Hawthorne's Light & Dark in *The Scarlet Letter*

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So far in general, Nathaniel Hawthorn has been considered a moralist and an artist respectively. Many critical researches have made clear that Hawthorne's concern as a moralist is pride and isolation, or religiously speaking, the original sin and the fortunate fall, etc. On the other hand, artistical researches about symbol, allegory, and imagery as well as his theory of romance have recently become remarkable. Yet Hawthorne's concern lies in both. The two are closely connected with each other. This double concern of the moralist and the artist is adequately expressed in one of his sketches "The Old Apple Dealer," when he identifies himself with "the lover of the moral picturesque" (X, 439). And the remark from *American Notebooks* on October 7, 1837 that "the reason of the minute superiority of Nature's work over man's is, that the former works from the innermost germ, while the latter works merely superficially," which reminds us of Coleridge's organic principle, suggests that his inner and ethical world is one with the external and aesthetic world. Harry Levin is right when he says in his great critical work, *The Power of Blackness:* "His [Hawthorne's] position is so strategically taken between the ethical and the aesthetic spheres, that he retains his residence in both. As a moralist he propounds an austere message; as an artist, he gracefully illustrates it."[1)]

Hawthorne's moonbeams quivering in the darkness on the death scene of Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*, the mirror scene in "The Custom House," and the church scene in "My Kinsman Major Molineux," are essential to his world of romance, a neutral territory "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet." This interplay of light and dark makes F. O. Matthiessen and Harry Levin, our greatest scholars in English literature, compare Hawthorne's works to Rembrandt's pictures. Harry Levin writes:

> ... he was dazzled by the highlighted faces and the background of Rembrandt's portraiture, but, though we naturally think of Haw-

thorne's work in visual term, we speak more appropriately of delicate shading than of rich coloring.[2)]

Light and dark is easily reducible to white and black. For Hawthorne, the interplay of light and dark, white and black is not a mere description of external world, nor mere imagery. They are deeply rooted in the inner and spiritual world. This essay tries to make clear how the interplay of light and dark, white or red and black works from the inner sphere in Hawthorne's masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter.*

Before going into the main discussion, I would like to refer to "Young Goodman Brown," one of the short stories from *Mosses from an Old Manse*, and "My Kinsman Major Molineux," from *The Snow Image.* In the former tale, a hero who has the name of the title leaves his home at dusk and comes back at sunrise; he spends the intervening night in the forest and sees an evil side of the people whom he has believed to be good so far. Day and light is clearly emblematic of good, of the decent outward appearance of human convention and society. Night and dark is the domain of evil, where the witch meeting is going on. "My Kinsman Major Molineux" possesses the same correspondence as does "Young Goodman Brown." It begins at dusk and the hero passes into the troubles of night. As Goodman Brown enters the forest, Robin enters Boston, crossing alone the ferry. Major Molineux, who is emblematic of good in the daytime, turns out to be evil after the troubles in the dark night. These two tales possess comparatively simple and traditional correspondence of light and dark to the central themes of works. But *The Scarlet Letter,* Hawthorne's resolute ghost, requires more close and minute investigation. First, I study the ethical sphere of *The Scarlet Letter* briefly, and secondly, I will give light on how the easthetic sphere, that is, light and dark, white or red and black, is closely connected with the former one.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, who may be regarded as a specialist on the subject of comparative anguish, Americans tend to suffer from "an ambivalence of anguish,"[3)] and this is very typical of Hawthorne's great romance, *The Scarlet Letter.* The world of *The Scarlet Letter* is that of

conflict and tension. Hester Prynne's conflict is external with the outward world; the conflict between herself and the society. Hester Prynne, a woman of passion and freedom, who committed a sin of adultery, has a marked individuality and, far from repenting, says "what we did had a consecration of its own" (I, 195). Her existence is quite opposing to the Puritan society whose members condemned her severely and intolerantly. It is "the characteristic situation in Hawthorne," as R. W. B. Lewis says, "of the Emersonian figure, the man of hope, who by some frightful mischance has stumbled into the time-burdened world of Jonathan Edwards."[4] Hester is like a heroine of such romantics as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, who are contemporaries of Hawthorne. She devoted all her life to love as when Emerson added a postscript to his romantic poem:

> Leave all for Love;
> Yet, hear me, yet[5]

"I think I could turn and live with animals," she might have exclaimed with Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself":

> I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid and self-contained,
> I stand and look at them long and long.
>
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.[6]

Hester neither wept for her sin nor repented it. She might sing a song in praise of sex with Whitman. On the other hand, the Puritans represented by Jonathan Edwards, condemned her sin severely. Jonathan Edwards, who wrote *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, believed in man's depravity. But the Puritans surrounding Hester seemed to see guiltiness in another's mind instead of their own. They punished her and tried to make her repentant by giving a badge of shame, the scarlet letter. Her conflict is whether or not she accepts the society's condemnation.

After having stood on the scaffold confronting the crowd, Hester began to perform needlework services to them. Her handiwork was welcomed

and she continued her services so self-devotedly by giving of her little substance to every demand of poverty or by consoling the sick that she was even elevated to a Sister of Mercy. So far, Hester seems to have adapted herself to the society and to have accepted the letter A, imposed by the society. But she didn't completely accept the letter A nor was contrite. "The scarlet letter," as Hawthorne says with the emphasis of a one-sentence paragraph, "had not done its office" (I, 166). The scarlet letter, which Hester was forced to wear upon her bosom as a punishment of adultery, had not done its office of making her repentant. She just "wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind...."(I,166). Her life of suppressed emotion for seven years directly leads to the forest interview with Arthur Dimmesdale. There, in the forest, she yielded herself to love and passion and regained her romantic self. She planned to escape to Europe with Dimmesdale and undid the clasp of the scarlet letter. The casting of the letter aside is very emblematic in that she gave up her conflict with the society. But their plan of escape was never to be carried out nor did continue for a single hour her enjoyment of freedom without a badge of shame. Pearl's blame by pointing her finger at Hester's bosom compelled her to wear the letter A again. She went back to the Puritan settlement and continued to struggle with the society to the last. She neither escaped from the society nor adapted herself to it. She was just wavering so ambivalently between herself and the society.

Dimmesdale's conflict is, on the other hand, with himself. He is a Puritan clergyman and his sermon moves the crowd so much that people almost idolize him. There is no tension between him and the society. He is at once a slave of passion and a servant of the Lord. Hence Dimmesdale's tragedy.

Arthur Dimmesdale, who "hath done a wild thing... in the hot passion of his heart" (I, 137), and "has inherited a strong animal nature from his father or mother" (I, 130), is in a sense a romantic figure like Hester Prynne. Yet, he troubled his conscience and sought to accomplish the Puritan thesis, that is, public confession. Randall Steward stresses Hawthorne's defense of the Puritan public confession:

> For sinners, Hawthorne must have regarded the public confession of the Puritans, by which the guilt was laid open before the congregation and community, as preferable to private confessional of the Catholic Church, which did not sufficiently meet the social requirements.[7]

His inward trouble drove him to practices. He kept fasts and vigils night after night, and at last, came to the scaffold where Hester had lived through her first hour of public ignominy and where he should have stood with her as a partner of her adultery. There he stood with Hester and Pearl who chanced to pass by. But he said no to Pearl's inquiry if he would stand there with Hester and her the next noontide. Because "all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned upon him" (I, 158). In the forest, he yielded himself to instinct and passion again, and agreed with Hester to plan to flee. He ceased to struggle with himself as well as Hester gave up the struggle with the society. On his return from the interview with Hester, the excitement of his feelings lent him unaccustomed physical energy and gave him another look. He was incited to do some strange, wild, wicked thing and even wondered if he had made a contract with a fiend and signed it with his blood. So far, Dimmesdale seems to have completely yielded himself to passion and instinct. But he underwent a splendid transformation. On reaching his room he destroyed the manuscript of the Election Sermon to be delivered on the following day, and furiously set about writing a new sermon. His experiences after leaving Hester forced him back to the Puritan path. He, at last, confessed publicly by revealing his inward A and died. While Hester's trouble is given by the society, Dimmesdale's by himself. D. H. Lawrence calls the tension that between blood-consciousness and mind-consciousness:

> Nowadays men do hate the idea of dualism. It's no good, dual we are. The cross. If we accept the symbol, then, virtually the fact. We are divided against ourselves.
>
> For instance, the blood hates being known. Hence the profound instinct of privacy.
>
> And on the other hand, the mind and the spiritual consciousness of man simply hates the dark potency of blood acts: hates the genuine

> dark sensual orgasms, which do, for the time being, actually obliterate the mind and the spiritual consciousness, plunge them in a suffocating flood of darkness.[8)]

Whether the conflict is with the society or with oneself, the central theme of *The Scarlet Letter* is the wavering between two worlds. In no other novel is the agony so sharp nor intense.

And it must be added that Pearl, although she suffers no anguish, has an ambivalent and dual aspect of herself. She is at once a child of innocence and of guiltiness:

> . . . whose [Pearl's] innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion. (I, 89)

It is not by chance that the interplay of light and dark is most conspicuously seen where the tension of the work becomes highest: the second scaffold scene of Dimmesdale's night vigil and the forest scene of lover's rendezvous. The meaning of the light of a meteor gleaming wide over the dark sky upon the scaffold and of the sunshine bursting forth into the obscure forest is to be considered.

Impatient of anguish, Dimmesdale comes to the scaffold and summons there Hester and Pearl, who are returning homeward from the deathbed of Mr. Winthrop. Thus he stands on the scaffold where he should have stood seven years ago as a partner of Hester's sin of adultery and as a father of Pearl, their child. Just then, a light of one of meteors lights up the sky: "They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets" (I, 154). When the clergyman reveals his sin, it is no more dark. Light is emblematic of revelation of sin while dark, concealment. But it is a false and unnatural noon, because it is a private drama, a mockery of penitence. The pastor's revelation and confession here does not meet Hawthorne's defence of the Puritan public confession. He shrinks from Pearl's request to stand thus together in the broad light of the following noon. We must wait his public confession in the broad light of sunshine until the last scene.

The other is in the forest. There the lovers recognize "they still

passionately loved" (I, 193) each other. By love, Dimmesdale forgives Hester although she has concealed Chillingworth's identity. When they plan to flee, Hester's love for Dimmesdale makes her promise that she should not let him go alone. She unclasps the letter A and regains the whole richness of her beauty. All at once, forth bursts the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest. "Love," Hawthorne writes, "whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine . . ." (I, 203). It need hardly be said how important love is for Hawthorne.

Hawthorne's humanity is undeniably tainted and imperfect; from its common bond of love come warmth, sympathy and understanding. "Man must not disclaim his brotherhood, even with the guiltiest," he says in "Facy's Show Box," since, "though his hand be clean, his heart has surely been polluted by the flitting phantoms of iniquity" (IX, 226). This can lead to a sense of brotherhood, which Hawthorne calls "magnetic chain of humanity" (XI, 90) in "Ethan Brand." Howthorne's love should be a link of brotherhood, which begins with self-awakening that one is tainted and polluted.

Then, what about the case of the lovers in *The Scarlet Letter*? In their case, love is realized by the negation of their once committed sin, which is symbolized by her casting of the badge of shame, the letter A. They lost "the iron link of mutual crime" (I, 160), even as Ethan Brand lost his hold of "the magnetic chain of humanity." At the same time, Pearl, as a symbol of their passionate sin and as "the scarlet letter in another form" (I, 102 *et passim*), is rejected. Pearl, "as a living hierographic, in whom was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide" is no more "the oneness of their being" (I, 207). Hawthorne consciously again and again reflects Pearl in the mirror of the brook:

> In the brook beneath stood another child – another and the same, . . . Hester felt herself, . . . estranged from Pearl; as if the child, in her lonely ramble through the forest, had strayed out of the sphere in which she and her mother dwelt together, and now vainly seeking to return to it. (I, 208)

Pearl is now a shadow; no more a substance. The negation of Pearl as a symbol of their secret and as "the scarlet letter in another form" is expressed here in the form of a shadow reflected in the brook. To regain her identity, Pearl accuses their parents by pointing her finger to Hester's bosom. She is compelled to replace the token of shame, and as for the clergyman, his hand steals over his heart. There is no more flood of sunshine and gray shadow falls across Hester. Pearl comes back to her mother's side and is embraced in her arms. Thus Hester and Dimmesdale go back to the settlement where the struggle is waiting: as for Hester, a struggle with society, as for Dimmesdale, with himself. Their love, which begins with the negation of their once committed sin, is never to be accomplished. To speak in a different way, for Hawthorne, the sin once committed does not disappear to the last extremity, as is just illustrated in "The Birthmark," when a singular mark in the center of Georgiana's left cheek never disappears by any means until her death.

The antithetical imagery of light and dark can be treated as a matter of white and black. While the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick* has a complex meaning, Hawthorne's white and black has somewhat a simple and traditional one. White is emblematic of good and innocence; black is emblematic of evil and experience. In *The Marble Faun,* simple and innocent Hilda lives in a tower which haunt white doves. In the last carnival scene, Hilda is in a becoming white dress, while Miriam and Donatello, who committed murder, are masquerading in peasant costume with black visor. In *The Blithedale Romance,* Priscilla, who is also simple, innocent and in a white dress, is contrasted with sensual and proud Zenobia with black hair. The whiteness of Hilda and Priscilla is well balanced with the dark side of the story. But in *The Scarlet Letter* white is very scarce. White are Pearl's name and her feet. White are Dimmesdale's cheeks and his good fame as a clergyman. As an innocent child, Pearl is white, so is Dimmesdale as a pious pastor. But these sacred qualities are only one side of them, for Pearl is a child of guiltiness and the pastor committed the sin of passion. *The Scarlet Letter* is tragic and dark because of the lack of whiteness. For the light in this work, white is substituted by red not brighter than the one, as is shown by the heraldic ending: "...

relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow: —'on a field, sable, the letter A, gules' " (I, 264). This black and red antithesis successfully corresponds with the very beginning chapter. This chapter has no relevancy to the action of the story, but without it, this romance would completely lose its literary value. Hawthorne, as early as the first chapter, establishes the aesthetic framework of the story:

> Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, . . . (I, 48)

The prison, ugly and overgrown with weeds, is expressed as a black flower of civilized society. Civilized society is considered to be identified with a Puritan society, and the prison symbolizes their severe and intolerant condemnation of sin as well as sin itself. Hawthorne gives it the epithet of an unnatural and ugly flower of black. On the other hand, a wild rose, which is traditionally a symbol of passion and freedom, is completely contrasted with the black flower. Hawthorne continues:

> This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history: but whether it had merely survived out of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it, — or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison door, — we shall not take upon us to determine. (I, 48)

Ann Hutchinson, who preached antinominianism, which means against (*anti*) law (*nomia*) by Greek, was antagonistic to the Puritans who made much of law. The place where it had survived was a wilderness, which is also quite antagonistic to the civilized society. The wild rose-bush, which is thoroughly contrasted with the black flower, is thought to be red by color. This is obvious also from the point that Pearl, "who had been plucked by

her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door" (I, 112), is always associated with red: she cried for a red rose in the Governor's garden, and the venerable pastor, John Wilson, having heard that the child's name is Pearl, responds, "Pearl? – Reby, rather? – or Coral – or Red Rose, at least, judging from thy hue!" (I, 110).

This red and black contrast which begins at the first chapter and ends in the concluding heraldic sentence persists all through the story. In front of the jail, a throng of people is assembled in "sad-colored" garments and "gray" hats. The jail is marked with "weather-stains," which gives a "darker" aspect to the front (I, 45). Hester's eyes and hairs are black, and is dressed in sombre clothes. Dimmesdale is burdened with "the black secret of his soul" (I, 143). And he is dressed in black. As for Chillingworth, the spectator can see his "blackness" (I, 169) all the better because of his attempt to mask it with a smile. He says: "It has all been a dark necessity. . . . Let the black flower blossom as it may!" (I, 174).

On the other hand, red is the color of roses, the scarlet letter, and Pearl. Pearl is always associated with a red rose. And she, dressed in red, is "the scarlet letter in another form," though she has dark, glistening curls. Out of Chillingworth's eyes, there comes a glare of red light, though his soul is blackness. Thus, the most frequent colors are red and black. There are scarecely any other color in the story. The color images are not simply descriptive of the setting and characters. It is clear that Hawthorne employs the contrast intentionally and gives them moral values. The relation between the colors and the symbolic values is too complex to generalize, and as Hyatt H. Waggoner points out[9], should be grasped in context. But in short, they seem to be reduced into black flower and red rose antithesis. Red is the color of lovers, which stands for blood. Red is also the color of rose, which stands for passion and love. Pearl, who was born out of passion and has "strong affection" (I, 207, *et passim*), is in a red dress and passionate Hester wears the letter A whose color is red. And we cannot shake off the impression that there is some affinity between the A and the wild rose. For, when Hester stands before her judges in the opening scene, just two spots are red while the others are black and gray. A red rose is a flower of Hester as well as that of Pearl. It is

a flower of those who have passions and affections.

On the other hand, black is the color of the prison, the Puritan society, and the sin. It is the color of the gloomy and sombre society which condemns the sin of passion intolerantly. It is also the color of Unpardonable Sin, Hawthorne's worst sin commited by Chillingworth, who "has violated the sanctity of a human heart" (I, 195). And the red passion of the lovers has potency to become black, because they committed the sin of passion and as for Dimmesdale, he committed the sin of concealment, the sin against Puritanism. The relationship between the color and the meaning is sometimes unaccountable and even inverse, but it helps to check the story from presenting a mere allegorical mode.

So far, this essay has discussed aesthetic antithesis between light and dark, red and black, taking into account substance-shadow antithesis and color of white respectively. They are not mere imagery nor a superficial symbol which has only to do with a component part of the work, but they are deeply rooted in the inner sphere of the work and have organic relation to the whole work. The spiritual world of Hester, who is wavering between society and self, and that of Dimmesdale, who is wavering between the ambivalent self, appear on the surface of the work in the form of the aesthetic interplay of light and dark, red and black.

Notes

Quotations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's works in this essay are from *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962–). The number of volume and page is indicated after the quotation.

1) Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 68.
2) *Ibid.*, p. 38.
3) *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4) R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 113.
5) Frederick I. Carpenter, *American Literature and the Dream*, quoted in "Essay in Criticism," annexed to *The Scarlet Letter* (Norton), p. 289.
6) Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Complete Poetry & Selected Prose and Letters*, edited by Emory Holloway (London: Nonesuch Press, 1938), p. 56.

7) Randall Stewart, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Archon Books, 1970), p. 262.
8) D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 91.
9) Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 134.