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Introduction by Hannah Commans

“Since the mid nineteenth century Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* has spurred debate and analysis amongst its readers. The romantic narrative is set within the seventeenth century during a time of staunch puritanism in America. The novel takes place in Boston, Massachusetts during the years 1642-1649 and follows the story of Hester Prynne, a woman who commits adultery resulting in the birth of a daughter she calls Pearl. The novel’s canonization is not surprising as it was an immediate best-seller when it was published in 1850. One of the more prominent aspects of the story is the distinct letter “A” that Hester is forced to wear publicly. The badge is meant to shame Hester, to visibly ensure that wherever she goes her sinful acts are made known. This dishonorable badge is the subject of the ensuing essay in which [REDACTED] tackles the myriad symbols present within the story. [REDACTED] take on the symbols reflected in the narrative is unique in that her approach infuses psychological analysis with close reading. [REDACTED] references Rollo May, an American existential psychologist, and through an understanding of his work she is able to relay how the implementation of relevant psychological approaches allows Hester to ultimately acknowledge

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and accept the symbols forced upon her. As an editor, this essay struck me as an insightful piece of analysis that works cross-functionally, touching on the larger implications of Hawthorne's use of symbolism both from an English standpoint as well as a psychological one. [REDACTED] work reflects the diversity of analysis that *The Scarlet Letter* continues to inspire even centuries after its publication."

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* largely revolves around one emblem: the scarlet 'A' prominently emblazoned upon Hester Prynne's chest. The nature of this particular symbol is open to interpretation, with its meaning rapidly losing its original essence throughout the plot's progression as members of the town imagine new meanings for it. However, what function does this symbol, or for that matter, any symbol in the novel, ultimately serve? According to existential psychologist Rollo May, the operative role of the symbol is to heal the mind by linking our often unconscious inner experiences to the consciousness of outer reality. By acting as a bridge between the inner and outer worlds, symbols help us to reconcile our primitive inner urges with an external

environment where public and social considerations must be attended to. They allow us to become fully aware of our primordial drives while giving such compulsions an acceptable place in society, because while the impulse itself cannot reasonably be integrated into outer reality, the symbol for it can be. Symbols within *The Scarlet Letter* permit character to connect their private lives to the public world, which in turn allows each character to achieve self-awareness and psychological integration.

Symbols can be explained in terms of a “sign” and a “signified”, in which the sign implies a deeper meaning about the signified object to which it refers. However May, identifies a two-fold function to the healing power of myth which corresponds to the inner and outer spheres:

This power resides, on one hand, in the fact that the symbol and myth elicit and bring into awareness the repressed, unconscious archaic urges, longings, dreads and other psychic content. This is the *regressive* function of symbols and myths. But on the other hand, the symbol and myth reveal new goals, new ethical insights and possibilities; they are...ways of working out the problem on a higher level of integration...This we call the *progressive* function...

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When examining the scarlet letter 'A' in this context, the regressive function of the symbol is quite apparent. The reddish hue it exudes immediately strikes connotations of extremes, since the color red is often used in cultures to indicate a warning which signals some sort of danger, whether this be excess passion or extreme crisis. In this particular case the redness seems to correspond with passion, especially that related to sexual urges. If we take the 'A' to stand for 'adultery', the sexual implications inherent to the symbol are further echoed, intimating the primitive urge to engage in sexual relations. The regressive nature of the symbol, however, does not lie simply in its relation to sexuality, but in its suggestion of the dangers of sexuality as well. The symbol is intended as punishment, implying that even though other associations can be drawn from it, guilt and trepidation should be chiefly considered. For Hester Prynne, the 'A's regressive power to bring to consciousness associations with sex and guilt are so strong that, when placed upon the scaffold for public view, unrelated instances of guilt are drawn to the surface. Hester's mind becomes filled with "Reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, passages of infancy and school-days, sports, childish quarrels, and the little domestic traits of her maiden years...intermingled with recollections of whatever

was gravest in her subsequent life..." In this scene we see the letter 'A' bringing the reader to the very roots of the unconscious psyche as Hester's sexual guilt is quickly linked with the totality of guilt ever felt in the summation of Hester's life. In this manner, Hester's inner life is brought to consciousness, meaning the healing process can initiate.

For Hester, convalescence commences when she is able to begin imagining a new meaning for her letter 'A', allowing the progressive function of symbol and myth to carry out. Hester becomes well-known around town for her piety and charity and the people eventually come to revere her saint-like qualities; "...nay, more, they had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin...but of her many good deeds since...the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness..." (142). The symbol, in spite of all its previous associations, loses its original meaning and is able to imagine new ones for itself. Nobility, sainthood, and rank are such possibilities imagined by the characters in the novel, superseding the previously negative implications with positive ones. It is here we are able to see the letter 'A's progressive side; since its vagueness allows for the malleability of meaning, the characters can envision

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an interpretation of the symbol which integrates the sexual guilt of Hester's inner world into the outer world, where repentance is lauded, giving the symbol a curative role.

When applying May's theories to *The Scarlet Letter*, the therapeutic value of the symbol is made quite apparent. The question arises, however, as to whether the symbol of the letter 'A' is truly sufficient to allow for Hester's full integration of private and public life; does Hester truly 'heal' herself through this symbol? We see in the novel that Hester, even after public opinion of her has changed, is still troubled by her own mind to the point where "At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide. The scarlet letter had not done its office" (145). The notion that the symbol is ineffective as a tool for healing can be accounted for by the fact that the scarlet letter fails to symbolize the entirety of Hester's transgression; while the 'A' signifies her own guilt, Hester's crime was a shared one. Her psychic discomfort stems much deeper than the letter 'A' insinuates, meaning that a greater symbol is required in order for Hester to truly bring

to consciousness the hidden neurosis which is preventing her from moving forward.

Hawthorne, however, provides Hester with a means of healing through an alternative method: the symbolic act of confession. A confession not only implies admission of a wrongdoing, but deferment to a greater, divinely bestowed authority that will ultimately judge that act. Upon revealing the truth of his deepest secret, Reverend Dimmesdale "...stood with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory...A spell was broken" (221-222). Through confession, the inner awareness of a lack of purity is brought together with the outer world where contrition is more than just socially acceptable, but praised. The symbolic act of confession allows for both Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale to finally put an end to the guilt that eats away at them both, as their neuroses are given a platform in outer reality. They are able to bridge their inner and outer worlds, providing psychological relief through this 'higher integration'.

Like the scarlet letter 'A', Pearl herself becomes a symbol for unbridled passion throughout the novel. On one particular outing Hester dresses Pearl in completely scarlet attire "...that irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which

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Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!...The mother...had carefully wrought out the similitude...[creating] an analogy between the object of her affection, and the emblem of her guilt and torture" (90-91). In these lines, we see the scarlet letter 'A' and Pearl as synonymous symbols; both conjure up notions of passion, of hell's fiery pits, and of shame. These connotations operate as the regressive function of symbols, as they remind us of the primitive urges and fears lying latent in the back of our minds. Pearl, unlike the scarlet letter, however, progressively allows her mother Hester to begin envisioning a world where heaven is possible for her. Although both the scarlet letter 'A' and Pearl serve as constant reminders of Hester's transgression, Pearl alone permits her to imagine the possibility of atonement. Reverend Dimmesdale points out that Pearl has the capacity "...to teach her [Hester], as it were by the Creator's sacred pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also will bring its parent thither" (102). Because of Pearl, Hester is able to imagine a future for herself in heaven, giving her purpose and initiating the healing process. Pearl turns the baseness of Hester's inner sins into outer love for her child, thereby transmuting her wrongdoings into alchemical gold.

Hester herself becomes a symbol and myth similar to that of Anne Hutchinson, the young woman who was excommunicated for her religious beliefs. The fact that Hawthorne begins the novel with "the Custom-House" further attests to Hester's role as symbol and myth; furthermore, the manner in which he "discovers" Hester's scarlet letter 'A' gives the novel a preternatural, fairy-tale like aura. Hawthorne proceeds, however, to give Hester Prynne multiple symbolic possibilities, the first of these being one of collective shame. When Hester is about to initially appear upon the scaffold, the town's women gossip about her offense with one of them proclaiming "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book" (49). Here, Hester symbolizes the immoral side of the townspeople, as she becomes the epitome of sin and shame through the overtly public nature of her punishment. Hawthorne further goes on to characterize Hester as a symbol against sin itself, as Robert Chillingworth declares: "...she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone" (58). In all of these instances the regressive side of Hester as a symbol is visible; because of the strange nature of her misconduct she becomes a sign of all that is immoral

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due to the fact that she serves to remind people of the shame that haunts their own psyches.

Like any other symbol, however, Hester also serves a progressive, healing function that links together two realities. Hester is first described as "...this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity..." (53). This is not the only instance in which Hester is described as saint-like and divine, with all of chapter thirteen being dedicated to "Another View of Hester", which provides an account of her goodness and charitable works (139-146). The rapid change in attitude towards Hester can be attested to by the progressive nature of symbols; the people are reminded that just as Hester is able to redeem herself for her past wrongdoings, therein lays the same possibility for themselves. Seeing Hester as a symbol provides them with the opportunity for convalescence, since Hester bridges their inner guilt over sinful acts with the possibility for absolution in the outer world. They are able to imagine their own transgressions in a socially acceptable light, quelling the torment of a mind affected by guilt.

Like Hester Prynne and Pearl, Reverend Dimmesdale also comes to adopt the role of a symbol.

Throughout the novel it is revealed that Reverend Dimmesdale has played a part in Hester Prynne's offense as an accomplice, but the nature of his work prevents him from making his confession. In a way, Dimmesdale as a symbol plays a regressive function by drawing to our attention two of the most basic, instinctive aspects of human nature: the fear of punishment, and the sinful inclination of every human being. As Hester urges Reverend Dimmesdale to confess he exclaims: "'The judgment of God is on me...It is too mighty for me to struggle with'" (171)! Dimmesdale struggles with his guilt, humanizing him and placing him among the ranks of men despite his 'holy' occupation. His actions may be viewed as hypocrisy, but in the greater sphere of things they make Dimmesdale more relatable. Upon discovering the true nature of Dimmesdale's situation, the people come to laud his actions, proclaiming "...he had made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike. It was to teach them, that the holiest among us has but attained so far above his fellows as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down..." (224). Here the progressive aspect of the symbol is visible, as Dimmesdale, like Hester, allows the people to imagine for themselves the possibility of forgiveness

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for their sins and entrance into the kingdom of Heaven. They even go as far as to transform Dimmesdale from a mere symbol into a myth, utilizing his example as a way to mend their broken, fragmented psyches.

The Scarlet Letter demonstrates to us the powerful effect that the symbol can have on the human mind by displaying the symbol's strong capacity for connecting the inner reality with outer reality. In accomplishing this link, the human mind is able to start coming to terms with its own nature, establishing a sort of mental peace and tranquility that could not be achieved through explicit expression. While explicit expression has the potential to be rejected and derided by the public, a symbol is more likely to be assimilated into public reception and recognition. Hawthorne uses several powerful symbols throughout the novel in order to exemplify this phenomenon, utilizing motifs such as the scarlet letter 'A', Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Hester herself. These symbols are ultimately transformative due to their regressive and progressive functions and have the capability of transcending neurosis, leading to fruitful psychological integration.

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