

The Scarlet Letter: A Critical Review

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Biogs

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, has become a classic American novel of such status that it is required reading in the US – a book with which Americans have such “epidemic familiarity” that it has become a “piece of hereditary memory” [1]. The book, set in 17th century Puritan Boston, tells the story of Hester Prynne who has a child as the result of an adulterous affair. For such a sin Hester is condemned, after a short period of public shame on the town's scaffold, to wear a letter A on her breast, signifying adultery, for the remainder of her life. This sentence is not universally supported – some of the crowd “amongst whom religion and law were almost identical” [2] considered the death penalty to be a more appropriate punishment for the crime. Hester does not, however, sew the plain and unadorned symbol the Puritan crowd expects; rather, she wears a letter created from “fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread” [3]. It is so artistically done that she scandalises the assembled women who comment on both her skill and Hester's ability to turn a badge of shame into a thing of beauty.

Hawthorne's story, however, is far more tangled than an account of Hester's life as an outsider. It slowly transpires that Arthur Dimmesdale, the town priest, is the unknown father of the child and wracked with guilt. Further, Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth, believed to have been lost at sea, returns at the moment of Hester's appearance on the pillory after which he dedicates himself to identifying the father; his medical and alchemical training, and a certain sensitivity to the conditions of the soul, enables him to quickly identify the priest as the guilty party. Manoeuvring himself into a position as personal physician to Dimmesdale, Chillingworth uses an almost constant application of words and chemical infusions to cause the priest intense emotional pain, which has the effect of torturing both Dimmesdale's body and mind. The priest develops a deathly appearance, “emaciated and white-cheeked” while Chillingworth himself becomes so consumed with revenge that he is slowly transformed into a diabolic shape – stooped, dark, mis-shapen and with eyes that emit “a glare of red light”. “In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office” [4].

The Scarlet Letter, then, is an account of four principal characters – Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and the daughter Pearl – their relationships with one another and within Puritan society. Their tale takes place against a background of strict social and religious codes, including notions of predestination, salvation, forgiveness and the role of penitence and good deeds. The novel does contain, however, allusions to an entirely different belief system - that of the Enlightenment. In spite of his religious faith and the “iron framework” of his belief system, Dimmesdale the priest detects an alternative way of perceiving the world:

“Not the less, however, though with a tremulous enjoyment, did he feel the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect than those with which he habitually held converse. It was as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study . . . But the air was too fresh and chill to be long breathed, with comfort.” [5]

Apart from the illegitimate Pearl - for whom life is one of independence, gaiety and provocative questions - this is the condition of Hawthorne's protagonists. Their actions take place against a background of boundaries (physical, metaphysical, civic, linguistic and behavioural) and their transgression. The microcosm of *The Scarlet Letter* is not one of limits, of definitive end points, but rather of edges, tangible and intangible, which are open to the possibility of being crossed. Such crossings are difficult, requiring the protagonists to negotiate a careful relationship with multiple Others – of the forest/wilderness and its freedoms/dangers; of magic; of the devil; of temptation and illicit sex. Hawthorne's novel is laced with codes and thresholds which beg investigation, and quite apart from the very obvious transgression from which the story emerges (the conception of Pearl) there are many others: the subversion of Hester's mark of shame to a thing of beauty; the role of the carnival as a place that sits outside, or beyond, the norms of accepted behaviours; the role of language and its ambiguities; the challenge to the role of the narrator; the challenge to the identity and location of self. The transgressions of *The Scarlet Letter*, then, are not limited to a single sexual misdemeanour; they embrace elements of liminality, ambiguity and otherness. Hester Prynne and her co-protagonists occupy a border territory that begins to provide useful analogies for our reading of transgression in relation to both body and space.

LIMINALITY

The Scarlet Letter is an exploration of life lived on, or between, edges. There is a liminal charge throughout the text, situating the protagonists within a realm of geographical, moral, linguistic, behavioural and symbolic uncertainties. The townspeople, and the four protagonists in particular, live within social constructs that range from regulations, principles and prejudices to the indeterminate and ambiguous: people are un-named or change names; there are secrets; things are said in the night-time, or in the forest, that are unsaid during daylight hours or in the market; the crowd will hear, but not listen; spoken words go unremembered, or even imagined and never spoken at all. Mirrors reflect distortions while a pool of sea water is so calm and clear that Pearl cannot be certain where she is located – which, indeed, is the reflection?

The tiny settlement of Boston is presented as “a roughly hewn street of a little town, on the edge of the Western wilderness” [6]. The protagonists live precariously between the vastness (and illicit opportunities) of “untamed forest” [7] and the sea which “in those old times, heaved, swelled and foamed very much at its own will, or subject only to the tempestuous wind” [8] separating the colony from the homelands and previous lives of the town's inhabitants.

From the very first pages of the book, there is a continual interplay between the idea of formal, civilized society and un-tamed ‘otherness’ of the wilderness. The prison from which Hester emerges is separated from the town by both an overgrown patch of weeds and a wild rose-bush with ‘its delicate gems...fragrance and fragile beauty.’ [9] The prison itself, indeed, is described as the ‘black flower’ [10] of a civilized society.

Hawthorne deploys the town, governed by human institutions, to represent society; controlled and limited by the rules of the church and civil establishment. The town can be read as rational and disciplined. The learned men of

the church are the ultimate symbols of the townspace (they even look like the town, with their “steeple-crowned hats” [11]). They are calm and orderly, using reason to arrive at an appropriate punishment for Hester’s transgression. The female townsfolk who demand harsher punishment represent, perhaps, human instinct and irrationality. Their desire for a harsher punishment for Hester (“the naughty baggage” [12]) emphasizes this society’s need to banish the disorder, mystery and melancholy of the irrational, instinctive natural world.

Characters such as the seafarers and the “Indians” clearly belong to these wild, disordered and ancient worlds but equally these spaces can be read as symbolic of the magical and beautiful. Mistress Hubbard (a minor character who we learn is later burned as a witch) is described as frequenting the dark, mysterious and unknowable forest. It is a space which implies a direct link to the sub-conscious, to natural and untamed instincts in sharp counterpoint to the rational, cerebral and formal order of the town.

A turning point in the narrative occurs seven years after the opening scene; Hester arranges to wait in the ‘primaevial forest’ [13] to speak to Dimmesdale. It is the first time they have been private together since the conception of Pearl, and it is a transformational moment. Pearl is happiest here in the forest. As she plays, a stream separates the child from Hester and Dimmesdale, indicative of her belonging to another sphere, reinforcing Hawthorne’s multiple references to her as an imp, elf or fairy. Indeed, (and even here Hawthorne’s narrator confesses to its improbability) even a wolf ‘smelt of Pearl’s robe, and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand.’ [14] In the forest, the adults can speak openly, they can embrace, confirming their ongoing love and conspiring to leave the settlement together. The scene offers the first hint of a release from the unremitting sadness of the tale. Dimmesdale goes through an almost miraculous transformation; his gait becomes stronger and he walks with a spring in his step; he returns from his visit to the woods transformed. Again a transgression occurs and things are forever changed.

This reading allows us to interpret transgression as not solely about stepping across into another territory, but somehow operating in undefined zones that hover ‘between’. These intermediary zones are uncertain and ambiguously defined, but this estranged space may also offer fresh insight and alternative ways of being. Hawthorne describes the way in which Hester is emancipated by her unique position:

“For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all 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.” [15]

HOUSE AND BODY

Hester’s house, a “lonesome dwelling” on land “too sterile for cultivation” [16] occupies a space on the far edge of the fragile little settlement; as Boston is described as a sliver of cultivation between sea and forest, Hester’s

house is further compressed, between the town and forest. It is a house which Vidler might describe as haunted or uncanny. There is in Hester's house "a mystic shadow of suspicion". [17]

Vidler notes how the haunted or uncanny house is a layered phenomenon – outwardly conventional and purposeful, yet embodying "a real sense out of place" [18] and subjected to imaginings and the possibilities of unearthly powers. "At any moment what seemed on the surface homely and comforting, secure and clear of superstition, might be reappropriated by something that should have remained secret but that nevertheless, through some chink in the shutters of progress, had returned." [19] Vidler relates how Victor Hugo described long empty but otherwise intact houses on the Channel Islands in *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (1866)[20]. Hugo described, in particular, one house on Guernsey which, though structurally intact, had long been empty and therefore become the site of story and superstition.

"There is a sacred horror in these stones. The darkness of these forbidden rooms is more than darkness: it is the unknown. After the sun goes down . . . the house is now open to dreams; and popular belief, which is both simple-minded and profound, peoples the sombre intimacies between this house and the darkness of night with apparitions, with evil spirits, with spectral faces dimly discerned, with masks surrounded by lurid light, with mysterious tumult of souls and shades. The house is haunted: no further explanation is needed." [21].

As Vidler observes, "only those on the margin would feel at home in so disquieting an abode" [22]. Hester Prynne is certainly on the margin – she would inhabit the house on Guernsey described by Hugo, just as she makes a home for herself in a house "built by an earlier settler, and abandoned". [23] Hawthorne's narrator describes how the house lies on the very outskirts of the town in isolation from all other dwellings, not quite hidden from view, although perhaps it ought to be. "A clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsular, did not so much conceal the cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed." [24]

Hawthorne's narrator often describes the "sympathy of nature" [25] by which the character and social standing of the protagonists, principally the female ones of Hester and Pearl, are echoed through the actions of, for example, sun, shade and water. The sun seems to perpetually shine on Pearl, while Hester inhabits darkness and is frequently described inhabiting, or stepping out from, shadows. Hester, like her house, is strongly associated with concealment. Indeed, "it was only the darkened house that could contain her". [26] That such containment, of a woman physically and institutionally on the margins, can be achieved by nothing but a darkened house can be understood within Hawthorne's development of Hester as a ghost. This description is occasionally delivered metaphorically. Hester is described as having "roots which she had struck into the soil" [27] and feels unable, therefore, to leave the colony, resulting in her lingering ghost-like upon the site in which her life is defined. Similarly, Hester is described standing apart from, but close to, society in similar fashion to the way a ghost will visit a familiar fireside, while much later, at the moment at which Hester and Dimmesdale meet on the forest path, they react with such awkwardness and surprise they are compared to spirits, recollecting an Earthly

connection, meeting in the afterlife: “Each a ghost, and awe-stricken at the other ghost!” [28] Elsewhere, though, Hester appears to actually become a ghost, rather than ghost-like. The grey colour and cut of Hester’s clothing has the effect of “making her fade personally out of sight and outline” while her habit of withdrawal causes her face to become inscrutable, bearing “the frozen calmness of a dead woman’s features”. [29] Towards the end of the novel Hester manages to leave the confines of the colony, an absence of some years which causes her to become something of a local legend, when:

“One afternoon some children were at play, when they beheld a tall woman, in a gray robe, approach the cottage door. In all those years it had never once been opened; but either she unlocked it, or the delaying wood and iron yielded to her hand, or she glided shadow-like through these impediments – and, at all events, went in.” [30]

Thus, Hester completes Vidler’s cycle of return, of revisitation, in order that a dwelling be properly characterised as uncanny: “something was not, then, merely haunted, but rather revisited by a power that was thought long dead”. [31] Except Hester is not dead – she merely has the qualities, even status, of the ghost in that she is described as disembodied. It is, of course, Hester’s body which occupies the centre of the story, while it is Hester’s reproduction which catalyses the narrative (not that the reader, or even narrator, is present at the moment of conception). Hawthorne’s narrator, however, makes clear that it is not simply the fact of Pearl, the illegitimate child, that leads to Hester’s badging and quasi-banishment; she is also punished for with-holding the name of the father. After an impassioned public appeal on the matter, the town’s senior clergyman, Reverend Mr Wilson, cries out “Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven’s mercy!” [32]

This reading of the uncanny, in relation to transgression reinforces the idea of liminality, but also introduces the way in which transgression unsettles. Hester as a ghost-like figure operates even between this life and the afterlife, denying even the fact of death. Her position unsettles the certainty of the town’s rules, and thus is a challenge to civic complacency. Her body co-constructs the meaning of the physical spaces she inhabits: the house, the townspace and the society that they represent.

LANGUAGE AND AMBIGUITY

The Scarlet Letter has a peculiar relationship with language and narrative. It is a story that begins in *media res*, and the reader learns nothing about the circumstances of Pearl’s conception or any emotional tie between Hester and Dimmesdale prior to the birth of their daughter. Hawthorne’s narrator is, in fact, an unreliable witness, veering from the omniscient scribe to the fallible and self-aware teller of a tale of which he is uncertain of all the facts – he even goes so far as to offer the reader a choice of endings. This is especially curious when one bears in mind the wider narrative framework of the novel in which Hawthorne sets out, through the semi-truthful prologue essay of *The Custom-House*, the following conceit: that he, Hawthorne, once worked as a customs official (true) and that one idle and rainy day he discovered (invented) a set of documents and the embroidered letter A from which he determines to develop a story. Indeed, Hawthorne writes that he will grant himself so

much license with this material that it will be even “as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention” (which they are). [33] Hawthorne is, writes Zwart, both “the scarlet letter’s discoverer-editor and creator-author” [34]. Within the complexity of this fiction dressed as fact / fact dressed as fiction, Hawthorne contrives a narrative laced with ambiguity and inference: the narrator becomes, at times, unable to confirm the veracity of all that he writes while, at a deeper level, the protagonists have a complex relationship with language itself. Moreover, this relationship with language, and what it signifies, becomes overtly linked to the body and identity.

On Dimmesdale’s return to the town after his forest rendezvous with Hester, he arrives so transformed that he cannot be sure whether the meeting has been one of godly liberation or devilish mischief-making. On his return to the town, all seems changed – everything is as he left it “but the same minister returned not from the forest”. [35] This sense of newness extends to his use of language. He becomes tempted to whisper obscenities to his parishioners, and fears that he is about to speak such “an intensely poisonous infusion” into the ear of an elderly widow that it might cause her to drop down dead. Dimmesdale cannot, after the event, remember what he said, and neither does the narrator reveal it to us other than to describe an expression of divine gratitude on the woman’s face afterwards. Elsewhere, Dimmesdale attempts to confess to his congregation, which hears nothing but the inspired exhortations of a spiritual man. “More than once . . . he actually had spoken! Spoken! . . . Could there be plainer speech than this? . . . They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more.” [36]

The clearest and most obvious reference to language, of course, is the letter A itself. Ostensibly symbolising “adultery”, the novel variously describes alternatives such as “angel” and “able”, while commentators have pointed out other references – it may be a reference to “Arthur” Dimmesdale, hinting at the name which Hester refuses to speak; even “America” which, like Pearl, has its origins in those 17th century New England settlements. “Authentic” is, too, a plausible reading, as is simply “ambiguous”. More widely, though, the letter can be understood as signifying both Hester’s body and language itself. As an indefinite article, the A may signify possibility. Equally, it represents the beginning of written language (and, indeed, of the novel which begins “A throng of bearded men”) as well as all beginnings – as well as the beginning of the story, the act of adultery, which is not described. The letter is, then, “an abbreviation or acronym for language as such, for the ushering in of the tools and possibility of linguistic signification”. [37] As the beginning of a sentence, of any sentence, Hawthorne uses the A to set up a multiplicity of meanings. On his arrival at Hester’s public shaming, Chillingworth (Hester’s husband, presumed dead) instantly assumes anonymity and a by-stander explains the crime and punishment. “A wise sentence!” answers Chillingworth [38], simultaneously commenting on the magistrates’ judgement, the by-stander’s account and the A itself. This sentence of a single letter becomes so closely identified with Hester that she is in danger of becoming text only: “If she entered a church . . . it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse” [39] while it is only the scarlet letter which rescues Hester from the “twilight indistinctness” described earlier, creating its own illumination by which Hester is identified and defined [40].

So closely, in fact, do letter and wearer become that Hester continues to suffer it long after she is permitted its removal. The scarlet letter does, in fact, become something of a talisman, affording Hester a certain “celebrity” status as a curiosity which has the advantage of creating about her a “magic circle” [41] of space which causes her to be alone in the crowd (while permitting her to have conversations out of ear-shot). Pearl, even from a very early age, detects the significance of the letter and even fashions her own from eel-grass and displays it proudly to her mother who declares “the green letter, and on thy childish bosom, has no purport”. Here, Hawthorne anticipates 20th century thinking on semiotics (as he does elsewhere in relation to other thinkers such as Foucault and Bakhtin) in which the constituent elements of the sign are developed:

“Every sign includes or implies three relations. To start with, an interior relation which unites its signifier to its signified; then two exterior relations: a virtual one that unites the sign to a specific reservoir of other signs it may be drawn from in order to be inserted in discourse; and an actual one that unites the sign to other signs in the discourse preceding or succeeding it.” [42]

In other words, Barthes is describing how a cross, for example, cannot be understood as a Christian symbol on its own terms; rather, there is a cross on the one hand (the signifier) and a meaning on the other (the signified), and through a process of cultural linkage the two become so closely linked as to become fused as a sign. Hester instinctively recognises this separation in her reading of Pearl’s green letter – it is a signifier only and means nothing. Hester’s letter, though, in scarlet, means so much that it also signifies “mother”. During her meeting with Dimmesdale in the forest Hester, for once, removes the letter and discards it; Pearl, however, refuses to acknowledge Hester without the sign and insists it be replaced. Once worn again, the “grey shadow” of Hester’s ghost-like presence reasserts itself: “Now thou art my mother indeed!” says Pearl joyfully, who then kisses not only Hester but the scarlet letter too. [43] What Pearl does, and Hester recognises regretfully, is move beyond the mechanics of symbol and engage with a system of space/body/object described by Merleau-Ponty. In his work on perception, Merleau-Ponty describes the relationships between people and objects as integrated rather than binary – that we relate to space through our bodies:

“We are rediscovering in every object a certain style of being that makes it a mirror of human modes of behaviour,” he writes. “The relationship between human beings and things is no longer one of distance and mastery . . . rather, the relationship is less clear cut: vertiginous proximity prevents us both from apprehending ourselves as a pure intellect separate from things and from defining things as pure objects lacking in all human attributes.”[44]

Thus Hester and the scarlet letter become so fused, the boundary between person and object so blurred, that the one defines the other. And that is one of the principal roles of Pearl throughout the book. Pearl is not just the evidence of the sexual encounter which gives the story its origin but (via a character that is fiendishly truthful, perceptive and naively honest); she is a reminder of the forest world, and an acknowledgement that the town needs its Others: the masculine / the feminine; the conscious / the unconscious; order / dis-order; the boundary /

the blur; the said / the unsaid. Further, Pearl is a device through which Hester and the scarlet letter become synonymous. At the book's end, after her return, Hester is described as "the recluse of the scarlet letter". Hester has become language, or at least the sign of it.

Hawthorne's use of language is therefore also transgressive in that he tests the limits of language, highlighting the ambiguity, uncertainty and even unreliability of his position. This reading reinforces an understanding of the self as more multiply constructed, less fixed and more ambiguous than might typically be understood. The transgressive voice is boldly radical in its ability to exceed the constraints of everyday, accepted practice to generate new knowledge and meaning.

The Carnival

Towards the climax of the book, Hawthorne brings together, temporarily, the opposing elements of his narrative through the event of 'Election Sunday' – both a civil and religious festival. This moment of carnival provides a release from the established norms of the puritanical community in which the book is set, allowing all characters to coexist within the same space. Indians and seafarers rub shoulders with townsfolk, elders and dignitaries. Behavior that would otherwise be prohibited (such as drinking, music and sports) is overlooked if not permitted, and there is an atmosphere of liberation, optimism, gaiety and hope. The carnival's use within the structure of the story offers potential for a Bakhtinian reading: where Bakhtin describes the carnival as a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions'[45]. Hawthorne releases his characters from their everyday duties and all are united temporarily by the festival – sharing a common humanity in their need for 'public joy' and hope (although tempered by the Puritan character: they "smiled grimly" and conduct themselves with "joyless deportment") [46]. Hester describes the scene to Pearl:

'The children have come from their schools, and the grown people from their workshops and their fields, on purpose to be happy. For today, a new man is beginning to rule over them; and so – as has been the custom of mankind ever since a nation was first gathered – they make merry and rejoice; as if a good and golden year were at length to pass over the poor old world!' [47]

This description is suggestive of renewal, and the potential for acts of transgression to become regenerative; a challenge to the norm which serves to either reinforce the existing order or to question and reinvent that order (some transgressions will retain their status as 'evil' whereas others may ultimately come to be assimilated). Hester also highlights the relationship between the manner in which space is used, and the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place; or as Tschumi would have it: 'Architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls'[48].

The festival leads Hester back to the place of her original pillory and, in the true spirit of the carnival, it is a place that is familiar, but significantly altered. It is at this event of temporary liberation that Hester, Dimmesdale

and Pearl are for the first time united in the presence of the whole community. It is here, finally, that the priest publicly acknowledges his part in the original transgression and weaves his own story of human weakness and shame into a final sermon before, as his final act, exposing his own chest and revealing a physical stigma upon it – a bodily constructed scarlet letter A, mirroring Hester’s socially constructed mark.

This scene can be read as a metaphor for Foucault’s critique of the way in which societies discipline and punish in order to maintain norms through subjection of the body: socially constructed rules are first maintained through external discipline (Hester is first incarcerated and then branded with the letter A), while over time that external control shifts to a personal form of self-discipline (it is Dimmesdale’s body which provides the punishment, the self-branding – but whether the mark is physical or imagined, as the narrator observes, is a moot point). Social constructs thus come to regulate our own individual behavior. This metaphor reinforces the opportunity for transgression to challenge the existing orders and hierarchies, and thus to be individually empowering.

Having wasted his body in the internalization of his guilt, Dimmesdale dies on the scaffold. It is at this point that female (Hester) and male (Dimmesdale), the sacred (symbolized through the reverend’s speech) and the profane (represented by Pearl), mental and physical, and even life and death are united. This coalescence of the contradictory realizes a final transgression, in which oppositions are denied, thus accepted limits are reconstituted [49]. Through this reconstitution, we can read a unification of that which had previously been considered as inherently segregated; a unification is a point of great suffering but also relief and happiness. The shame of transgressing from society’s order appears to be described as fundamentally part of the natural order of things: ‘Pearl kissed [Dimmesdale’s] lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it.’ [50]

Thus, for the first time, the book speaks of the way in which transgression can imply not just a change in the transgressors, but also that the transgression may have wider implications for the society which hosts it. In acknowledging the new unity, the town is slowly and subtly changed. The transgression and its punishment reinforces the need for order and thus reinforces the center (the way things are or should be), while simultaneously redefining that order. Pearl symbolizes, perhaps, the way in which a transgression may even be necessary – in order to continually question and challenge, but also ultimately to complete the accepted order. ‘It was as if she had been made afresh, out of new elements, and much perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime.’ [51] In Pearl we can see the potential for positive outcomes from transgression. She is freer and happier than the Puritan children. She is at home in the wilderness, but ultimately is accepted by the community and the wider world.

It is appropriate, then, that Hawthorne creates a carnival as the place for the final union of Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl. Bakhtin proposes that the carnival is a rejuvenative event that sits as a second life outside the serious world of ‘officialdom’[52]. In this way he reads the carnival as an essential way of exposing the ‘gay relativity’ of society’s rules in a way that has the potential to shift ‘authorities and truths, a shift of world orders’[53]. While Bakhtin’s interpretation of the carnival was not published until a century after Hawthorne’s book, still the narrative anticipates the three elements of Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnival – grotesque imagery, folk laughter and the marketplace. All are present in the revelatory scene and reinforce the allegory of societal change. Bakhtin sees the carnival as a place of liberation, popular protest, and thus a fundamental aspect of fully democratic social relations. It is important therefore, that this scene is played out in public, at an event that sits outside of the day-to-day, where the normal rules are suspended but in which the officialdom remains present.

The final paragraph of the book describes how Hester is finally buried near (but not immediately next to) Dimmesdale while sharing a gravestone. There is a suggestion, then, that the town comes to acknowledge – perhaps forgive, and perhaps even revere - the love that brought the two together. The dour, black gravestone is marked with a heraldic inscription which appears to burn like an “ever-glowing point of light” from the sombre slab of slate:

“ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES” [54]

To bring this reading closer to architecture, and the interplay between body and space, the Scarlet letter suggests a way of being/working/thinking that challenges accepted practices, in order to question unacceptable prevalences and deny the careless certainty of binary oppositions. The book reinforces notions of liminality and uncertainty to imply a move towards flexibility, multiplicity and ambiguity. This suggests an architectural endeavour that embraces hybridity, political and critical practice, trans-disciplinarity and operating at, or from beyond, the margins, to act as a force for change. This is not about the avant-garde. Transgression itself is inseparable from the constraints which gives rise to it; it implies a challenge that is bi-located both without *and* within. Whilst the act of transgression is itself is neither inherently good nor evil, it is however a fundamentally liberating force for change.

End of main text

Notes

1 Jane Zwart, “Initial Misgivings: Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter and the Forgery of American Origin.” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 59 (number 3). (Washington State University, 2013), 417.

- 2 Nathaniel Hawthorne , *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Penguin, 2003, first published 1850), 47.
- 3 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 50.
- 4 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 148.
- 5 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 109.
- 6 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 54
- 7 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 174
- 8 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 203
- 9 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 45
- 10 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 45
- 11 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 45
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- 34 Zwart “Initial Misgivings: Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* and the Forgery of American Origin”, 431.
- 35 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 189.
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- 37 Thomas Loebel, “A confession: How to Avoid Speaking the Name of the Father.” *Arizona Quarterly Review*, 59 (number 1). (Tucson: University of Arizona 10, 2003)

- 38 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 58.
- 39 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 77.
- 40 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 197.
- 41 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 204.
- 42 Roland Barthes, in Susan Sontag, *Barthes: selected writings* (Fontana/Collins, 1983), 211.
- 43 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 184.
- 44 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*. (Oxford: Routledge 2008), 50-54
- 45 Mikhael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (1965) in Pam Morris "The Bakhtin Reader", (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 199.
- 46 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 201-202
- 47 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 200
- 48 From one of Bernard Tschumi's 1978 Advertisements for Architecture presented as a part of his 'Architecture and Transgression' essay in Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1996 edition)
- 49 After Bernard Tschumi, who argues in *Architecture and Transgression* (1976) that since the paradoxical elements of concept and experience coexist within architectural projects, the paradoxical oppositions are denied, and therefore architecture is inherently transgressive. Published in Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1996), 67.
- 50 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 222
- 51 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p118
- 52 The carnival scene is therefore an apt place for the final coming together of Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl
- 53 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* p 127
- 54 This translates as 'On a black field, the letter A in red' and is reminiscent of Foucault's description of a flash of lightning at night, which "gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity", Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, (New York: Cornell University Press 1977), 35.

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