The first chapter “The Prison Door” encapsulates all the essential concerns of *The Scarlet Letter*. The recognition of the dark necessity of the cemetery and the prison, even in the midst of an alleged utopia, reflects not only the puritanical gloom which sees sin and corruption at the very centre of the piece of work that is man, but also undermines the utopianism and exceptionalism that had underlined the American settlement. While the historical context is further emphasized by deliberate references to Isaac Johnson and Anne Hutchinson, the grassy plot overgrown with “unsightly” vegetation offers two contrasting views of nature in general. The “congenial” soil, it seems, has encouraged the setting up of the prison, the “black flower” of civilized society. However, the soil also supports and sustains the wild rosebush which might be “imagined” to offer the fragrance and the fragile beauty of its flowers to the inmates and reveal that the “deep heart of nature” could be kind to the condemned criminal. That the rose-bush represents the ideal of sympathy which the text intends holding out before us is made clear when we are directly brought into the narrative as readers and presented with one of its flowers. “It may serve, let us hope,” comments the narrator, “to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close
of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.”¹ In the very beginning, even as the narrative is about to issue forth from the inauspicious portals, the narrator has not only introduced the major thematic motif of the book - the tension between the reality represented by the cemetery and the prison and the ideal represented by the rose bush - but has also established that the mode of expression will be self-consciously symbolic.

The dominant symbol in the book is the letter “A”. It appears on Hester’s dress and also probably on Dimmesdale’s chest; on Pearl, and as Pearl, since she is another version of the letter; it appears magnified in the convex mirror of the governor and in the sky as a gigantic letter and is finally engraved on Hester’s tombstone. At the time of the publication of The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne had written to Fields, “I find it impossible to relieve the shadows of the story with so much light as I would gladly have thrown in... Keeping so close to its point as the tale does, and diversified no otherwise than by turning different sides of the same dark idea to the reader’s eye, it will weary very many people and disgust some.”² This dark idea is embodied in the letter “A” and can best be summed up as (with due apologies to Keats): Truth is Sin and Sin is Truth that is all you know on earth and all you need to know. The attitude of the different
characters towards this letter serves to define their attitude towards the reality and universality of sin and determines their role in terms of the overall meaning of the book.

The attitude of the Puritans towards the scarlet letter shows that though they recognize the reality of sin theoretically, they are unable to accept all its implications. In the opening sequence, as Hester walks out of the prison door into the market place with Pearl in her arms and the elaborately embroidered letter “A” on her dress, the letter “A” is exposed to the gaze of the crowd. The comments of the onlookers as well as those of men in authority help us to see that in inflicting the punishment on Hester, the community is both defining and fortifying the values by which it chooses to live.

The Puritan authorities, think of the letter “A” as a form of punishment, a badge of shame. They take pride in the fact that they live in the “righteous colony of Massachusetts where iniquity is dragged out into sunshine.”

The narrator, however, places their action in perspective when he comments, “There can be no outrage, me-thinks, against our common nature - whatever be the delinquencies of the individual, no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face in shame.” The narrator’s criticism of the Puritans is not in theological or even social
terms. He is not debating the point whether adultery as a sin is punishable or not. His objection is only to the nature of punishment since it belies our common humanity in face of sin.

The Puritans are portrayed as people who "lack sympathy." Hard and sombre, a grim rigidity inevitably petrified the bearded physiognomies of these people. Ironically, in punishing Hester, they reveal themselves to be prisoners of their own past. They had broken away from a repressive Europe to try and create a New Eden, but were becoming repressive themselves because they were fighting the universal reality of evil not with compassion but with severity. It is their severity that makes them incapable of understanding a woman's heart so that they end up perpetuating, even on the virgin continent, the inequality of the sexes. At the end of the book, Hester recognizes that until and unless the relation between man and woman is established on a surer ground of mutual happiness, no redemption is possible for humanity. As the suffering of Hester and also the suffering of the Puritan women who come to Hester at the end of the book testify, the Puritans are very far from establishing this relation. Therefore, even in the New World, an old evil continues, and the American settlement, far from being a renewal of society and culture becomes a re-enactment of the older errors and mistakes. In Hawthorne's framework, the past errors will continue to repeat themselves until and unless man recognizes and
accepts the reality of evil within himself. The Puritans, as their attitude to letter “A” shows, are unable to do this.

Complying with the harsh punishment meted out to her, Hester puts on the letter “A” on her dress but in her heart of heart she is defiant. Hawthorne gives us brief but telling glimpses of this defiance. When she steps out of the prison, she faces the crowd “with a burning blush and yet a haughty smile that would not be abashed.” Her defiance, however, is most clearly expressed in the elaborate embroidery of the mark that is meant to be her punishment, 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 wore... seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity.”

For all her seeming acceptance of her punishment, the fact that Hester is not truly penitent, is brought out clearly in the pillory scene, for then we are shown the real reason for her defiance. Wilson and Dimmesdale, backed by the entire Puritan crowd, exhort her to reveal the name of her lover. She not only refuses but says that she would rather be true to her love (the cause of her sin) than to any theological consideration. “Never... And would that I might endure his agony as well as mine.” And all through the dramatic scene, on her dress, she is wearing the gorgeously decorated letter which, if it stands for adultery, can also stand for Arthur.
The attitude of outward compliance and inner defiance shows that Hester hasn’t quite grasped the significance of the universal reality of sin, and this almost brings about her “damnation”. In social terms, the letter “A”, necessarily isolates her from society. “In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere...”

But at a deeper, hidden level it connects her with humanity for it gives her a knowledge of hidden sin in others. This knowledge, because she has not been able to accept the reality of the scarlet letter on her own dress, terrifies her, for it seems to her that it was the bad angel trying to persuade her that the “outward guise of purity was but a lie...” Despite her fears, however, she cannot ignore the revelations of the scarlet letter, and we are told that this almost causes a loss of faith that might have been her utter ruin. Hester’s situation in this respect should be contrasted with Dimmesdale’s. He does not have the courage to display his letter “A” to the world, but he never rebels against it either so that the knowledge of other’s sins brought about by letter “A” does not cause loss of faith or alienation from society but gives him “sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind, that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs...”
Intellectually, her defiance turns Hester into a revolutionary. "The world's law was no law in her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken more active and wider range than for many centuries before... Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit." She began to see that the whole system of society would have to be torn down and the basic nature of both men and women too would have to be changed before mankind could be truly happy. This kind of revolutionary thinking reaches its climax in the forest chapters when Hester tries to persuade Dimmesdale to leave the colony with her and unclasps the letter "A" from her dress and throws it away. "The whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this hour." Hawthorne seems to admire Hester's character and courage in arriving at this conclusion but finds it unacceptable. "The scarlet letter" he tells us, "had not done its office". The subsequent action of the book, therefore, goes on to reinforce the idea embodied in the letter "A" rather than Hester's revolt. Pearl, the scarlet letter in live form, forces Hester to put on the letter "A" again, and Dimmesdale instead of escaping, confesses his sin.

If Hester's hidden defiance meant an inability to accept the real significance of the letter "A", and if it leads her to an intellectual position
which though admirable is false, Dimmesdale errs in the opposite direction. His cowardice is a similar inability to accept the letter ‘A’ as a symbol of universal sin. This places him in hypocritical position which slowly but surely destroys his moral fibre.

His exhortation of Hester in Chapter 3 establishes his position in relation to the letter “A”. “What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him, - yea, compel him, as it were - to add hypocrisy to sin?... Take heed how thou deniest to him - who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself -, the bitter, but wholesome, cup wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips.”

Over the years, just as Hester’s defiance leads her to kind of hardening, his hypocrisy being to eat into his moral being. “It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his, that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us .. To the untrue, man, the whole universe is false, - it is impalpable, - it shrinks to nothing within his grasp.” The redeeming feature in his situation is the honesty and intensity of his suffering. “The only truth that continues to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth was the anguish in his inmost soul and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect.” It is this suffering which gives him a sympathetic understanding of the sin and suffering of others. And it is the honesty of this suffering which causes the letter “A” to appear on his breast.
In the chapter “The Minister’s Vigil” we see the extent of the damage. In the middle of the night he is driven to the pillory to act out a “mockery of penitence” by the “impulse of that Remorse which dogged him everywhere, and whose own sister and closely linked companion was that Cowardice...”\(^ {17}\) At the pillory, Hester and Pearl joined him. His degeneration is revealed when he side-tracks Pearl’s direct question, “will thou stand here with mother and me tomorrow noontide?” And also when he tells a plain lie about the phenomenon that was emblazoned across the skies. The old sexton asked him, “But did your reverence hear of the portent that was seen last night? A great letter in the sky....” “No” answers the minister, “I had not heard of it.”

By the time Hester meets him in forest, he is a physical and a mental wreck. He clings to Hester’s strength unable to see that Hester’s plans and suggestions will ultimately lead to his complete spiritual destruction for not only do they involve the continuing falsification of the letter “A” and, therefore, a continuation of his hypocrisy, but also the falsification of the suffering that he has gone through. Earlier in the book, Hawthorne had remarked that had Dimmesdale once found power to smile and wear a face of gaiety, he would have been lost. Now under the influence of Hester and
in the secrecy of the dark forest he is gay and he smiles and as his subsequent actions show he is almost lost. To the old and hoary deacon he wants to utter certain blasphemous suggestions about the communion supper. He also wants to blight the young virgin's field of innocence with one wicked look. When he sees the Puritan children he wants to teach them some wicked words.

It is the supposed encounter with Mrs. Hibbins that leads to an introspective self-realization which in turn culminates in his subsequent confession. "Tempted by a dream of happiness," writes Hawthorne, "he had yielded himself, with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of that sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system... And his encounter with old Mistress Hibbins, if it were real incident, did but show his sympathy and fellowship with wicked mortals and the world of perverted spirits." After the encounter, the minister himself reaches similar conclusion. "Have I sold myself" thought the minister, "to the fiend?..."

This self-realization triggers off a change which makes him fling the already written pages of the Election sermon into the fire, and begin a new one. Earlier, Hawthorne had referred to this Election sermon. On finding
out the date of departure, the Minister had been glad because he would have the opportunity to deliver the Election sermon which "formed an honourable epoch in the life of a New England Clergyman." Hawthorne at this point had commented, "we have had, and may still have, worse things to tell of him; but none, we apprehend, so pitiably weak; no evidence, at once so slight and irrefragable, of a subtle disease, that had long since begun to eat into the real substance of his character." But now as he looks at the Election Sermon he "seemed to stand apart and eye this former self with scornful pitying, but half envious curiosity. That self was gone. Another man had returned out of the forest." The reference to change in these lines is not to the diabolic change that had come over the minister on his return from the forest, but to the change that has come about through self-realization after the encounter with Mrs. Hibbins. For Hawthorne continues, "...Another man had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; (the changes earlier were all described in negative terms) with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached. A bitter kind of knowledge, that." It is this bitter knowledge which informs his subsequent actions. With confidence and sense of purpose he confesses his sin before the multitude. Even when Hester asks him "shall we not meet again? Shall we not spend
our immortal life together?” He is unable to reassure her. His answer is grounded in the fact that as a mere mortal he cannot see that far into eternity. He cannot presume to interpret God’s purpose and, therefore can hold on to, can reiterate the only truth available in the world - the truth that had all along been embodied in the letter “A” and which he did not have the courage to embrace - the reality of sin.

If Hester cannot accept the reality of the scarlet letter out of defiance and Dimmesdale out of cowardice, then Chillingworth is not able to accept it out of pride. Returning from wilderness, the first thing that he encounters is the glittering letter “A” on his wife’s dress, and this wounds his pride. After rationalizing about it, however, he realizes that it is not entirely Hester’s fault that the letter “A” is on her dress. This realization, instead of leading him to an acceptance of the universality of sin, leads him to fix all the blame, and, therefore, all his hatred, on the unknown lover. Moreover, since no one knows the identity of the lover, it seems a challenge to his intellectual powers to try and find out the identity of the lover. This intellectual pride leads him to apply methods of scientific investigations to human problems and he goes on to commit what in Hawthorne is the unpardonable sin - the violation of the sanctity of the human heart - and he slowly but surely becomes a devil. His hideous vengeance on Dimmesdale
becomes a crime against all humanity because he coldly and deliberately punishes him for that which the latter shares with every other human being. He thus violates the sanctity of not just Dimmesdale's heart, but "human heart."

II

Different critics have interpreted the process of transformation described above in terms of their own ideological preoccupation's. Bercovitch, for instance, elaborates the four fold office of the scarlet letter - political, moral, aesthetic, and historical - and suggests that Hester's return invites us to participate in the consensus building process of liberal democracy by ensuring reader's complicity in the process of liberal consensus making.23

For Gilmore, the novel tells the story of the emergence of the middle class identity in America. According to Gilmore, the Puritan Boston depicted in the novel is decidedly pre-modern with its emphasis on hierarchy and patriarchy and in its blurring of the boundaries between public and private. Hester, however, with her refusal to identify her lover in the market place reveals herself as someone who is already in transition towards a post Puritan order which guards the private from public exposure. The change in Hester from "passion and feeling to thought" in the span of few years, condenses, according to Gilmore, the reconstruction of the feminine nature
that had historically taken place over a period of a century. He calls it the domestic ideology and traces its rise to the entrenchment of commercial and industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. According to him, some of the salient features of the new social and economic structure were the rigid segregation of work, accelerated by decline of domestic production and by the rise of factories and offices. Excluded from the public and male preserve of "productive" labour, women came to be identified with and derive their nature from the private domestic space. They shed their traditional image as lustful and were now believed to find fulfillment in moral purity, self-sacrifice and caring for others rather than themselves.

Monica Elbert, using insights derived from contemporary French feminists throws new light on Hester's transformation. Her central thesis is that through the nurturing of Pearl, Hester, the mother, effectively counteracts the reigning patriarchy, most vividly reflected in the harsh rejection of maternity in the comments of the five women at the marketplace. According to Elbert, Hester's role as a mother dissolves dualistic male distinctions between spiritual and physical, between self seeking ambition and selfless love. From being a contemptible outsider, she ends up becoming the "Great Mother" to the entire community. In her reading Elbert specifically opposes Person's interpretation which sees Hester as a
hidden agent of active revenge seeking power and punishment through effective use of silence. Person goes on to suggest that through Hester, Hawthorne is actually sublimating his own desire of revenge on the Salem Whigs. Elbert however, argues that Hester's silence enables her to move out of the male dialectic of ambition and revenge. Instead, she expresses herself through caring and nurturing.

There are others who find much to object to in the ending. For Mary Suzanne Schriber the end shows that Hawthorne actually lost "his courage" and eventually judged Hester by the very conventions which her character seemed designed to interrogate. Readings such as these emphasize author's failure to transcend his own cultural construction of gender. As Herbert puts it, in Hester's case, Hawthorne ends up proposing, "the source of the disease as the remedy for it." Jean Fagan Yellin focuses on Hawthorne's attitude to race and slavery. She finds hidden images of enslavement and shows Hawthorne's deliberate betrayal of the anti-slavery movement through the denial of the womanhood of Hester.

However, the novel is as much about itself as it is about America, and it is the character of Pearl that gives the novel its self-conscious dimension. The Scarlet Letter, unlike the other three major romances, does not have an
artist figure yet the theme of the artist is central to the book. The novel repeatedly tells us that Pearl is the scarlet letter itself in a live and active form. But Pearl as a symbol represents not just the letter “A” on Hester’s dress but also the novel itself. This argument can best be summed up by suggesting that when the narrator says of Pearl, “It was the scarlet letter endowed with life,”30 he has in mind not just the letter on Hester’s dress but also the title of the book. Through this device of the novel within the novel the novelist is able to show us that he is not just writing the story of Hester Prynne but is also watching himself write it; that even as he is telling the story of Hester Prynne, he is also telling the story of its literary composition. Through Pearl, Hawthorne is not only able to incorporate into the text his own theory of fiction but is also able to dramatize and articulate the nature of effort that has resulted in the fiction itself.

There are many important clues which give us the sense that Pearl as a symbol is equated with the novel in Hawthorne’s mind. Pearl’s preoccupation with letter “A” parallels the novel’s preoccupation with it. In the novel Pearl is almost always associated with terms which Hawthorne habitually uses in his discussion of romance - light and shadow and fairies, flowers, unreal airiness, an ability to flit and skip. The dressing up of Pearl in bizarre colours reflects Hawthorne own dressing up of the novel in “deep
hues”. Hawthorne used his observations of his daughter Una in describing and characterizing Pearl. The novel too is the child of his brain. There is a demonic element in Pearl. She is the demon child both for Puritans and Hester. Hawthorne called his novel the “hell fired story”. In Chapter 5, Hawthorne describes Pearl’s hostility towards the visionary throng that she had created herself. This reminds one of Hawthorne’s own dissatisfaction with his literary creations. He is reported to have burnt his earlier stories. The personification of an art object was made easy by the organic element in the romantic theory that was current in his time. In The Mirror and the Lamp, Abrams defines organicism as the aesthetic philosophy “whose major categories are derived metaphorically from the attribute of living and growing things.”31 In organic theory, some of the qualities that characterize living beings are transferred to works of art. Through Pearl, Hawthorne performs the neat trick of reversing the process. He uses the organic qualities shared by the work of art and living being to personify his novel in the character of Pearl. Later in his career, Hawthorne uses the same device explicitly by personifying in Donatello, an aesthetic object, the statue of the Marble Faun.

Abrams outlines the main features of organicism. The living plant, Abrams tells us, was the “principle paradigm” governing the description of the
organic work of art. Like the plant, the organic work of art grows and in
growing assimilates diverse elements of earth, air and water. But in
assimilating these elements, it transforms them and spontaneously
organizes them into a structure of organic unity that is all its own. The
evolution is spontaneous and the organic work of art comes into being
almost independent of author's intention. Its creation is seen as a
spontaneous overflow which is not entirely within the author's control. 32

Pearl, throughout the novel, is associated with the living plant, "that little
creature, whose innocent life had sprung by the inscrutable decree of
providence, a lovely and immortal flower..."33 Like an organic work of art,
while growing Pearl too imbibes "her soul from the spiritual world and her
bodily frame from its material of earth."34 Thus, the warfare of Hester's
spirit is perpetuated in her. However, like the organic work of art, though
she had assimilated all this, she was "a being whose elements were perhaps
beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder, or with an order peculiar to
themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was
difficult or impossible to be discovered."35 Like the organic work of art,
she too possesses a creativity of her own. "The spell of life went forth from
the ever creative spirit, and communicated itself to a thousand objects... the
unlikeliest materials--a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower--were the puppets of
Pearl’s witchcraft, and without undergoing any outward chance became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world.”

Through the device of the novel within the novel, Hawthorne is able to give us insights into the difficulties which the author faces while writing. The work of art, as said earlier, begins to have an independent existence in the mind of the writer. Occasionally much to his discomfiture, it seems entirely out of his control. Hester’s situation in respect to Pearl parallels the writer’s situation in respect to his book. Mindful of her own errors, Hester tries to impose a “tender discipline” on the infant mortality that was in her charge but fails entirely. This naturally causes her much agony which the author too must have felt in relation to his book. “Hester sometimes burst into passionate tears... Brooding over all these matters the mother felt like one who has evolved a spirit, but by some irregularity in the process of conjuration, has failed to win the master word, that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence.”

A particularly distressing consequence for the author is that this independent work of art, since it is committed to truth begins to reflect even those aspects of the author’s personality which the latter would rather not
face. In *The Marble Faun*, Miriam’s paintings reflect the revengeful thoughts that haunt her. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester the creator, sees reflected in the created object, Pearl, not only turmoil, anguish and despair but also her own hatred of the Puritans. “It appalled her, nevertheless, to discern here again a shadowy reflection of that evil that had existed in herself.” But even more disturbing is the fiendlike face which Hester sees in Pearl’s eyes. Thus, Hester looking for her own image in the black mirror of Pearl’s eyes often sees another face, “fiendlike, full of smiling malice, yet bearing the semblance of features that she had known fully well, though seldom with smile and never with malice in them.”

The face described here can only belong to Dimmesdale and it seems fiendlike because Pearl’s eyes are reflecting the hidden unconscious hatred which both Hester and Dimmesdale despite all their love, feel for each other. Thus Hester leaves Dimmesdale in the hands of Chillingworth for seven long years. “... or perhaps in the misanthropy of her own trouble, she left the minister to bear what she might picture to herself as a more tolerable doom.” On his part, Dimmesdale envies Hester her chance to “work out an open triumph over evil within”. Thus when the two meet in the forest, “It was with fear... and, as it were, by a slow reluctant necessity, that Arthur Dimmesdale put forth his hand, chill as death, and touched the
chill hand of Hester Prynne.” Later, when Hester tells him that she will accompany him if he decides to escape, his spontaneous reaction is a kind of horror at her boldness. The fiendlike look mirrored in Pearl’s eyes becomes real, when Hester tells Dimmesdale about Chillingworth. “The minister looked at her for an instant, with all that violence of passion, which... was in fact the portion of him which the Devil claimed, and through which he sought to win the rest. Never was there a blacker or a fiercer frown than Hester now encountered. For the brief space that it lasted, it was a dark transfiguration.” At the end of the book, Hawthorne moralizes, “It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom” D.H. Lawrence in his essay on The Scarlet Letter has given a miraculous analysis of this hidden current of hostility between the two lovers. Undoubtedly, Hawthorne knew disagreeable things in his soul and the novel, whether he likes it or not, reflects them all, just as the black mirror of Pearl’s eyes reveal to Hester her own innermost drives.

Hawthorne knew that a work of art should be sincere. But if it were to be totally sincere, it could easily express too much. Expressive art has the advantage of authenticity but what it reveals might be too dangerous to confront. It is often forgotten that the author the very first reader of the
text, that the form which a particular text takes can be said to evolve through the interaction between the author as writer and author as reader. Day after day, Hester looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature, dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity, that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed. Hawthorne uses the device of novel within the novel to articulate in the text his views on the origins and aims of art. At one point in the novel, Pearl asks Hester who created her, and Hester answers hesitantly that it is the heavenly father who has sent her but Pearl does not agree. "He did not send me. I have no heavenly father." At Governor Bellingham's house, Mr. Wilson asks Pearl the same question and she answers that she had been plucked by her mother off the rosebush of the wild roses that grew by the prison door. The little scene, if we accept Pearl as novel within the novel dramatizes Hawthorne's critique of romantic theory. In romantic theory a work of art is seen as second nature created by poet in an act analogous to God's creation of the world. Hawthorne, with his Puritanical heritage, could not accept this. For him, work of art was not a repetition in the finite mind of infinite principle of creation. It was rather a result of sympathy born of the consciousness of universal sinfulness of man. Significantly, the rose-bush mentioned by Pearl was explicitly associated by Hawthorne with the value of sympathy in the first chapter.
If Pearl is indeed the novel within the novel, then as a character her actions and reactions must always be in accordance with the central vision of the book. In a sense she cannot be considered an independent character since her point of view must at all points be the same as the novel’s viewpoint. If we examine the role of Pearl in the book, we will find that this is indeed so. She is the living hieroglyphic in which the real meaning of the novel is made plain. Her actions become a living commentary on the central argument of the book. She is the means by which Hawthorne incorporates the interpretation which the narrative wishes to communicate into the very structure of the narrative itself.

For the Puritans the recognition of the reality of sin does not lead to sympathy and compassion. Instead, it leads to cruelty. Therefore, for them Pearl is a “half-fledged angel of judgment whose mission was to punish the sins of rising generations.” All through the novel, her attitude to the Puritans is consistently hostile. She is a living reminder that in the novel’s scheme of things neither sin nor art is an offense that should lead to forced isolation.

Millington, who sees the Puritan community not “as an inert framework but as an animate system actively engaged in the generation of meaning”
very perceptively demonstrates that there are, in fact, two different forms of communal meanings existing within the Puritan community. One is the official meaning that sees the letter "A" as a form of punishment. This is a hierarchical meaning that establishes itself by suppressing other viewpoints as is evident from the narrators comment on how a Papist might view Hester on the scaffold. And it is protected by the power of enforcement. Obviously, it is a meaning that is shared by the majority, with some even exceeding the fervor of the Puritan elders. Opposed to this dominant meaning is the viewpoint represented by the soft voice of the youngest and the prettiest of women gathered in the marketplace. Unlike the older women in the marketplace, who focus their attention on the embroidery of the letter "A", this woman understands Hester's experience in terms of its internal effect claiming that Hester must have felt each stitch of the letter in her heart. This perspective involves a sympathetic emotional understanding that is not authorized from above. To begin with, it manifests itself as barely articulated undercurrent. But as Millington correctly points out, it is this very capacity that is located in the larger and warmer heart of the multitude which grasps the perversity of Chillingworth's attachment to Dimmsdale, which responds to the undercurrents of Dimmsdale's sermons, and which eventually comes to see the letter "A" as "a badge of honour." Mellington is surely right when he points out that Hawthorne has not simply set up an opposition between the
two sets of communal meaning. Rather, The Scarlet Letter sets out to tame
the authoritarian impulse of the Puritans and to teach them the way of
sympathy.

The Puritans derive their authority and their severity from a particularly
literal interpretation of the Bible. They were "a people amongst whom
religion and law were one." Thus, one of the self-constituted judges in the
crowd quoting the authorities of the scriptures and the statute book wanted
Hester to be executed. "This woman has brought shame upon us all and
ought to die. Is there no law for it? Truly there is, both in scripture and the
statute-book." The scriptural injunction here referred to is the Biblical
command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). As for the
law, Salem's earliest statute did decree death for fornication.

The scriptures also come into play in the Puritan method of bringing up
children. "The frown, the harsh rebuke, the frequent application of the rod,
enjoined by Scriptural authority, were used, not merely in the way of
punishment for actual offenses, but as a wholesome regimen for the growth
and promotion of all childish virtues." Pearl, her mother's sole treasure
was, however was being allowed to grow in accordance with laws peculiar
to herself. Matters come to a head when the authorities, wanting to ensure
"Christian nurture" start wondering whether Pearl shouldn't be taken away

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from Hester. At Governor Bellingham’s house Pearl flatly rejects the Biblical explanation offered by the authorities regarding her origins. No she has no heavenly father, she tells the Puritan elders but had been plucked off the rose-bush by her mother. It was left to Dimmesdale to save the situation by giving an “interpretation” of Pearl, again grounded in the Bible but one that served the interests of sympathy. He presents Pearl as “infant immortality, a being capable of eternal joy and sorrow,” a being deliberately created by God and entrusted in care of Hester, with a “quality of awful sacredness in the relation between this mother and this child,” for “if she were to bring the child to heaven, the child will also bring its parent thither.” Dimmesdale thus manages to accommodate the essence of Pearl as well as Hester’s real need for her creation, to the Biblical way of seeing things, without falsifying either of the two points of view. The authoritative Puritan vision that governs the community here expands to include a point of view grounded in sympathy, and it looks forward to the community’s sympathetic response to the final scene of suffering that closes this tale of human frailty and sorrow. In the interdependent world of Hawthornian poetics, a more secular, but equally “awful sacredness” characterizes the relationship between the author and the narrative created by him for if the author can ensure that the text embodies sympathy, then the text will become the ground, the space where the alienated author and the larger world of readers can meet and interact and ‘save’ each other as well.
According to Hawthorne, Hester is in danger of not recognizing and accepting the reality of sin because of the cruel punishment imposed by society and because of her own inner defiance. In relation to Hester, Pearl has two main functions to perform. She saves Hester from the perils of isolation and also from the perils born of her inner defiance of the letter “A”. Hester tells Governor Bellingham, “Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not she is the scarlet letter...”

Pearl’s other function is to check Hester’s defiance by keeping alive in her the consciousness of the letter “A”. Thus, the very first object which Pearl seems to become aware of is the letter A. And all through the novel with an oddly conscious look in her eyes she keeps playing with the letter to the infinite “torture of Hester.”

Despite Pearl, and the letter “A” on her bosom, Hester reaches the intellectual position of rebellion which is in opposition to the dark idea embodied in the scarlet letter. Hawthorne shows us that Hester is on the wrong track through Pearl. In Chapter 15 (that is, immediately after Hawthorne had discussed the changes that had come in Hester in course of seven years) Hester’s integrity is tested. Pearl after putting on the letter “A” on her own dress (in green) asks Hester with uncharacteristic earnestness “...mother dear, what does this scarlet letter mean? - and why dost thou
wear it on the bosom? - and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"48 Hester at that particular moment seems to recognize the significance of the letter “A” on Pearl’s bosom and her strange earnestness. Pearl, thought Hester, might be seeking to establish a meeting point of sympathy. “If little Pearl were entertained with faith and trust”, she thought, “might it not be her errand to soothe away the sorrow that lay cold in the mother’s heart...” But despite this realization, Hester Prynne lies to Pearl and Hawthorne comments, ‘some new evil had crept into it (her heart) or some old one had never been expelled.”49 This lie coming at the end of the chapter parallels the lie which Dimmesdale tells earlier to the old sexton and which reflects his moral degeneration. Hawthorne further drives home the point when Hester getting angry at Pearl’s insistence speaks with an “asperity she had never permitted to herself before.” “Do not tease me, else I shall shut thee into the dark closet.”50 The scarlet letter had indeed failed to do its office for in threatening Pearl with imprisonment Hester has come a full circle since the day she stepped out of the prison.

Later, the rebellious Hester throws off the scarlet letter and Pearl forces it back upon her. The scene is complex and elaborate symbolism is used. The forest, with all its wild vital sympathies, symbolizes untamed nature which is neither immoral nor moral but simply a-moral. Thus, its shifting shadows reflect the mental condition of the protagonist. For Hester “it imaged the
moral wilderness in which she had so long been wondering,“51 but for Pearl, “the great black forest-stern as it showed d itself to those who brought the guilt and the trouble of the world into its bosom--became the playmate of the lonely infant...”52 When Hester and Dimmesdale decide to escape and Hester throws off the scarlet letter, the lovers experience a sense of release. The amoral forest shares their bliss. The brook symbolizing life and time is also amoral and, therefore, it also shares the joy of the two lovers. But both the brook and forest also support Pearl who has an entirely different attitude to the scarlet letter. Thus when she insists that Hester should put the letter back where it belongs, she is in “close sympathy with the antique wood”. The crucial difference, however, is that when the forest sympathizes with Hester and Dimmesdale, it sympathizes as the wild, heathen forest which had never been “subjugated by human law or illumined by higher truth.” But its sympathy for Pearl is expressed through the adornment of flowers which helps to create in her the spiritualised self which in turn is reflected by the brook. “Just where she had paused, the brook chanced to form a pool, so smooth and quiet that it reflected a perfect image of her little figure, with all the brilliant picturesqueness of her beauty, in its adornment of flowers and wreathed foliage, but more refined and spiritualized than reality.”53 The vital sympathies of amoral nature, and the movement of life and time support
both Pearl and the lovers. The dividing line between the two lies in the different attitude that is adopted towards the reality of sin. When the lovers throw off the whole burden of sin they experience joy, freedom, and release. But Pearl, who preserves a true instinctive awareness of the reality of sin and who forces the letter "A" back on Hester's dress, is also supported by the forest and the brook, and their support is expressed in the creation of a spiritual self which is even more real and more beautiful than the actual self. The forest provides the flowers and foliage for the adornment of Pearl, while the brook reflects her spiritualized image.

Nature and Spirit are two key terms we need to come to terms with if wish to understand Hawthorne's view of the human condition in general, and the plight of each individual in particular. Nature is that aspect of the human existence that we hold in common with other animals - our physicality, our appetites, our instincts and our fatality. Spirit however, is that aspect of humanity which is capable of transcending itself. In Hawthorne, with regard to nature the point of transcendence is the human mind itself. As human beings we don't just think and act, we reflect upon our actions and thoughts, thus possessing the capacity transcend both. Also our memory ensures that the capacity for self-transcendence is not confined to specifics but acts upon the totality of our lives - not only in terms of our individual
lives, but in terms of our place in the wider scheme of existence as a whole, and it is in this ability to question existence as a whole we become beings who have the ability to transcend existence in nature itself. In Hawthorne, to be a civilized human being and to be a Christian (and he is Christian enough to exclusively equate the two) means to possess the ability to lift our heads from the endless immersion in doing, thinking and being. This constitutes the essence of our beings as spirit.

But if our existence as spirit is the ability to transcend not only the self but existence in nature per se, then our existence - as - spirit points beyond existence to another reality. In traditional Christian thought this would be God, but in Hawthorne it is the interconnected brotherhood of fallen human beings living in a relational world where everything is linked with everything else. In Hawthorne, because nature and spirit co-exist each transforming the other, it is still possible for individuals, although limited by the particularity of their selves and by the particularity of their sinful history, to be in touch with the infinity of human connectedness - if they can develop their sympathies.

Pearl standing at the edge of the brook can be seen as a vivid personification of Hawthorne’s own conception of his book. Adorned with
an imaginative recreation of natural reality and committed to the truth symbolized in the letter “A”, Hawthorne hoped that his romance, like Pearl, would have a spiritual essence that would be more beautiful than any form of empirical beauty. The romance, like Pearl would derive its spirituality and its beauty through the correct attitude to sin, and its chief value would lie in its embodiment of the truth which marks both life and time-- the universal brotherhood of man despite the reality of sin.

The forest scene makes clear Hawthorne’s attitude to sexuality. Hawthorne sees it as an amoral (not immoral) vitalizing force. Without it, Chillingworth is seen to be cold and deformed. To begin with, Hester possesses rich, voluptuous, oriental beauty and an impulsive, passionate nature. But her isolation and intellectual revolt makes her so hard that “there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester’s face for love to dwell on.” However, in the forest when she throws off the letter “A” and lets her hair down, her features recover their softness. “Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of their beauty came back from what men call the irrevocable past and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour.”

Love, Hawthorne says, must always create sunshine but it cannot do away with the problem of evil. Hester throws away the letter “A” but what is she to do

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with the letter “A” in live form? The reality of evil, precisely because it is real, cannot be ignored, and Hester’s attempt to do so, for all the attendant joy and release does not succeed. Also, in the joy of love there is a temptation for dangerous self-absorption. The decision of the lovers to get rid of the letter “A” and come together falsifies not just the reality of Pearl but also that of the Christian world of which they too are a part. Thus, the nature which sympathizes with the lovers is wild heathen nature “never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth.”

In Hawthorne’s scheme of things, vitality that accompanies sexuality must be allied with sympathy - which is not possible without a genuine acceptance of the reality of evil. If it is not accompanied by sympathy, it will become a destructive force, that will merely re-enact past mistakes. For Hawthorne, Hester and Dimmesdale are not renewing their love in the forest. Rather they are re-enacting their earlier sin of passion but this time with “principle and purpose.”

Dimmesdale is unable to accept the reality of sin because of cowardice. Therefore, with Dimmesdale Pearl’s endeavour is to save him from the destructive consequences of his own cowardice and hypocrisy. In the beginning, she sympathizes with him but as falsehood begins to eat into his
being, she becomes hostile. At the Pillory she wouldn’t let Dimmesdale hold her hand because he refused to come out into the open with Hester and herself. Little later, she mocks him “Thou Wast not bold! thou wast not true! Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand, and mother’s hand, tomorrow noontide!” In the forest she would not acknowledge the minister and when the latter kisses her she runs to the brook and washes her forehead “until the unwelcome kiss was quite washed off”. Later, after the minister had made his great confession, he asked Pearl, “dear little Pearl, wilt thou kiss me now? Thou wouldst not, yonder, in the forest! But now thou wilt?” And Pearl “with tears falling upon her father’s cheek kissed his lips.”

Thus, Pearl forces Hester and Dimmesdale to recognize and accept the reality of the letter “A” Appropriately, as a character she herself grows by learning to sympathize. Like the letter “A”, which through misunderstanding becomes a mark of devil, but which if properly understood defines the limitations of humanity and opens the door to new and potent sympathies, Pearl too is poised between the demoniac and the human. She has drunk the turmoil and anguish that had pervaded her mother’s system and to the Puritan as to Hester herself, she seemed at times, a “demon child”. But as Hester recognizes at a critical juncture in the
novel, “In the little chaos of Pearl’s character there might be seen emerging and could have been, from the very first—the steadfast principles of an unflinching courage and uncontrollable will a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self respect and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them.” All that she needed was something which some people wait for throughout life “a grief that should deeply touch her, and thus humanize and make her capable of sympathy.” The last great scene where Dimmesdale confesses and forces everyone else to acknowledge the reality of sin, develops her sympathies in precisely this manner. “A spell was broken. The great scene of grief in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell up to her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl’s errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.”

It is in this development of her sympathies that Pearl comes to differ so much from Chillingworth. She had performed the same function in respect of Hester that Chillingworth performed in respect to Dimmesdale. But Chillingworth without these sympathies ended up committing the unpardonable sin while Pearl embodying the only possible positive value
the novel can offer relieves the darkening close of this tale of human frailty and sorrow. That Hawthorne intended this to be so is clear from the fact that all along the track of the story Pearl has been associated with the rosebush first mentioned in the opening chapter.

Unlike the romantic work of art, the Howthornian work of art is designed not so much for the pleasure of the audience as to bring home to him the rather unpleasant truth about the reality of sin. The function of art for Hawthorne is very clearly the spiritual education of the reader by enabling him to come to terms with the negative realities of humanity. Thus in The Marble Faun he singles out Guido’s painting of Beatrice and Sodoma’s painting of Christ for special praise. Pearl, like the book, is shown to be conscious of the reality of sin symbolized by letter “A” right from the beginning. Her role in the book (as we have already seen), is the same as the function which the book itself is supposed to serve as a work of art. Committed to truth, she brings all those with whom she comes into contact, to accept the reality of sin. In the final analysis she embodies Hawthorne’s conviction regarding the positive role which art can play in the fallen world. Not only does she connect the sinful creator with the rest of humanity but she, like all art objects, born of the consciousness of sin, becomes the symbol, a living hieroglyphic, of the idea that sin instead of
leading humanity to damnation might actually lead it to redemption by enabling it to discover its common bond.

How strange, indeed! Man had marked this women’s sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, whose place was on the same dishonored bosom, to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of mortals and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven!

As said earlier, Hawthorne’s romances thematize their own self-readings by incorporating grounds external to the narrative as characters or features inside the novel. That Hawthorne actually intends us to “read” Pearl and the novel in the manner outlined above becomes clear if we look closely at a seemingly insignificant comment by Dimmesdale. While he was waiting, along with Hester, for Pearl to cross the brook in the forest, he remarks: “Even little babes, when I take them in my arms, weep bitterly. Yet Pearl, twice in her little lifetime, hath been kind to me! The first time, - thou knowest it well! The last was when thou leadst her with thee to the house of yonder stern old Governor.” In this comment, the use of the word “twice” is significant because it shows Dimmesdale has a very clear
memory of both the incidents when Pearl allegedly had been kind to him. He goes on to specifically mention the second incident but Hawthorne ensures that his reference to the first incident remains clouded in ambiguity. However, Dimmesdale clearly assumes that Hester would know which incident he is referring to, despite the fact that the incident obviously happened years ago, and that two of them could not possibly have discussed it earlier.

If we do go back to the house of the yonder stern old Governor, we will see that Dimmesdale was, in fact, not mistaken in assuming that Hester would know which incident he was referring to. At the Governor’s house, after Dimmesdale had finished pleading Hester’s case, Pearl softly stole towards him, and gently laid her cheek against his hand. The tenderness of the gesture surprised Hester, and she permitted herself an on the spot analysis of Pearl’s character: “...her mother, who was looking on, asked herself, - ‘is that my Pearl?’ Yet she knew that there was love in the child’s heart, although it mostly revealed itself in passion, and hardly twice in her lifetime had been softened by such gentleness as now.”

The deliberate use of the word “twice” here as in the later chapter forces us to ask when was it that Pearl displayed similar kindness and gentleness towards Dimmesdale, before the meeting at the Governor’s house? The only possible incident that both Hester and Dimmesdale could be referring
to occurred during the first scaffold scene when Dimmesdale had finished exhorting Hester to reveal the name of her lover. "The young pastor's voice was tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken. The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy. Even the poor baby, at Hester's bosom, was affected by the same influence; for it directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmsdale, and held up its little arms, with a half pleased, half plaintive murmur."62

Years later, it is this gesture of the new born baby that both Hester and Dimmsdale recalled. The fact that both parents attached so much importance to this little gesture, and that they both seemingly knew each other's mind on this, remains an absurdity from the realistic perspective. But as we have seen, in terms of Hawthorne's self-conscious art, the assumptions are valid. They establish the fictionality of fiction and self-consciously point to the interpretive framework incorporated within the narrative itself. Pearl, as Hawthorne tells us, "had been offered the world, these seven years past, as the living hieroglyphic, ... all written in this symbol, all plainly manifest..."63
NOTES

1 Hawthorne, Novels 159.


3 Hawthorne, Novels 164.

4 Hawthorne, Novels 165.

5 The Hawthornian narrator repeatedly brings in different points of view in the narrative. Here he is using a contemporary nineteenth century perspective to criticize the Puritans, deliberately initiating an ongoing comparison between the value system of the Puritans and his nineteenth century readers.

6 Hawthorne, Novels 163.

7 Hawthorne, Novels 164.

8 Hawthorne, Novels 176.

9 Hawthorne, Novels 190.

10 Hawthorne, Novels 192.

11 Hawthorne, Novels 240.

12 Hawthorne, Novels 259.

13 Hawthorne, Novels 291.

14 Hawthorne, Novels 175.

15 Hawthorne, Novels 243.

16 Hawthorne, Novels 244.

17 Hawthorne, Novels 245.

19 Hawthorne, *Novels* 310.

20 Hawthorne, *Novels* 304.

21 Hawthorne, *Novels* 304.

22 Hawthorne, *Novels* 310.


30 Hawthorne, *Novels* 204.


33 Hawthorne, *Novels* 194.

34 Hawthorne, *Novels* 195.
35 Hawthorne, Novels 195.
36 Hawthorne, Novels 199.
37 Hawthorne, Novels 197.
38 Hawthorne, Novels 284.
39 Hawthorne, Novels 282.
40 Hawthorne, Novels 285.
41 Hawthorne, Novels 342.
43 Hawthorne, Novels 213.
44 Millington, Practicing Romance 66.
45 Hawthorne, Novels 114.
46 Hawthorne, Novels 196.
47 Hawthorne, Novels 214.
48 Hawthorne, Novels 272.
49 Hawthorne, Novels 274.
50 Hawthorne, Novels 274.
51 Hawthorne, Novels 276.
52 Hawthorne, Novels 293.
53 Hawthorne, Novels 297.
54 Hawthorne, Novels 293.
55 Hawthorne, Novels 253.
56 Hawthorne, *Novels* 339.
57 Hawthorne, *Novels* 339.
58 Hawthorne, *Novels* 273.
59 Hawthorne, *Novels* 339.
60 Hawthorne, *Novels* 297.
61 Hawthorne, *Novels* 216.
62 Hawthorne, *Novels* 175.
63 Hawthorne, *Novels* 297.