

AMERICAN ROMANTICISM AND THE BEGINNING OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL



With the establishment of its Constitution the United States became a functional democracy, in contrast to European monarchies and aristocracies this newly created country was radical in its distribution of land titles. Practically all citizens were farmers and owned the land they farmed, quite different from the system in old Europe where peasants labored on the estates owned by the nobles and were not entitled to ownership of land.

Many immigrants from Europe were attracted to America due to the opportunity to become an independent landowner. Therefore, an ever increasing population moved towards the west, beyond the original thirteen states on the Atlantic coast. By the early 19th century, a great frontier movement had begun in the United States, bringing wealth and increasing the size of the country.

American culture steadily flourished with such growth and in the beginning half of the 19th century, there appeared many of the major and most influential figures in American literature. Writers of fiction, of novels, romances, and short stories, now emerged. This growth occurred under the influence of a European cultural movement, Romanticism.

Romanticism initially emerged as a response to the age of reason, characterized by an emphasis on individual freedom from social conventions or political restraints, on human imagination, and on nature in a typically idealized form. Romantic literature rebelled against the formalism of 18th century reason. Many Romantic writers had an interest in the culture of the Middle Ages, an age noted for its faith, which stood in contrast to the age of the Enlightenment and pure logic.

The Romantic Movement appeared in America at the beginning of the 19th century and greatly influenced American culture until the middle of the century. Romanticism based its beliefs upon emotion rather than reason. Feelings other than logic were the best way of knowing the secrets of life. Poets and artists were the representatives and celebrities of

Romanticism.

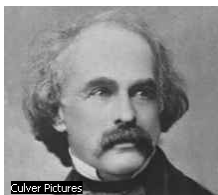
The writers of the Romantic Movement put huge importance on nature in their works. They wanted to demonstrate how nature could bring out deep feelings in man. The American thought was in favor of Romanticism because since the United States was an agricultural society which was moving and expanding at a fast pace across the American continent, intimately in contact with nature.

Romanticism fought against the inflexibility and uniformity demanded by the rationalism of the Enlightenment; it encouraged men to free themselves from these restrictions. Individual freedom was the most important thing for individuals to wander freely in nature, experiencing its richness and abundant emotions. This idea of individual freedom, of personal liberty, greatly fascinated Americans. They believed this was the center of their society, because it had been the basis of the American struggle for independence.

Due to this insistence upon personal freedom, Romanticism also emphasized individualism. The integrity of each person was assumed and respected. This attitude also impressed Americans. They had struggled previously for individual rights and liberties; they had assured these rights for themselves in the democracy which they had established. Americans in their daily drive to settle the land and acquire their own property were constantly proving their individual worth.

Romanticism proclaimed the love of nature, of freedom, and of individualism which were so admired by Americans, which guaranteed that this movement held lasting influence upon American literature and society. Practically all writers expressed themselves in the early 19th century under the effect of the Romantic movement. One of these great American novelists is Nathaniel Hawthorne whose allegorical novels explore such themes as guilt, pride, and emotional repression in his native New England

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE (1804 ~ 1864)



Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, his father was a sea captain and descendant of John Hathorne, one of the judges who oversaw the Salem Witch Trials. Although Puritanism no longer existed as a formal, organized religion its influence in moral and social practices remained very strong, existing not only in New England but having penetrated throughout the United States. Hawthorne's father died at sea in 1808 of yellow fever when Hawthorne was only four years old, and Nathaniel was raised secluded from the world by his mother. Hawthorne's Puritan past brought him to add

the "w" to his surname in his early twenties and the Puritan legacy for long intrigued him.

With modern psychological insight, in his greatest novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne probed the secret motivations in human behavior. He explored the guilt and anxiety that grew out of sins against humanity and asserted that emotional and intellectual ambivalence was inseparable from the Puritan heritage of America. Hawthorne characterized most of his books as romances, a category of literature not as strictly bound to realistic detail as novels. This approach freed him to represent symbolically the passions, emotions, and anxieties of his characters and to expose "the truth of the human heart" that he believed lies hidden beneath mundane daily life.

Hester Prynne, the story's protagonist, is a young married woman whose husband was presumed to have been lost at sea on the journey to the New World. She begins a secret adulterous relationship with Arthur Dimmesdale, the highly regarded town minister, and gets pregnant with a daughter, whom she names Pearl. She is then publicly vilified and forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her clothing to identify her as an adulteress, but loyally refuses to reveal the identity of her lover. She accepts the punishment with grace and refuses to be defeated by the shame inflicted upon her by her society. Hester's virtue becomes increasingly evident to the reader, while the self-described "virtuous" community (especially the power structure) villify her, and are shown in varying states of moral decay and self-regard. Hester only partially regains her community's favor through good deeds and an admirable character by the end of her life.

Dimmesdale, knowing that the punishment for his

The Scarlet Letter

The door of the jail being flung open from within, there appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and grisly presence of the town-beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender. Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward; until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will. She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old, who winked and turned aside its little face from the too vivid light of day; because its existence, heretofore, had brought it acquainted only with the grey twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome apartment of the prison.

When the young woman – the mother of this child – stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she

sin will be shame or execution, does not admit his relationship with Prynne. In his role as minister he dutifully pillories and interrogates Hester in the town square about her sin and the identity of the father. He maintains his righteous image, but internally he is dogged by his guilt and the shame of his weakness and hypocrisy. He receives admiration while Hester receives social contempt. Prynne's husband, Roger Chillingworth, reappears without disclosing his identity to any but Hester. Suspecting the identity of Hester's partner, he becomes Dimmesdale's caretaker and exacts his revenge by exacerbating his guilt, while keeping him alive physically. Ultimately Dimmesdale, driven to full public disclosure by his ill health, collapses and dies delivering himself from his earthly tormenter and personal anguish

The selection below shows Hester appearing in public for the first time wearing the scarlet letter indicating her sin.

wore; and which was of a splendour in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterised by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognised as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more ladylike, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. It may be true, that, to a sensitive observer, there was something exquisitely painful in it. Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer -- so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time -- was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.

DISCUSSION

1. Does the above scene show that Hester has been humiliated and weakened as a result of her period in prison and her punishment?
2. Why has Hester made the scarlet letter in such an elaborate and fantastic manner?
3. What strength and pride does Hester show?
4. Does the author seem to be sympathetic to the character of Hester? What is his opinion of the Puritan moral code?
5. Do you think Hester can prove a worthy mother?