STRUCTURE AND THEME IN HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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Rezumat

Lucrarea este o incursiune în tiparele structurale folosite de Hawthorne în The Scarlet Letter. Relevând particularităţilele stilului lui Hawthorne (american, sec. IX), autorul analizează narativul ca modalitate de construcţie a discursului practicat în proza scurtă şi lungă. Simplitatea structurilor, economia strict naratologică, de expresie şi limbaj au dus la crearea unei structuri solide, care, prin armonia şi simetria tiparelor, concură la expunerea nuanţată, alegorică, dar simultan şi la coerenţa temei.

The following paper has in view an incursion into some of the structural patterns and devices Hawthorne used in his romance, *The Scarlet Letter*. The incursion starts from his two short stories, "The Hollow of the Three Hills" and "Rappaccini's' Daughter". They remind us of the same patterns and devices used in his long romances and contribute to bring into relief the themes Hawthorne approached in both his short stories and romances.

When reading Hawthorne, we are struck from the very beginning by the remarkable skill of his narrative exposition. He used simple structural principles that, paradoxically, realized power and symmetry, and reinforced the theme by the structure, such as:

- two separate threads interweave (e.g. in "The Rappaccini's Daughter", where major parts intermingle with minor parts)
- same images that provide a pleasing symmetry appear at the beginning and at the end (e.g. the window in "The Rappaccini's Daughter" and the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter*)
- symmetrical designs are built around pivotal scenes (the three scenes of guilt from the past of the young woman that the old crone invokes in "The Hollow of the Three Hills", the three scenes on the scaffold of the pillory in *The Scarlet Letter*)

Everything reveals a persistent feature of Hawthorne's art of the novel, his **strict economy**. This is most perfectly shown by the relation between theme and structural devices. This complex relation Hawthorne achieves:

- by the circle motif (most perfectly showing the relation between theme and structure)
- between outer and inner world
- between things (e.g. the scaffold, the forest) and inner experience
- between physical and metaphorical appearance
- between setting and characters' personality types
- by the perfect number three (Pythagoras calls it the *perfect number*, expressive of beginning, middle and end; also a symbol of deity). This is also seen, according to

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> *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* in Trinity (Christian creed), man is threefold (body, mind and spirit), the world is threefold (earth, sea, and air), the enemies of men are threefold (the world, the flesh, and the devil), the Christian graces are threefold (Faith, Hope, and Charity), the Kingdoms of Nature are threefold (animal, vegetable, and mineral), and the Cardinal colours are three in number (red, yellow, and blue).

In "The Hollow of the Three Hills" the old crone invokes three scenes of guilt from the past of the young woman. Hawthorne's full-length romances have the same structure. One needs only remind oneself of the three pivotal scenes on the scaffold at the beginning, middle, and end of *The Scarlet Letter* to realize what power and symmetry Hawthorne achieved with this simple structural principle.

The structure of "Rappaccini's Daughter" is made up of seven parts. The first, third, fifth, and seventh are major sections and carry the main action of the story. The second, fourth, and sixth are minor parts, and here the action tends to stand still. The major parts show the increasing influence of Rappaccini's garden and narrate the details, which keep the story rolling along to its outcome. The minor parts deal with Giovanni's relationship to Signor Baglioni. They also gradually draw Baglioni into the principal stream of the story. Beatrice's death is the direct result of Baglioni's antidote and is his means of destroying Rappaccini's scientific experiment. Baglioni's appearance at the end of the story and his question, which is the final line, "'and is *the* upshot of their experiment?'" completes the interweaving of the two separate threads. The **central theme** of the story can be stated simply enough. The inner world of human experience is a complex and ambiguous mixture of good and evil - the evil here taking shape in the two extremes of intellectual pride (in the person of Rappaccini) and gross materialism (in the person of Baglioni). They are static figures, designed to provide a framework for the two central and developing characters of Beatrice and her lover Giovanni. The structure of the story reinforces our statement of its theme. There is a house and a garden, an outer and an inner world. In the beginning we see Giovanni's fair head framed by the window. He is somewhat homesick but not yet bewildered by the ambiguities and intricacies of the inner world. The masterly ending does more than provide a pleasing symmetry. We see the window again; but the face of Giovanni has been supplanted - obliterated, one might say - by the triumphant countenance of Baglioni, who has never entered the inner world. His loud voice confirms the triumph of the external, the superficial, the mediocre.

A number of critics, among whom **Leland Schubert**, advanced the idea that Hawthorne's ability to realize well-thought plots deteriorated after he had written his best composition, *The Scarlet Letter*. Schubert even ranked Hawthorne's novels according to his skill in handling form in art: *The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, The_Blithedale Romance*, and the least achieved thematically and structurally*, The Marble Faun.*

Leland Schubert has nothing but praise for the structural excellence of *The Scarlet Letter*. He sees the "*pattern of the story*" as "*clear and beautiful. It is built around the scaffold. At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the story the scaffold is the dominating point. Just as it literally rises above the market-place, so does it structurally rise out of the novel's plan and attribute pattern to it*" (*Hawthorne, the Artist: Fine-art Devices in Fiction*: 1963: 138). In chapter two, Hester is taken up on the scaffold where she endures her public shaming. In chapter twelve, midway through the book, Dimmesdale, who has been driven almost crazy by his guilt but has lacked the resolution to confess it, mounts the scaffold one midnight for self-torture, and is joined by Hester, on her way home from watching at a deathbed, and there they are overseen by

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Chillingworth. In chapter twenty-three, Dimmesdale takes Hester and Pearl up there with him; there, also, at the end, just after his own knowledge of suffering has endowed his tongue with eloquence in his great election sermon, the exhausted and death-stricken minister staggers to confess his sin at last to the incredulous and only half-comprehending crowd, and to die in Hester's arms. These three incidents are, in every sense, the high points of the novel.

F. O. Matthiessen has arrived at a somewhat similar conclusion. He accounts for the superiority of *The Scarlet Letter* on the grounds that: "*Here Hawthorne has developed his most coherent plot. Its symmetrical design is built around the three scenes on the scaffold of the pillory*" (*American Renaissance*: 1941: 275)

John C. Gerber sees that the "form of The Scarlet Letter is actually a four-part division, in each of which parts one character is central: in part one (Chapters I-VIII) the Puritan community; in part two (Chapters IX-XII) Chillingworth; in part three (Chapters XIII-XX) Hester; and in part four (Chapters XXI-XXIV) Dimmesdale." ("Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*": 1944: 25).

Malcolm Cowley has gone even farther, and described it as "*a tragic drama divided into five big acts or tableaux that Hawthorne concentrated his talent as a stage designer and his mastery of lighting effect, not to mention his insight into the guilty heart*." According to him, these five acts take place (1) in the market-place at Boston, when Hester Prynne is exposed to the populace, (2) in Dimmesdale's chamber, when Chillingworth is probing him in order to discover the cause of his mysterious illness, (3) in the market-place again, this time on the scaffold at midnight, (4) in the forest, and (5) again in the market-place, the final climactic scene where the meaning of the letter is revealed. ("100 Years Ago: Hawthorne Set a Great New Pattern": 1950: 1, 13). This five-act structure is actually not so different from the three-act structure discussed previously as it might first appear, since three of the five acts, as **Cowley** sees them, are the pivotal scenes around the scaffold in the market-place.

Actually, what is really important to consider when speaking about *The Scarlet Letter* is the remarkable skill of Hawthorne's narrative exposition. Everything that he tells us contributes to our understanding and visualization of highly charged scenes, starting from the very first scene when Hester mounts the scaffold for the first time, the moment coinciding with the recognition of her husband, Chillingworth who is watching her inquisitively and blamingly. Everything reveals a persistent feature of Hawthorne's art of the novel, his **strict economy.** A consideration of the first chapter of the book will highlight the appropriateness of the opening scene as a suggestive introduction to the novel's major concerns and, implicitly, his mastery of his new craft.

The first scene of the romance involves the punishment of the convicted adulteress, Hester Prynne, by public exposure on the scaffold in the Boston marketplace. The scene unfolds at a slow and deliberate pace. Before he allows Hester to appear, Hawthorne focuses our attention on the prison door, meditating on it in such a way as both to localize it in a specific time and place and to see in it a "*black flower of civilized society*" (*The Scarlet Letter*: 77). Then, he allows the point of view to pass over to other observers of this scene, a group of Puritan women. In their comments - ranging from a legalistic, punitive desire to brand or execute the adulteress to a softer voice that recognizes the anguish of the victim of punishment - Hawthorne affords us a series of vantage points by which to frame our own initial response to Hester. But in offering possible attitudes in this way, the women do not cease to be participants in a specific scene. They are part of the audience before which Hester is to be exposed, and, by surrounding Hester's emergence with their reactions Hawthorne makes us see the experience of his main characters from the first as being bounded by, as well as, the affair of a larger society. His own commentary emphasizes the nature of the

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community the women represent. He contrasts them with the paler women of his own day, he sees their coarseness of body and speech in relation to a specific moment in a historical evolution. In their concern with the rigid administration of punishment to a criminal and sinner they exhibit the special outlook of "*a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical*" (78). Through them we recognize the values by which their society defines itself and also the quality of private feeling that upholds those values, "*the general sentiment which gives law its vitality*" (78)

By choosing the punishment of Hester as his first scene Hawthorne is able to reveal the Puritan community in what seems to him its most essential aspect, enacting its deepest social and religious values. Unlike the tendency of the Puritan community toward restriction, and fixity, Hester's attitude is presented as one of free expression, willing to be recognized as an individual person with her own needs, desires and powers. This is the moment when Hawhorne changes his perspective from the community to Hester. As Hester mounts the scaffold Hawthorne adopts her point of view, measuring the nature of the assembled crowd now by registering its presence to her consciousness. As he notes her urge to reckless defiance, her anguished shame, and her peculiar defenselessness against the solemnity of the occasion, he qualifies her initial assertion of freedom, enabling us to see the power the community holds over her emotional life. The freedom she does attain here comes through the reveries of her past life that intervene between her and the crowd's awful gaze. At the same time, her daydream finally destroys its own value as a means of escape; as she watches her life unfold she is led back inexorably to the present moment and the present scene. Hester's reverie illustrates Hawthorne's talent as a psychological analyst and as a storyteller. *The Scarlet Letter* emphatically opens in the middle of an action, and through Hawthorne's vision he is able to sketch in two paragraphs the past that has led up to this action. Further, Hester's momentary recollection of her husband, "*a man well stricken in years, a pale, thin, scholar-like visage ... with the left shoulder a trifle higher than the right*," (87) serves to prepare us for the immediate future. Exactly as Hester's reverie comes to a close we look back out at the scene and recognize, at the edge of the crowd, the figure whom Hester has just seen.

As Hester recognizes her husband, her relation to the crowd changes. Their gaze now becomes a "*shelter*" from Chillingworth's even more intense gaze and from the more specific shame and guilt that she feels before him. The appearance of Chillingworth marks a subtle shift in the action of the scene. The dramatic conflict between Hester and the Puritans gives way to a more private drama involving the characters most intimately connected with the fact of adultery. This is the moment when Hawthorne introduces Dimmesdale who is urging Hester to reveal the real name of Pearl's father.

The characters who belong together are now assembled, placed in the suggestive grouping around the scaffold that they will form again in "The Minister's Vigil" and once again when the true relations that that grouping embodies are revealed in the book's final scene. And, as it gathers together the characters of this private drama, so, too, this scene engenders the energies of that drama. Dimmesdale, poised with his hand upon his heart, is seen protecting his secret; Chillingworth's resolution - "*He will be known*!" (90) - already incarnates his fierce purpose to expose that secret.

Another aspect is the complex relation Hawthorne achieves here between **things and inner experience**. **The scaffold** is not only a physical object, it is also seen as a social creation; but our sense of its meaning is also shaped by its appearance in Hawthorne's figurative language. He says of Dimmesdale:

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"*It would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework*" (174).

He uses a related image to describe Hester's emotions on the scaffold:

"*The very law that condemned her - a giant of stern features, but with vigor to support, as well as to annihilate, in its iron arm - had held her up, through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy.*" (103)

The forest too, is both a physical presence and an image of the moral wilderness in which Hester had been so long wandering; the sunshine that brightens and fades in strict accordance with their emotions of joy and despair makes the forest appear both as a natural place and as an externalization of their mental states.

Hawthorne's is a **scenic art** whose power often lies in its manipulation of what might be called its atmospheric effects, e.g. forest scenes. The setting is in accordance with the characters' personality types. Hawthorne uses a **descriptive language**, with images of darkness and contrasting lights.

The almost perfect relation between theme and structural devices to highlight it is obvious in the **circle motif** he used. Hawthorne tells us in "The Prison-Door" that every community contains a prison and a graveyard. The novel begins outside an actual prison and ends in contemplation of an actual grave. But between these points we see them in other forms: Dimmesdale who keeps the truth of his life secret is called a "*prisoner*" in the "*dudgeon of his own heart*" (77); when Hester allows her continuing love for Dimmesdale to surface into her conscious mind she hastens "*to bar it in its dungeon*". Both the town and the mind contain dungeons, and both the Puritans and the main characters are jailers. Thus, it is all but impossible to isolate an item in *The Scarlet Letter* that does not make both physical and metaphorical appearances.

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