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# The Red Light Romance: The Narrator's "inmost Me" in *The Scarlet Letter*

Mariko YOSHII

## 1. Introduction

Among many memorable scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), it is upon the meteor scene that the author seems to fully bestow his romantic imagination. Henry James notices that the scene is rather too romantic when the immense letter A appeared in the sky. He remarks on the idea of the letter A that Hawthorne "returns to it [the letter A] constantly, plays with it, and seems charmed by it" (113) and the letter A in the sky is "not moral tragedy, but physical comedy" (115). He judges the faults of this novel are the lack of reality and the abuse of the idea of the letter A. Hawthorne introduces varieties of the scarlet letter: the worn-out rag in "The Custom-House", the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's breast, the meteor in the sky, and Pearl wearing a red garb. We will analyze the reason of it in the romance, especially in the meteor scene.

## 2. The Neutral Territory on the Pillory

There is a suggestion that the meteor scene should enhance the element of romance even though it diminishes the reality of the novel. Evan Carton argues that the meteor scene contributes to represent Hawthorne's deceptive characterization of romance in more revelatory

way (113). The moonlight scene in “The Custom-House” is the most well known scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, even in the whole works of Hawthorne when he explains his way of creative romance.

Moonlight in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly, —making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility, —is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests. (29)

Under the moonlight, a domestic scenery is “so spiritualized”(29) and “becomes things of intellect” (29). Thus “the Actual and the Imaginary” meet there and “a neutral territory” (29) where the romantic imagination exercises appears.

On the other hand, the narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* depicts the meteor scene as follows:

[The light from the meteor] showed the familiar scene of the street, with the distinctness of mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light. [...] all were visible, but with a singularity of aspect that seemed to give another moral interpretation to things of this world than they had ever borne before. (101)

Comparing the moonlight scene and the meteor scene, and noting the resemblance between the ways of their representing things illuminated

by the unusual light, Carton claims that another kind of "the neutral territory" produced by Dimmesdale. As he ascends the scaffold in a midnight, he is imagining a red morning light will shine on everywhere and every people will awake and will find him standing on the scaffold. Soon afterwards, Hester, Pearl and Chillingworth really appear, and the real red light comes from the gigantic A which gives them strange view of the market place. Dimmesdale's visionary experience is shared by the entire community, and "the cloistered dream pictured in the passage from 'The Custom-House' " (113) becomes "the social reality of the passage from the novel" (113). Thus Hawthorne's aim as a romance writer is achieved dramatically in the particular scene. Carton's argument has certain validity, but it can be further said that there is sheer necessity of another neutral territory and another unusual light, instead of the *usual* moonlight which the romance writer always wants.

Many critics tend to omit quoting following passages when they argue Hawthorne's romance: the narrator of "The Custom-House" confesses uselessness of the power of moonlight.

But, for myself, during the whole of my Custom-House experience, moonlight and sunshine, and the glow of fire-light, were just alike in my regard; and neither of them was of one whit more avail than the twinkle of a tallow-candle. (30)

Through his surveyor life, the sluggish atmosphere of the place has penetrated him and has spoiled his vigor and has stiffened his sensibility. Under the power of "enervating magic" (31) the custom-house has, he is

possessed by “wretched numbness” (28). One day, however he finds the rag of the scarlet letter and the manuscript which contains the story of the letter and its wearer in the second story of his workplace. After finding the scarlet letter, the narrator happens to place the letter on his breast, and then he tells his sensation:

It seemed to me, —the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word, —it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor. (26)

This is the scene where the readers as well as the narrator first meet the scarlet letter. Reading the quotation above, we cannot but notice the exaggerated way of saying. Because of the exaggeration, we are aware of a kind of his humor and wit rather than his honesty and sincerity. It contrasts with the graveness and solemnness of Hester’s first appearance wearing the scarlet letter on the pillory in “The Market-Place”. Moreover it also deprives us of the narrator’s credibility in “The Custom-House” which is told to be written by what he calls “an autobiographical impulse” (7). So apparently this scene seems to only affect disadvantageous effect to this story.

This experience “recalled [his] mind, in some degree, to its old track” (27) and brought him to write the story of the scarlet letter. As for the document, the narrator neglects it because he is so fascinated with the scarlet letter. The document records “the life and conversation

of one Hester Prynne" (27). In the document she is "a very old, but not decrepit woman" (27) and "[it] had been for her habit, from almost immemorial date, to go about the country as a kind of voluntary nurse" (27) and "to give advice in all matters, especially those of the heart" (27). The narrator only comments on Hester's life that he "should imagine, [she] was looked upon by others as an intruder and a nuisance" (27). His rather indifferent comment shows not so much excitement as he shows toward the scarlet letter. Indeed the story which he afterward writes based on the document scarcely represents Hester's later years. It proves that what brought the apathetic narrator to write the story is not the document but the red rag of the letter A. The sensation of its burning heat gives him energy to write the story.

He complains that "[t]he characters of the narrative would not be warmed and rendered malleable by any heat that I could kindle at my intellectual forge" (28). He compares his imagination to fire or heat. It also shows that he wants such sensation as the scarlet letter had once given him.

Thus what the narrator wants then is a stimulus which can awaken him from the serious inertia: not the glimmering moonlight, but a strong radiance such as that from the meteor which could be sought only in visionary world. It is the radiance which is "so powerful" (101) that "it thoroughly illuminated the dense medium of cloud betwixt the sky and the earth" (101) and "showed the familiar scene of the street, with the distinctness of mid-day" (101) and "with the awfulness" (101).<sup>1)</sup>

### 3. Dimmesdale's Red Light

Dimmesdale, in the chapter of "The Leech and His Patient", utters his true feelings comparing himself to a murderer through the course of the conversation with Chillingworth:

Why should a wretched man, guilty, we will say, of murder, prefer to keep the dead corpse buried in his own heart, rather than fling it forth at once, and let *the universe* take care of it ! (88 Italics mine)

His assertion reveals succinctly his mind which has no hope of dissolving his guilt. The word "universe" proves he actually has no idea about where in this world his secret guilt or burden could be given up to. Meanwhile, when he ascends the pillory at the end of his lengthened vigils, he was struck with the feeling as if "*the universe* were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart" (98 Italics mine). This kind of a punishment by the universe is what he really wants from the bottom of his mind.

Just after the imaginary punishment by the universe, a light gleams over the sky with such a powerful radiance that seems "as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets" (102). At last, the punishment by the universe is realized. Dimmesdale "clasps both his hands over his breast, and casts his eyes towards the zenith" (102). The punishment reminds Dimmesdale of the Judgment Day. When Pearl requests that he should stand with her again at the tomorrow noontide, he answers like follows:

"At the great judgement day," whispered the minister [...].  
"Then and there, before the judgement-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I, must stand together. But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!"

Pearl laughed again.

But before Mr. Dimmesdale had done speaking, a light gleamed far and wide over all the muffled sky. (101)

Goethe writes in his *Theory of Colors* (1810) that it must be the bright red color that overspreads the sky and the earth on the Judgment Day (389), and the idea appears also in his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796): the old harp player who has been tortured by guilt longs for the morning sun which will blaze over the earth. The light which judges him is no more torture but a relief. Light itself also has power to reduce such torture: in darkness man is inclined to look into his own mind full of dark thoughts because there is no outside stimulus, and he can not stop ideas floating through the mind. On the other hand, the light overpowers man's reason and robs him of such dark feelings, thoughts and imaginings (Chijiwa 94). As for Dimmesdale, the Judgment Day is the only hopeful future that he really wishes to come. He repeatedly mentions the Judgment Day and fancies the time when he yield up his secrets at the day "with a joy unutterable" (88). He regards the revelation of sin as being "meant merely to promote the intellectual satisfaction of all intelligent beings" (88). He has no idea of standing before the judgment seat during his lifetime.

The experience on the pillory brings him to change his mind: after



that he shows his new idea that if he really had had penitence, he “should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown [himself] to mankind as they will see [him] at the judgment-seat” (124). It could be said that he firstly can confront the real world letting go of the hope of the Judgment Day. He finds a new prospect in his future. The meteor scene, therefore, does not only stand for Dimmesdale’s visionary Judgment Day but operates as a big device for carrying forward both Dimmesdale and the story itself to the climax — Dimmesdale’s confession on the same pillory.

#### 4. The Narrator’s Red Light

The narrator behaves generally as a normal third-person narrator throughout the story of the scarlet letter, yet he makes deliberate excuses about the Dimmesdale’s witnessing of the meteor as follows.

[...] it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul’s history and fate!

We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter, —the letter A—marked out in lines of dull red light. (102)

The narrator’s long preliminary excuse proves his hesitate to tell us the

variety of the letter in the sky. He seems to fully know his overusing of the idea of the letter A as a romantic device. By saying the meteor may have shown itself "with no such shape as [Dimmesdale's] guilty imagination gave it" (102), he forces all responsibility for the overuse of the scarlet letter images only onto Dimmesdale's eyes and gives up his responsibility as the author. He even seems to blame Dimmesdale for seeing the letter, and he leads him to reintroduce another version of the scarlet letter.

The narrator, however, acknowledges the presence of the meteor by providing another witness: a sexton who addresses his remark that the letter A in the sky stands for Angel, which permits the narrative to assume ambiguousness. Although the narrator himself tells the credibility depends on "the faith of some lonely eye-witness" (102) who sees it "through the colored, magnifying, and distorting medium of his imagination" (102) and "shape[s] it more distinctly in his after-thought" (102), this very witness is no other than the narrator himself because it is he who has read the original document of this story. All of the events in this story are produced by the only reader of the document, and therefore the credibility lies on him.

From the beginning of "The Custom-House", the narrator has taken an ambiguous position about where the authority lies. He tells that because of his "desire to put [himself] in my true position as editor, or very little more" (8), he offers "proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained" (8), namely, the document and the rag of the letter A. When he introduces the document, however, he dares to say he has allowed himself "as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license

as if the facts had been entirely of [his] own invention" (27). What lies behind his attitude toward authority of the novel is his hesitation in declaring the whole story to be derived from his imagination.

The narrator thinks he should not be too autobiographical because it is scarcely decorous "to speak all, even where we speak impersonally" (7), and he wants to keep his "inmost Me" (7) behind a veil. It is needless to say that for an author writing a story is always nothing less than revealing his inside, for every sentence is a product of his thoughts, experiences, memories or imagination. It is the first reason for his hesitation that he wants to keep his inside secret.

An author tends to hide his inside especially when his thoughts or imagination lacks proper condition. The narrator in *The Scarlet Letter*, suffers from "wretched numbness" and almost loses the energy not only for writing novels, but for living proper everyday life. His state of mind is serious enough to gain energy from the mere red rag by putting it on his breast. His reaction toward the scarlet letter shows exactly what Deborah Sharpe explains "a compensatory reaction to the bleakness of their inner lives and/or an expression of a need for an emerging stimulus" (135) or "the homeostatic process whereby the organism is always striving for equilibrium" (135). His serious condition of mind is the second reason for his hesitation for declaring authority.

Although the narrator's reaction to the scarlet letter is a symptom of serious mental condition, yet the behavior itself elicits laughter. It is no other than what James calls "physical comedy" to experience "a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat", namely, to try to gain energy for writing a novel from a mere rag. As

his words "the reader may smile" suggest, the narrator knows how his behavior looks foolish. It also consists in his reason why he tries to hide his "inmost Me" from the reader and therefore not claiming authority. His novel is so closely intertwined with his "inmost Me".

The narrator's excuse for the meteor does not show his accusation against Dimmesdale. It suggests his intent not to be in conspiracy with Dimmesdale as witnessing the meteor. He fully knows that "it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state" not only of Dimmesdale, but also of himself. The narrator's long excuse is not only for Dimmesdale but also for himself.

Dimmesdale has long been suffered from the pain of guilt and could have only hope The Judgment Day. He needs to witness the letter A in the sky, the punishment by the universe in order to confront his real life and sin which should have to be judged in his lifetime. He needs to witness it even if it proves only "the symptom of a highly disordered mental state" and seemed "physical comedy". The narrator knows it, and his vindication turns to prove his sympathies with Dimmesdale's state of mind.

The narrator who also suffers from disordered mental state activates his romantic imagination by imagining the strong radiance from the sky and substitutes it for the feeble moonlight. He successfully represents the power of the scarlet letter which his mind really wants, and at the same time he can dexterously hide his apathy, namely, the "inmost Me" behind Dimmesdale's state of mind. We can say that the meteor scene vividly represents the narrator's romantic imagination because it reveals the struggle of both Dimmesdale and the narrator. Hawthorne writes in

the preface of the next novel *The House of The Seven Gables* (1851) as the follows:

[Romance] [...] has fairly a right to present that truth [of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he thinks fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the light and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish to the Public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution. (3)

Hawthorne's definition of romance explains exactly what the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* tries to do in the meteor scene. That is, the scene needs the immense letter A in the sky because their minds seriously want the sensation of the scarlet letter, even if it seems rather comical for Dimmesdale and the narrator.

The sentence in "Conclusion" also suggests his intended overuse of the letter.

We have thrown all the light we could acquire upon the portent, and would gladly, now that it has done its office, erase its deep print out of our own brain; where long meditation has fixed it in very undesirable distinctness. (163)

At this point the scarlet letter has been branded on the narrator's brain in such distinctness that he explains it as "very undesirable". The words "very undesirable" show that he has depended on the scarlet letter while writing this story and that he manages to recover from the inertia because the fascination with the letter means a realization of the recovery of his inertia. The repeated use of the images of the letter A gives disclosed the narrator's effect to regain his energy to live life alive which had in his daily duties in the custom house.

## 5. Conclusion

It is without doubt that the abuse of the letter A deprives the story of the reality as a novel, but it contributes to represent a different kind of reality. If Hawthorne's romance dedicates itself to represent the same truth of a human heart as the preface of *The House of the Seven Gables* explains, *The Scarlet Letter* certainly has "romantic reality". In the most part of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator keeps being a neutral third-person narrator, and therefore it is difficult to characterize him, but careful reading reveals his struggle to write this kind of story to recover his life energy. He tells he wants to hide his "inmost Me" from the reader, but it is obvious that *The Scarlet Letter* is intended to write as a story of the narrator's struggle and recovery, because the narrator tells us "The Custom-House", where he has been minutely described as a depressed custom officer, which he could have omit. The narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* plays the same (important) role as the characters such as Hester and Dimmesdale in the romance which pursuits not simple

reality but romantic reality.

### Notes

- 1) For a detailed analysis on the narrator's fascination with the scarlet letter in "The Custom-House", see Mariko Yoshii, "What the Narrator Saw in the Scarlet: On the Narrator in the Scarlet Letter" *Forum* 15 (2010) 19-36.

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## SUMMARY

The Red Light Romance:  
The Narrator's "inmost Me" in *The Scarlet Letter*

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In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the image of the scarlet letter repeatedly appears and it seems to deprive the novel of the reality. The letter A in the sky which Dimmesdale witnesses is the suitable example of it. The scene is a turning point for Dimmesdale and the plot of the novel, for he could let go his hope for the Last Judgment and confront his real life by witnessing the meteor of the letter A. He is relieved by the light of the meteor and comes to think he should confess his sin in his lifetime.

The narrator is suffered from wretched numbness and lacks energy to live proper life and write novels. Then he is fascinated with the rag of the letter A which he finds in the custom-house. He feels strong sensation from the letter, and by writing the story of the letter he tries to regain the energy. Especially by representing the light of meteor he produces the place he calls "a neutral territory", and exercises his romantic imagination.

The novel's repeated appearance of the letter A proves the narrator's desperate struggle to gain energy. Describing the meteor scene and Dimmesdale who also suffers from disordered mental state, the narrator tries to exercise full of his imagination and in the course of writing he can recover from the inertia.

**Keywords** : Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, narrator, romance, the scarlet letter in the sky