "or, at least" (10), "Possibly" (19), "Be that as it might" (21)...), the _____ theme of sight and representation makes the passage more akin to a literary *scene*, that is an exact equation between discourse time and story time where the mode of narrative representation is *showing* rather than telling. As it were, the text _____ on the two modes, and reveals its hybrid nature: with such a text, the traditional modes of representation are null and _____; what counts is that the reader mentally shares the whole flow of Hester's visions, in their order of appearance, in their quality and in their mode of appearance.

What we are presented with is a palimpsest of images: "reminiscences" (14) superimposing themselves on the more substantial "cruel weight and hardness of reality" (20). One should note how these "imperfectly shaped and spectral images" (11), however indistinct, are much more likeable in Hester's mind than their _____ in reality ("other scenes than this roughly hewn street of a little town" (12-13)). The same remark can be _____ about the faces that come to her mind ("other faces than were lowering upon her from beneath the brims of those steeple-crowned hats" (13-14)). Note how the antithetical references to point of view in this sentence make it difficult for the reader to identify the characters' positions clearly in the scene: focalization fluctuates and our vision of Hester is pretty much like the "shifting scenes" (41-42) she herself _____.

The nature of the images is itself ambiguous: "the most trifling and immaterial" elements of her past life (15) are "intermingled with recollections of whatever was gravest in her subsequent life" (17). Ambiguity lies even in her perception of the images. They are visions imposed on her: "Her mind, and especially her memory (...) kept bringing up other scenes" (11-12); "Reminiscences (...) "came swarming back upon her"(16) or "rose before her in memory's picture gallery" (37)) while at the same time the process is described as a more active "instinctive device of her spirit to relieve itself by the exhibition of these phantasmagoric forms" (19-20).

Today, this could be _____ as a manifestation of the unconscious, but to a 1850 readership, Hester's "preternaturally active" mind (12) superimposing "phantasmagoric forms" on a realistic and hostile setting ("the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement" (42)) would primarily endow Hawthorne's text with a gothic quality. The immaterial veneer the narrative puts on what Hester actually beholds presents us with a multilayered vision in a multifocal scene. The dual term "exhibition" in line 19 is at the core of this prism.

COMMENTAIRE LITTÉRAIRE

PART III:

It is just one of the numerous instances of "double-entendre" in the text. We have already _____ on some of them ("point of view" (21); "miserable eminence" (23)). The phrase "levelling their stern regards" (43) is yet another example of the narrator's wilful play on equivocations and attempt at "levelling" antithetic points of view in the passage. But our vision of the situation is even more complex: it is not only multilayered and multifocal. The text hinges not only on dialectics but also on *mise-en-abîme* with the central theme of the "mirror".

In this light, line 30 is a typical example of the subtle _____ of point of view and vision in the passage: "She saw her own face, glowing with girlish beauty, and illuminating all the interior of the dusky mirror in which she had been wont to gaze at it." Hester sees her own girlish face in the mirror and it is her face's own illuminating nature that allows her to gaze at it. The *mise-en-abîme* confirms our first impression that there is more than meets the eye in this apparently contrastive world, but it also places us in front of the mirror, too, by her side and slightly at the back. In other words, we find ourselves in her husband's position ("There she beheld another countenance" (31)).

The *mise-en-abîme* is multiple since the "eyes dim and bleared by the lamp-light" that Hester beholds subtly become the eyes that behold her: "Yet those same bleared optics had a strange penetrating power, when it was their own purpose to read the human soul." (35). The expression "read the human soul" probably _____ to her husband's job, since he is the "figure of the study and the cloister" (35), but because we share the man's point of view at this precise moment of our reading, we cannot but interpret it as an invitation to read Hester's soul. All the more so when the framing and focussing effects are at their utmost: internal focalisation is framed by two paragraphs of external focalization, Hester's face is framed by the mirror and her "memory's picture gallery" functions in a _____ way: ["the scaffold of the pillory" (21) ["her happy infancy" ["her native village, in Old England" ["her paternal home" [her Puritan parents' faces ["her own face"] her Puritan husband's face and figure] "the study and the cloister"] "a continental city"] "a new life"] "the scaffold of the pillory" (44)].

As focalisation gradually _____ from the mirror, as if Hester was _____ after a hypnotic experience, we are mentally led back to the "miserable eminence" where she is standing, on the symbolic threshold that at once separates and joints her old and her future life. The kaleidoscopic vision we get, _____ to the various point of view effects, is that of a stasis, of a confinement in an overwhelming and death-like present.

COMMENTAIRE REDIGÉ

In this passage taken from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the main character, Hester Prynne, is standing on "the scaffold of the pillory" (21), facing "the crowd of Puritans" (1) who branded her with the A of Adultery. The text abounds in visual references and the most striking elements, as one reads, are the subtle shifts of points of view: from external focalization in the first lines to internal focalization (Hester's point of view), and then back to external focalization in the last few lines. The blending of points of view contributes to the more general ambiguous vision we get of Hester Prynne's situation.

Indeed, contrast is only apparent and antithetical values or references are always intermingled, making Hester's position much more equivocal than we might expect. Besides, the multiple points of view applied to a very visual text lead to a hybrid narrative, making the perception at once omniscient and blurred. Finally, on a symbolic level, through the prism of multiple focus and *mise-en-abîme*, the reader is led to envision Hester on the edge of her life and to acknowledge this passage as a narrative pivot in the story.

At first glance, Hester is characterized by contrast: she is the sinner among the Puritans; she is alone on the scaffold in front of the crowd ("all the townspeople assembled" (43)), she bears "the taint of deepest sin" (6) and can be compared to a Madonna "only by contrast" (4-5) in the narrator's mind. The text opens with the pictorial allegory of "the image of Divine Maternity" (3), which at once introduces the predominant theme of sight in the passage and stresses the irreconcilable traits of Hester and that of the Virgin Mary.

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Even the vision that is given of men and women in the patriarchal society in which she lives is never totally black or white: the chiaroscuro that emerges from the text is not depicted on a gender basis; contrast is between Hester and the rest of the world ("the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty" (7)). One could also quote the passage when she sees her face "glowing with girlish beauty, and illuminating the dusky mirror" (30) in which she beholds her husband's (?) "dim" (32) "Yet" (33) "penetrating" eyes (34).

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As focalisation gradually recoils from the mirror, as if Hester was awakening after a hypnotic experience, we are mentally led back to the "miserable eminence" where she is standing, on the symbolic threshold that at once separates and joints her old and her future life. The kaleidoscopic vision we get, thanks to the various point of view effects, is that of a stasis, of a confinement in an overwhelming and death-like present.

We have shown that the various travelling effects allow us to envision the scene from several vantage points and prevent us from construing elements of the plot in a Manichean way. As it were, we are led to transcend dialectically the contrastive aspects of Hester's life. Moreover, the kaleidoscopic perception of Hester's thoughts, provided by the prism of zooming, framing and mirroring, invites us to share her position on the threshold of her future life. And somehow, because the text is taken from the end of chapter II - that is, quite early in the plot - we find ourselves on a narrative threshold. We can easily foretell that the scarlet letter A will be a recurrent motif in the novel, yet we wonder whether Hester - presently on the borderland of death - will topple over the edge of the narrator's condemnation.