

## Symbolism in The Scarlet Letter: The Scaffold

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Symbolism plays such an important role in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" the author even puts the most critical symbol in the title. In doing so, he not only added a phrase to the English language, he brilliantly titled a book that is still the strongest portrait of puritanism in early colonial New England. One of the strongest visual images of puritanism is the scaffold of the pillory that stood at the center of so many puritan settlements. Although on the surface, the platform with its stocks represents the punishment system of the time, Hawthorne takes the structure a step deeper in the novel and uses the scaffold in early Boston as a stage upon which the main characters act out how they deal with their sin — first with the community, then to god or nature, and then to the world.

Hawthorn presents the scaffold at the start of the story in Chapters Two and Three, in the exact middle of the book in Chapter Twelve, and finally in Chapters Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three. At each point, the three main characters, Hester Prynne, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, perform a morality play on or near the stage that shares what drives them, the actors, and how society, the audience, perceives their sin.

In the first occurrence, the author takes time to describe the structure and its role

in punishment at the time. He states, “this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine (62).” Of note is the fact that he points out the purpose of the scaffold was to hold the pillory, or stocks, that the guilty would be placed in for public observance and ridicule and to make the guilty parties easily visible to everyone. However, none of the story's characters ever stand in the actual pillory. Instead, it becomes the backdrop, the scenery in front of which they act out their parts. He also points out that, like a stage, the platform is “at about the height of a man’s shoulders above the street (62).” The similarity goes further when he describes how influential men sat on “a balcony of the meeting-house, looking down upon the platform (63).” Just like boxes for the wealthy and powerful in a theater. And below the stage, the lesser townsfolk assembled, standing like groundlings at Shakespeare’s Globe. Hester’s lost husband, the person offended the most by the adultery, reappears amongst the people on the ground. Dimmesdale, her accomplice, is standing on the balcony. Neither publicly acknowledge Hester or her act. They begin as part of the audience because they are not sharing their response with others.

Hester never spoke or responded to either audience. She stood on her stage, confronting her sin and the response of her community. Hawthorne closes the scene by showing her as detached and states, “her spirit could only shelter itself beneath a stony crust of insensibility (79).” The first act of the play is complete, the story’s background has been established, the conflict that will drive the drama is explained, and the characters have been introduced as has some of their motivation.

The second act upon the symbolic stage of the scaffolding happens at night when Dimmesdale, driven mad by guilt, climbs upon the platform. But instead of the townspeople crowded below and the powerful in the balcony, the only audience was, eventually Chillingworth below and god or nature above. But, initially there is no audience and when he screams into the night, sharing his guilt, no one notices. He does not have the courage to perform in front of a live audience.

After some time, he finds that Hester and Pearl are below him, and he asks them to join him on the scaffold and they join hands where “the three formed an electric chain (184).” This act was like three actors connecting and performing on the stage. However, still not in front of an audience. Pearl tries to correct this, but Dimmesdale refuses. At the same time, the audience of Chillingworth appears below and God or nature appears as a comet spelling out the letter A in the sky.

In the third and final scene on the Scaffold, the story comes to its conclusion. Dimmesdale takes the stage and Hester, Pearl, and Chillingworth follow him. This time, the audience is full of more than the townspeople, it includes natives, farmers, traders from out of town, and seamen in the port. The world is now watching the performance.

When Chillingworth follows, Hawthorne fully reveals the scaffold as a symbol of a stage for a morality play. He states, “Old Roger Chillingworth followed, as one intimately connected with the drama of guilt and sorrow in which they had all been actors, and well entitled, therefore, to be present at its closing scene (308).” And as in any good play of the day, the person who finally faces his sin and asks for forgiveness,

dies.

Everything that happens between these three uses of the scaffold is off-stage. The author shares the story with us, but the main characters do not share what happens with their audience. Hawthorne used the scaffold to represent a stage where the characters could react in public — with defiance on the part of Hester Prynne, guilt by Reverend Dimmesdale, and hate for Chillingworth. Pearl also appears as the result of that sin. As they worked things out, the audience was their community, each other, god, and then finally, the world. All while the pillory stood as a backdrop representing punishment.

### **Works Cited.**

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 2nd ed., Boston, James R. Osgood and Company, 1878, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/25344/pg25344-images.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/25344/pg25344-images.html)