

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the background of research, statements of problem, research questions, purposes and significances of research, conceptual framework, organization of writing, and clarification of key terms.

1.1 Background of the Research

Literature as its existence to be a reflection of the life can contain whole aspects that we can find in the real life. One of aspects that may be contained in literary works is Social-status. Social status is important in people's life, include in literature. Social class can present in literature because the writer assumes literary work is a kind of associations and society status in its existence in our life, where the people in this activity have their own role recording to their social needs.

The criteria of what we can be regarded as literature, then where honestly ideological; the values and 'tastes' of a particular social class (Eagleton, 1996: 15). According to Ralph Linton, Social status is a set of rights and obligations of a person in the community. People who have high social status will be placed higher in the structure of society compared with the low social status. The differences in social status not only emerge from the post of social responsibility, but also occur due to differences in physical characteristics, beliefs, and others. Differences of race , ethnicity, religion , education , gender , age or the age , ability , height , ugly, cute , and so also distinguishes humans from one another .

In looking at something that is going on in a literary work, of course we have to understand the work in depth, including about the story, characters, and the tragedy that happened in the story. In the story *The Scarlet Letter*, the main character plays an important role in running the story. We are required to understand about their position and status in the story. This is a study of the objective theory or structuralism in a literary work. The objective approach, in principle, sees separate artwork from everything that is outside of the work. Art is a work of art in itself, independent of any external factors that exist. In the analysis by itself sufficient to something that is already in the works. As Abram (1979: 26) said, "The objective orientation, 'the which on principle regard the work of art in isolation from All These external points of reference, analyze it as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations, and sets out to judge it solely by criteria intrinsic to its own mode of being'".

The role of the main character in the story *The Scarlet Letter*, is very dominant and give effect to the other characters. According to Linton (1936) defined the role of social status simply as a position in a social system, such as child or parent. Status refers to what a person is, whereas the closely linked notion of role refers to the behaviour expected of people in a status. A role is a set of connected behaviours, rights, obligations, beliefs, and norms as conceptualised by people in a social situation. It is an expected or free or continuously changing behaviour and may have a given individual social status or social position. It is vital to both functionalist and interactionist understandings of society.

The diversity of the people in the neighbourhood will bring social stratification or social differentiation (distinction). This situation affects how people think and having behaviour in the society. People who has status power will lead and be dominant than

lower people. Certainly, their leader commands the lower people as the result of historical process.

Additionally Gramscy (1991:30) states that, Supremacy of a social group expressed itself in two ways, namely as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'. A social group may exercise leadership before winning power. He became the dominant power when running, but if he already holds dominance, it must continue its leadership. In the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, there are many elements of the social status attached to the main character. Based Gramscy's opinion, it indicates that the status or social groups in the community because there are two things, namely as 'dominance' and 'moral and intellectual'. This has become their strength in carrying out their role in society, as well as their role in the *Scarlet Letter*. Seemingly, the status cannot be apart from this matter. The status or social status itself can be regarded as a part of society. The explanation above shows that literary work is related to social matter, such as Social status.

In a literary work, the social class influence on literature in the object itself and the effect on the storyline itself. The effect occurs through what they do, say, for the people and culture of the community itself. People more often unite this aspect to one phrase and it also can be found in a literary work. The social class issue becomes an important element that must be considered in comprehending literary works because it can influence literary works in some ways. *Scarlet Letter* shows the influence of the main characters to the storyline based on their status. This cannot be separated from Puritan culture that upholds the values of religion or church. Kay Kezer (1994:72) explained that The Puritans were a group of people who grew discontent in the Church of England and worked towards religious, moral and societal reforms. They contended

that The Church of England had become a product of political struggles and man-made doctrines. The Puritans were one branch of dissenters who decided that the Church of England was beyond reform. Escaping persecution from church leadership and the King, they came to America. This is very clear if the elements of religion and morals into most elements in the Puritan society hold dear. In the *Scarlet Letter*, there is lot of social inequality directly influenced by the status of the priest in the novel. The pastor is in control even holds the power of the law in its environment. It becomes interesting views even when they are able to match the leaders above them. All of this is none other than the effect of the religious element in the highly cherished by the Puritan society.

Marx defined that ideology as a set of beliefs, value, and ways of thinking through which human being perceive and then explain what they assume to be reality (Abrams, 1971:148). These aspects are not directly affected by the social status attached to the main character. It will make a considerable difference in the style of the novel storytelling. These influences is nothing but the result of what the main character say, do, and their view to another character. All the things caused by the main character in this novel, will become a special code that can be interpreted as a result of their social status. What they done then become static as text and have entered the value of *Social status Power*.

This study is chosen because the writer is interested in studying literature. By reading literature work automatically we can develop our knowledge and science. And we can arrange the works that are chosen by the author. Besides that, the writer can also get the author's feeling or experiences from the object of the study in "*Scarlet Letter*" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. After reading and studying this novel, the writer can give some information concerning with the novel through the way of play based on the

main characters of the story. Because the reader of this research can get an understanding of more general aspect through it such as human character, behaviour, mystery or message of life as the effect from the main character based on their status.

As a matter of fact, this study is not a new one. There has been lots of research on social status. Some of them have been undertaken by Nurin Anitasari (2010) and Friska Sinaga (2007). Nurin analyzes Arthur Dimmesdale's hypocrisy as a puritan clergyman in Nathaniel's *Scarlet Letter*. Her research is focused on Arthur Dimmesdale's hypocrisy dealing with his social status as a puritan clergyman and the Puritan society's reaction to hypocrisy. The research is aimed at finding out the relation between his Hypocrisy and the society he belongs to. Meanwhile, Friska provides an analysis of puritanistic values in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Whereas, the writer would like to analyze the power of social status of the main character as the object of his research.

The reason the author chose *Scarlet Letter* as an object of research is because some of the characters in the novel that plays an important role in the story. Their role cannot be separated from their social status. The role is the basic foundation for them in dominating the story and affect other characters, it becomes the top things that each character has a social status can perform its role as a dominant and it all makes the writer interested to analyze it more deeply.

The writer conducted a study concerning with the role of the main characters gives effects to other characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "*Scarlet Letter*". As we know that the role of the main character has a very close with the story. To support the study, the writer reviewed the reference material such as books and some literary theories. From the reasons mentioned above both about the definition and the influence of character status in making the novel be interesting.

This novel published in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* is considered Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous novel and the first quintessentially American novel in style, theme, and language. Set in seventeenth-century Puritan Massachusetts, the novel centres around the travails of Hester Prynne, who gives birth to a daughter Pearl after an adulterous affair. Hawthorne's novel is concerned with the effects of the affair rather than the affair itself, using Hester's public shaming as a springboard to explore the lingering taboos of Puritan New England in contemporary society.

1.2 Research Question

Referring to the background of research above, it is rather already seen that this novel contains some cases about social ideology and social status aspects. The main problem in this study is the effect of social status on the main character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. The aspects of the main character are one of the things that affect the other characters and story lines in this novel. The writer suspects there are some values of the social aspects that constructed the novel.

To analyze these problems, the writer have formulated into questions:

1. How do other characters view the main character based on the social status?
2. What are the effects of social status of the main character to other characters?

1.3 Research Objectives

The research objective is to know the aspect of the main character and the effects from their social status in "*Scarlet Letter*". The specific purposes are presented below:

1. To analyze how the other characters view the main character based on the social status.
2. To identify the effects of social status of main character to other characters.

1.4 Research Significance

The research significances are divided into two aspects. The first is from academically aspect, and the second is from practical aspect.

1. Academically, this research is directed to the students of linguistics and literature subjects or the reader generally, and the literature society specially for further analysis. Furthermore, this research is a reference for those who are interested in enriching the literature knowledge.
2. Practically, this research is directed to those who are interested in this research. This research also proves that literature is important for human life, because there are so many aspects can be found in literature and become guidance of life. Furthermore, this research can be references for those who are interested in enriching the literary knowledge.

1.5 The Organization of Writing

This research consists of five chapters. The first chapter is introduction. This chapter comprises The Background of research, Statement of Problems, research questions, purposes and significances of research, clarification of key terms, and organization of writing. The second chapter is theoretical foundation. This chapter reviews the theories underlying and supporting the present research, including: The theory of Hegemony by Gramscy; The Mimetic theory By Abrams; The Althusser theory of ideology and social values history background of novel *Scarlet Letter*.

The third chapter is research method. This chapter explains the procedures of the research used by the writer in this paper. It consist of: research design, the data, sources of data, the technique of collecting data, and technique of analyzing data. The fourth chapter is data presentation and discussion. This chapter provides data

representation and discussion based on data is taken from the novel and entire the theoretical books and other sources which supports this analyzes, such as Hegemony theory, Mimetic and social values of the novel.

The last chapter is conclusions and suggestions. This chapter includes two parts containing conclusions of the research and suggestions for further research.

1.6 Clarification of Key Terms

This research has two key words. They are hegemony and social status that will be explained below:

- 1) **Role** are all behavioral, speech, sight, thought that made them have value to other characters in the story. Everything that is a device that has been attached to them from the Author.
- 2) **Social status** is the position of a character in the story, especially the main character. R. Linton (1936) defined the role of social status simply as a position in a social system. It became a benchmark in giving effect to the other figures, and giving effect to them in the story.
- 3) **View** is what the other characters view of the main character based on their social status. Their views are the basic role which builds the hegemony concept
- 4) **Effect** means that the effects of social status on the main character to other characters can be seen by using the particular theory of hegemony. The main character in the story gives change to the other characters and the storyline. And the following are the explanations of the effect of the main character.



CHAPTER II

THEORITICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter reviews the theories underlying and supporting the present research, including: The Theory of Objective by Abrams; The Mimetic; The Althusser theory of ideology; and social values history background of novel *Scarlet Letter*.

2.1 The Objective Approach

The objective approach, in principle, sees separate artwork from everything that is outside of the work. Art is a work of art in itself, independent of any external factors that exist. In the analysis by itself sufficient to something that is already in the works. "The objective orientation, 'the which on principle regard the work of art in isolation from All These external points of reference, analyze it as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations, and sets out to judge it solely by criteria intrinsic to its own mode of being'".

Abrams (1979: 27) The tragic work itself can now be analyzed formally as a self determining whole made up of parts, all organized around the controlling part, the tragic plot itself a unity in which the component incidents are integrated by the internal relation of 'necessity or probability'. "The objective approach is an approach that gives full attention to literature as an autonomous structure; therefore this paper leads to the analysis of literary works as structuralism. So, it called structuralism approach also objective approach. Semi (1993: 67) mentions that the structural approach is also called objective approach, formal approach, or analytic approach. Structuralism holds that to respond objectively literary work should be based on an understanding of the literature text itself. Directed at understanding the process of analyzing the parts of a literary work in supporting overall, and conversely that the whole of the parts themselves (Suyuti, 2001; 63). , Therefore, to understand its meaning, literary works should be analyzed based on its structure alone, separated from the historical background, apart from myself and the author's intention, and also inseparable from the effect on the reader. Referring to the term Teeuw (1984: 134), so it is important only close reading, which is how to read the starting point of the opinion that any part of the text should occupy a place in the entire structure so that the latch-hook sanely (Pradotokusumo, 2005: 66).

Jeans in Suwondo Piaget (2001: 55) explains that in terms of the structure contained three ideas. First, the overall idea (wholeness), it is in the sense that the parts conform to a set of rules that determine both the intrinsic and the overall structure of its parts. Secondly, the idea of transformation (transformation), it was agreed that the structure of the transformation procedure that allows continuous formation of new materials. Third, the idea of self (Self Regulation), does not require things outside himself to maintain the transformation procedure. In association with Aristotle in Djojuroto (2006: 34) mentions the existence of four structural properties, namely: order (regular sequence), amplitude (sufficient breadth), complexity (complex problem), and units (interwoven unity).

The analysis literary works with structuralism approach has many advantages, including (1) the structural approach provides an opportunity to conduct the study or the study of literature in more detail and more depth, (2) this approach tries to see literature as a literary work by simply questioning what's on in him, (3) provide feedback to the author so as to encourage the author to write in a more careful and thorough (Spring, 1993: 70). In essence, the theory of structuralism assumes that literature is a structure whose elements are interrelated. So that its elements have no meaning by itself, its meaning is determined by the interconnections with other elements to form a totality of meaning.

Abrams (1979: 27) states that "In this second consideration of tragedy as an object in itself, the action and agents that are imitated re-enter the discussion as the plot, character and though which, together with diction, melody, and spectacle, make up six elements of a tragedy ." The objective is to describe as accurately as possible the relationship of all elements of literary works together to produce the meaning of the literary work as a whole. As a consequence of the view that regards the work as

something autonomous, the next part is how to apply them in analyzing works of literature, especially poetry.

2.2 Abram's Theory of Mimetic

In his book, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1971), Abrams presents the theory of the Universe. Through the theory of the Universe, we know that: first, there is a literary work (work of art); second, there is a creator (author) literary works; Third, there is the universe (nature) which underlies the birth of literary works; and fourth, there are connoisseurs of literature. With regard to the theory of the Universe, he said: "Four elements in the total situation of a work of art are discriminated and made salient, by one or another Synonym, in almost all theories aims to be a comprehensive roommate. First, there is the work, the artist product itself. Since this is a human product, an artifact, the second common element is the artificer, the artist. Third, the work is taken to have a subject roommate, directly or deviously, is derived from the existing Things-to-be about, or signify, or reflect something the which either is, or bears some relation to, an objective state of affairs. This third element, Whether held to consist of people and actions, ideas and feelings, the material of Things and events, or super-sensible essences, has frequently been denoted by that word - all-work, 'nature'; but let us use the more neutral term and comprehensively, universe, instead. For the final element we have the audience: the listeners, Spectators, or readers to whom the work of art is addressed ..." (Abrams, 1971: 6). Based on that theory, literary works can be viewed from four points of view: expressive, mimetic, pragmatic and objective.

The author would choose one Abrams theory relates to the problems that exist in the novel, namely mimetic theory. In a powerful contrast, Abrams shows that until the Romantics, literature was usually understood as a mirror, reflecting the real world,

in some kind of mimesis but for the Romantics, writing was more like a lamp: the light of the writer's inner soul spilled out to illuminate the world.

Essentially, the theory of mimetic regards that the work of art is the imitation of the universe. It can be seen in this quote that "The mimetic Orientation-the explanation of art as an imitation of essentially aspects of the universe" (Abrams, 1971:8). This theory comes from the mind of Plato and Aristotle. According to Abrams this theory is a theory that the most primitive.

Regarding the mimetic view of the literature, it is basically not released from Plato. In this connection, Plato, in his dialogue with Socrates, argued that all works of art, including literature, is an imitation (imitation). Artificial is a relational term, which suggests the existence of two things, namely: who can emulate the 'imitable' and copies' the imitation 'and a number of relationships between them. Relationship was seen in two of three categories: (a) the existence of eternal ideas and ideas that cannot be changed (the eternal and unchanging Ideas), (b) the existence of a reflection of the eternal idea of the world in the form of both natural and artificial invention, and (c) the presence of reflections from the second category, as shown the existence of a shadow in the water and mirrors and artworks (Abrams, 1971: 8). This means that, literature is a form of global reflection of real life itself 'mirror'. Nothing happens in a literary work is a critique of the author to present a tragedy or a problem that would make a valuable work of 'entertainment' or 'educate' (live). Thus literature is essentially a response to someone (the author) to the situation around him. This view departs from the idea that literature is a reflection of real life. Reflection is realized because of the impersonation and combined with the author's imagination or reality of human life.

When one author was not satisfied with that objective reality, then maybe he felt 'uneasy'. Departing from the anxiety that, just maybe, he, in his own way, for

example, through the activities of authorship protesting, rebelling, breaking an objective reality, he argues, is not satisfactory or filled with injustice. Once there is an attitude, then he tries to have an expectation of a "reality" as the new replacement for the objective reality that while he rejected.

As Abrams (1971:9) said that "we also according to our ability are tragic poets , and our tragedy is the best and noblest ; for our whole state is an imitation of the best and noblest life , the which we affirm to be indeed the very truth of tragedy . You are poets and we are poets ... rivals and antagonists in the noblest of dramas ..."

Abram assume that we ourselves are poets, and we all are in the best imitation of a noble life. This means that what is written in a literary work is a reflection of all reality, nature, or one's good and bad things. Than as a means of entertainment, the moral messages presented by the artwork can be used by the audience as a reflection. If literary art, such as a novel, is considered a "model" of human life, however imaginary, we can see models or patterns of life was poor, rough-mannered, moral-immoral, refresh-sucks or the like, for example, in friendship, the relationship between the children, the child's relationship to parents or vice versa, student-teacher relationships, or vice versa, and so on.

The models of life in either category can be adopted and developed in our social life, state and nation; on the contrary, things are not good we would have to leave. As a model life, the novel is almost always offering a good model of life confronted with the ugly, evil. Although, at first a good character faces many challenges, problems, and the like from an evil figure; ultimately 'good' win, victorious, and happy, while the 'evil' lost, knocked out and then suffer.

All the things that have been written to the literature by means of real-life imitation will lead to a literary work that has value. The ultimate goal of the work is

simply presenting the beauty of art, which in turn can provide entertainment to the audience (Abrams, 1998). This means, for the artist, the artwork creation process between aspects of entertainment and usefulness must be considered; he should not accentuate the entertainment aspects than the usefulness aspect, resulting in a balance between entertaining and useful in the creation of artwork.

In this regard, Esten (1978: 9) stated that there are two things that must be owned by the author, namely: the power of creative and imaginative power. Creative power is the power to create things that are new and original. Human filled with a thousand and one possibilities of him. To that end, the author seeks to demonstrate that possibility, showing human problems that subtle and varied in his literary works. While the author's imaginative power is the ability to imagine, fantasize, and describe things or events.

An author who has a high imaginative power stated that if he is able to demonstrate and illustrate the possibilities of life, issues, and choices of possible alternatives facing mankind. Both powers will determine the success or failure of a work of literature. These powers are by regarding the process of literary creation, the author dealing with a reality that exists in objective reality of society.

Objective reality can be shaped events, norms values , outlook on life and the forms of objective reality that exists in society.

He wants instructing others about what it sees as a problem or a human problem (Esten, 1978: 9-10). Due literary works are required to provide entertainment (entertainment), the beauty, freshness, and the like must accompany the attractiveness of the literature that. Because of its creative-imaginative literature suggests the creator of the fictional world. Literary works, novels, for example, presenting the story. According to Horace, that art must be *dulce et utile* or entertaining and rewarding

(Wellek & Warren, 1977). The artwork is entertaining and rewarding to be seen simultaneously, not separately from one another.

2.3 Gramscian Aspect of Social Status

. For Gramsci, there is an important linkage between culture process with politics. The relationship is then split into simpler culture, including dividing the elements that exist within a culture such as religion, beliefs, education, language, and others. Gramsci reject the Marxist conception of a more rugged and orthodox about "class domination" and like a couple of more sophisticated concepts and meaning of "violence and of agreement". Violence is a way of dominance that planting the power of the ruling class against class oppressed by force, while the hegemony of agreement is his own way, which is cultivation of the same powers but made to reach agreement on controlled class and prefer the sincere acceptance of the class which will be led.

These relate to the things that are in the process of social values it as cultural practices, political, and ideological. All of these are then formed a society into a unified and binding classes into a harmonious unity and harmonious society. This then makes the researcher is interested in connecting with the cultural phenomenon as well as the element of "intellectual" is very important in building and undergo a leadership that is inherent in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. In Gramscian framework, there are at least five key concepts are:

2.3.1 Culture

Gramsci were most interested in culture. He considers culture as a material that has the strength and broad practical impact on society. According to Goldman (1977: 62) tragic worldview contains three elements, namely a view about God, the world, and men who have a culture. It is clear if the culture that it contains the

elements of a pattern of behavior and beliefs of the community. It is one of the important and very influential, especially in creating a system of society.

The concept of culture is as an organization, on the inner one, which is the achievement of a higher consciousness, by which one can understand the value of her historical, cultural functions in society that will refer to the formation of a social system. The issue of culture is the interesting for him. As stated by Goldman (1977: 99), a social group is the subject of a collective view of ideas and activities (culture) which tends to refer to a holistic view of social life. This becomes important if the culture is one of the roots is done by people who tend to live collectively.

2.3.2 Ideology

Renate Holub (1992: 11) states that Gramscy beliefs and ideas (ideology) are the material force. In this case the most important idea or belief that it is spread in such a way to affect a person of the world. According Gramscy there are three ways of spreading the idea, through language, common sense, and folklore. Folklor is a belief system that is comprehensive, covering superstition, opinion, or see how certain actions of a thing. These things are not immediately obvious that the system of thought and belief will build a new outlook on life and how one looks at community service system, including when someone is being a leader.

2.3.3 Intellectuals

To achieve hegemony, ideology should be propagated. According Gramscy, the deployment does not happen by itself, but through social institutions such as schools, religious instruction, and social groups and so on. The centers have important role functionaries, namely intellectuals.

William (Johnson, 1987) considers that the concept of hegemony includes the concept of ideology and its emphasis on the deal, and hegemony is a process, not a passive dominance occurring.

Thus the word "intellectuals" here can be understood as a comprehensive social strata and carry out an extensive social organization functions. Each social group will create one or more strata of intellectuals which give him the awareness to run community. This is a process that becomes a system, not through the things that are instant.

2.3.4 State

Gramscy distinguishes two regions in the country, namely, the world of civil society and political society. State for Gramscy is not only about the government apparatus, but also the apparatus of hegemony or civil society. Countries are complex activities thorough theoretical and practical with the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but also actively seek to win 'agreement of those who ruled. This means that the State is a concrete manifestation of the things that are arranged systematically including thought and ideology. The things are exactly what will make the system run according to the concept of hegemony, which is "of agreement" and "free will".

2.4 Althusser theory of ideology

All art or literary is profoundly influenced, often in ways which are difficult for the author or reader to realize, by society in which it is produced. We can broadly define ideology in the following manner, drawing heavily from Allthusser: an ideology is a value system motivated by the human need to attach significance to, and promote faith in, our own lives (Althusser, 1971: 139). Furthermore, we can distinguish ideology as

those value systems which have attained a significant dynamic force: ideology should derive a coercive and normative power through our inclination as social animals towards gaining affirmation by virtue of our belonging to a community in consensus, a community living out “established” truths.

In 1905, Lenin argued that “Literature must become party literature... literature must become part of the organized, methodical, and unified labours of the socio-democratic party” (Barry, 1995: 160). This development upon the Marxist model—that of ideological influence via state apparatus. Using the terms “over determinism” and “relative autonomy”, (Barry, 1995: 163), Althusser argued that a number of interacting causes gives rise to the structure of our system of meaning, not merely ideological causes. It means that artists have a degree of relative autonomy. Althusserian theory sees ideology as emanating from the state. Ideological state apparatus secure our assent and interpellate us as citizens in more thorough ways than sheer material power can. Ideological influence enforces certain assumptions as social norms, and certain beliefs as acceptable truths: “it imposes (without appearing to do since these are “obviousnesses”) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize” (Althusser, 1998: 300).

As a result, he proposes to distinguish “ideological state apparatuses” (ISAs for short). The state apparatus includes “the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prison, the Pastor, etc” (Althusser, 1971: 142-143). These are the agencies that function “by violence,” by at some point imposing punishment or privation in order to enforce power.

Althusser writes that “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence” (Althusser, 1998: 294) and further argues that we are complicit in such an act since it allows us “the absolute guarantee

that everything really is so, and that on condition the subject recognize why they are and behave accordingly, everything will be alright: Amen (Althusser, 1998: 302). It is not only by agreeing to the imaginary representation of our free acceptance to such subjectification, that we are able to assure ourselves of respectability, correctness and a validity. Such validity, and the unspoken threat of its withdrawal- ensures that the subject, once interpellated, will work “all by himself” (Althusser, 1998: 303). As Foucault would write of the subject who has internalized discipline, “he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1998: 471).

Althusser posits a series of hypotheses that he explores to clarify his understanding of ideology:

2.5 Social Values History Background of Novel *Scarlet Letter*

Published in 1850, The Scarlet Letter is considered Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous novel and the first quintessentially American novel in style, theme, and language. Set in seventeenth-century Puritan Massachusetts, the novel centers around the travails of Hester Prynne, who gives birth to a daughter Pearl after an adulterous affair. Hawthorne's novel is concerned with the effects of the affair rather than the affair itself, using Hester's public shaming as a springboard to explore the lingering taboos of Puritan New England in contemporary society. Published in 1850, The Scarlet Letter is considered Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous novel and the first quintessentially American novel in style, theme, and language.

1. Public Guilt vs. Private Guilt

Perhaps the foremost purpose of The Scarlet Letter is to illustrate the difference between shaming someone in public and allowing him or her to suffer the consequences of an unjust act privately. According to the legal statutes at the time and the prevailing sentiment of keeping in accordance with a strict

interpretation of the Bible, adultery was a capital sin that required the execution of both adulterer and adulteress--or at the very least, severe public corporal punishment. Indeed, even if the husband wanted to keep his wife alive after she committed adultery, the law insisted that she would have to die for it. It is in this environment that Hester commits adultery with Dimmesdale, but we come to see that the public shaming cannot begin to account for all the complexities of the illicit relationship--or the context of it.

What Hawthorne sets out to portray, then, is how the private thoughts, the private torture and guilt and emotional destruction of the people involved in the affair, are more than enough punishment for the crime. We wonder whether the state or society has any right to impose law in private matters between citizens. Does adultery really have no impact upon the lives of others? If not, it should not be seen as a crime against the village. A more charitable reading of the Bible would come later in reflections on the New Testament interpretation of adultery law, namely, that the public need not step in to punish a crime when we ourselves have our own sins to be judged. Each person suffers enough already for his or her own sins.

2. Punishment vs. Forgiveness

One of the more compelling themes of the novel is embodied by Chillingworth, who seems the arbiter of moral judgment in the story, since Dimmesdale--the minister and the supposed purveyor of righteousness--is himself tainted as a party to the crime. Chillingworth is surprisingly forgiving of Hester's crime. We sense that he understands why she would forsake him. After all, he is deformed, he is older, he has not been nearby, while she is beautiful and passionate. Indeed, we get the feeling that Chillingworth's self-loathing allows him to forgive

Hester, but this attribute also increases the relentlessness and rage with which he goes after Dimmesdale. In Dimmesdale,

He sees the vigor and passion which Hester desires and which he himself does not possess. Like a leech, he's out to suck Dimmesdale of his life force, not just to punish the minister for the crime of fornicating with his wife, but also to symbolically appropriate Dimmesdale's virility. And as the novel continues, Chillingworth seems to grow stronger while Dimmesdale seems to weaken. That pattern continues until Dimmesdale dies in an act of defiance, his public demonstration of guilt, which essentially leaves Chillingworth stripped bare of his power to punish or forgive.

3. The Scarlet Letter

The scarlet letter is symbolic in a number of different ways, but perhaps most in the ways that the sinners choose to wear it. Hawthorne's generative image for the novel was that of a woman charged with adultery and forced to wear the letter *A* upon her clothes, but upon wearing it, decided to add fancy embroidery as if to appropriate the letter as a point of pride. Hawthorne read about this choice in an actual case in 1844, recorded it in his journal, and thus *The Scarlet Letter* was born as Hester Prynne's story. Hester, a knitter by trade, sees the letter as a burden laid on by society, an act of community-enforced guilt that she is forced to bear, even though it seems to make little difference for her private thoughts. Dimmesdale, however, as the town minister, wears his own scarlet *A* burned upon his flesh, since it is the community's rage he fears the most. Thus we see the difference between a woman who has made peace with the crime, publicly confesses, and endures the suffering the community imposes, and a man who imposes his own punishment because he cannot bear to reveal the crime to the community.

4. Sin and Judgment

Hawthorne's novel consistently calls into question the notion of sin and what is necessary for redemption. Is Hester's initial crime a sin? She married Chillingworth without quite understanding the commitment she made, and then she had to live without him while he was abroad, then fell in love with Dimmesdale--perhaps discovering the feeling for the first time.

Is the sin, then, committing adultery with Dimmesdale and breaking her vow and commitment, or is the sin first marrying Chillingworth without thinking it through? And what is Chillingworth's sin? Essentially abandoning his wife for so long upon their marriage, or failing to forgive her once he knew of the crime? Is Dimmesdale's sin his adultery or his hypocritical failure to change his sermon themes after the fact? Or are all of these things sins of different degrees? For each kind of sin, we wonder if the punishment fits the crime and what must be done, if anything, to redeem the sinner in the eyes of society as well as in the eyes of the sinner himself or herself.

We also should remember that what the Puritans thought of as sin was different from what went for sin in Hawthorne's time, both being different from what many Christians think of as sin today. This should not teach us moral relativism, but it should encourage us to be wary of judging others.

5. Civilization vs. Wilderness

Pearl embodies the theme of wilderness over against civilization. After all, she is a kind of embodiment of the scarlet letter: wild, passionate, and completely oblivious to the rules, mores, and legal statutes of the time. Pearl is innocence, in a way, an individualistic passionate innocence.

So long as Dimmesdale is alive, Pearl seems to be a magnet that attracts Hester and Dimmesdale, almost demanding their reconciliation or some sort of energetic reconciliation. But as soon as Dimmesdale dies, Pearl seems to lose her vigor and becomes a normal girl, able to marry and assimilate into society. The implication is thus that Pearl truly was a child of lust or love, a product of activity outside the boundaries imposed by strict Puritan society. Once the flame of love is extinguished, she can properly assimilate.

6. The Town vs. the Woods

In the town, Hester usually is confronted with the legal and moral consequences of her crime. Governor Bellingham comes to take her child away, Chillingworth reminds her of her deed, and she faces Dimmesdale in the context of sinner (his reputation remains untarnished despite his role in the affair). But whenever Hester leaves the town and enters the woods, a traditional symbol of unbridled passion without boundaries, she is free to rediscover herself. The woods also traditionally emblemize darkness.

In the darkness of night, Hester is free to meet Dimmesdale, to confess her misgivings, and to live apart from the torment and burdens of the guilt enforced by the community. Dimmesdale too is free at night to expose his guilt on the scaffold and reconcile with Hester.

7. Memories vs. the Present

Hester Prynne's offense against society occurred seven years earlier, but she remains punished for it. Hester learned to forgive herself for her adultery, but society continues to scorn her for it. (One might remember Jean Valjean's permanent identity as criminal after a single minor crime in Victor Hugo's Les

Misérables.) Indeed, Hester reaches peace with her affair and in that peace comes to see the town as insufficiently forgiving in its thoughts and attitudes.

Pearl is enough of a reminder of the wild choices in her past, and as Pearl grows up, Hester continues to live in the present rather than in the past. Reverend Dimmesdale, meanwhile, is haunted in the present by sins past and seems to reflect (along with Chillingworth) the town's tendency to punish long after the offense. In suppressing his own confession, Dimmesdale remains focused on coming to terms with a sinful past instead of looking squarely at the problems of the present.

8. American Puritan

One may rightfully claim that the Puritans' power of vision built America and its mythology. As Perry Miller states that "without some understanding of Puritanism, it may safely be said, there is no understanding of America" (Miller, Johnson 2001: 2). In mythology, one can find the roots of cultural practice, and, through its epistemological aspects, understand why and how he/she is situated in society and which is the specificity of the community he/ she lives in. The Puritan imagination sustained thus one of the strongest pillars of the American cultural identity.

The Puritans were visionary people and the endurance of their community was due to the power of the vision the expression of which was intimately linked with a great reliance on texts; the Puritan cultural identity was one of the words. As the already mentioned Sacvan Bercovitch explains, the rise of the so-called Gutenberg galaxy changed not only Europe but also the New England Puritans, the people of the Book, the believers of the sola scriptura doctrine.