Truth in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*
Excerpted from *The Liberated Imagination* by Leland Ryken

Literature…extends the range of vision, intellectual, Moral, spiritual; it …sharpens our discernment.
Charles G. Osgood, *Poetry as a Means of Grace*

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic *Scarlet Letter* will help us synthesize the four levels of truth in the arts. What types of truth do we encounter as we read this great story?

**Truth about Human Values**

To begin, the book presents for our contemplation some of the powerful archetypes of literature and human experience. At the center of the story are two important character types—Hester, the martyr figure who by her courage and love wins eventual victory over social prejudice, and Rev. Dimmesdale, the great sinner who at last stands purified before God. The plot likewise revolves around two great archetypes—crime and punishment, and redemption through suffering.

The story also makes memorable use of some of the master images of the human imagination. Light and darkness become virtual actors in the story and assume their common meanings of revelation and concealment, respectively. Equally prominent are the forest and the town, but Hawthorne introduces a complexity by making both of these images ambivalent. The forest is a place of both natural freedom and moral error (being the scene of Hester and Dimmesdale’s adultery and of their ill-fated plan to run away from their moral responsibility). The town represents social oppression, but it is also where Hester and Dimmesdale achieve their redemption (though in different ways).

*The Scarlet Letter* is a vision of human longings and fears. As we participate vicariously in the action, we feel the natural human longing for love and compassion, for relief from guilt, for truth and honesty, for union with God, society, and nature. We are also made to feel what we most wish to avoid: alienation from God and people, social ostracism, hatred among people, guilt and its effects.

What kind of truth does the story embody? First of all, the truth about basic human values, longings and aversions. The usefulness of reading the story lies partly in its ability to organize some familiar aspects of our own experience and to bring them to our consciousness so we can act upon them.

**Truth about Human Experience**

The story also presents significant aspects of human experience for our contemplation. The knowledge that it offers is not a series of abstract propositions or logical arguments but a living through of an experience. What human experiences does the novel enable us imaginatively to recreate?

Hawthorne gave American literature its classic anatomy of human guilt (as Shakespeare did for English literature in *Macbeth*). In the account of Dimmesdale’s life we experience the reality of the guilty conscience, the isolation and self-torture that it engenders, the psychological anguish and aberrations that it induces, the physical suffering that it produces in its extremities, as well as the self-defeating impulse to perpetuate it through concealment. In this story we “know” all this experientially, not as
abstract theory. In fact, I am always somewhat shocked when I reach the last chapter (the fireside chat with the author, in effect) and read Hawthorne’s moralizing statement, “Be true.” What an emaciated piece of advice that is compared with the experiential reality of the story itself.

The story also embodies the truth about human isolation or alienation. Beginning with Hester’s exposure on the scaffold in the second chapter, we are made to feel what it is like to be rejected by society. The ostracism that the village members extend to Hester’s daughter Pearl pushes the phenomenon in a social direction as well.

Other truths are also rendered as experiential realities in the novel. To know what self-righteousness is, we can read Hawthorne’s descriptions of the Puritans. To feel the reality of hatred, both for the perpetrator and the victim, we can vicariously enter the life of Chillingworth. For a new awareness of the truth about God’s forgiveness, we can read the great confession scene that comprises the story’s climax.

**Pieces of General Truth**

What I have said thus far has already suggested some of the general truths that the book embodies. As we read the story, we recover truths that are the common wisdom of the human race: that people need love, that society can be unjust and oppressive, that feeling can be a better moral guide than unfeeling reason, that (however) feeling without rational judgment can be destructive of both self and others, that hatred and concealed guilt are self-destructive, that sin produces consequences.

Stated in these general terms, the morality of the story is a point at which most people can meet on a common ground. More needs to be said, obviously, but Christians should value the moral consensus they can often find with people generally. It is a blessing of God’s common grace and the basis of morality in society. The arts are a great humanizing agent and (not surprisingly) one of the first things that tyrants and totalitarian governments try to suppress.

**World View in The Scarlet Letter**

One of the most helpful frameworks for grasping the world view embodied in a story is to look upon the characters in the story (especially the protagonist) as people who make an experiment in living—who undertake some course of action that exemplifies and test the kind of life in which they believe. This way of reading considers the literary characters as persons who pursue such an experiment in living “to its final stages within a situation of ultimate meaning. Nothing in fiction is thus viewed as what an action leads to, results in, or implies. If the experiment in living succeeds, the work can be said to affirm that world view. If the experiment fails, the work denies that view of reality and by implication usually suggests an alternative.

Hawthorne’s story is an especially useful work with which to illustrate how works of art embody world views because it gives equal treatment to three distinct world views: the Puritan, the romantic, and the Christian.

**The Puritan Community**

The Puritan Community is the first group of characters whose world view emerges in the story. Theirs is a legalistic world view that exalts a moral code to supremacy. The narrator describes them as “a people amongst whom religion and law
were almost identical” (chapter 2). Their elevation of moral law to the integrating factor in their experience explains the Puritan community’s tendency to view Hester Prynne, the mother of the illegitimate child Pearl, not a person but as the violator of a moral code. For example, the impressive scene that opens the story describes how the community brings Hester out of the prison to the scaffold of the pillory in order to hold her up as an example of moral sin.

The same propensity to define Hester in terms of the moral code is underscored in chapter five when we read that through the years, “giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her… as the figure, the body, the reality of sin.” The same thing is established by the letter “A” that the Puritan community compels Hester to wear. The symbol recurs in the book more than once every two pages and is a running reminder of the community’s practice of defining Hester as an adulteress, a violator of a moral code.

The members of the Puritan community also take their own identity from the moral code that dominates their world. The spectators of Hester’s exposure on the scaffold identify themselves as the self-righteous keepers of the code. Governor Bellingham, Reverend Wilson, Reverend Dimmesdale, and the city magistrates are the official guardians of the moral law. Throughout the story, these characters illustrate how the moral code is the mainspring of action and governing principle for the Puritan community.

How does the Puritan community’s experiment in living fare in the story? It fails, to put it mildly. The Puritans are portrayed as uniformly unsympathetic. Hawthorne secures a negative reaction to them by making them the object of satiric attack throughout his story. He also pays his readers the compliment of assuming that their world view and morality are healthy, so that we have hesitation in condemning the bigotry, self-righteousness, sadism, and unforgiving nature of the Puritan’s legalism.

The final task is to elevate the Puritan community’s legalistic world view by the Christian standard. Too many readers equate the Puritans in Hawthorne’s story with Christianity (and with the real Puritans of history, which Hawthorne never intended) and conclude that Hawthorne is condemning Christianity. This is surely an inaccurate interpretation. *The Scarlet Letter*, when it attacks Puritan behavior, is not attacking Christianity because Puritan behavior in the story is not Christian. The attitudes and behavior of the Puritan community are condemned by a truly Christian standard, as contained in the Bible and the life of Christ.

The Christian ideal is one that forgives and restores the sinner. Christ forgave the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11); he did not excuse her, nor did he neglect to call adultery a sin, as evidenced by the fact that he told the woman, “Go, and do not sin again” (v. 11). Paul reinforced the same ideal of forgiveness when he wrote, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galations 6:1-2).

In a Christian world view, then, the standard by which people are called to order their lives is a forgiving God who calls people to forgive their fellow humans. The
Puritans in Hawthorne’s story have substituted for that standard a moral law that only condemns (rather than restores) the sinner.

The Romantic World View

The second world view dramatized in the story is the romantic world view. Romanticism, that intellectual movement that became dominant early in the nineteenth century and has been influential ever since, elevated emotion, impulse, and human freedom from all civilized restraints as the highest of all values. If there is a single term that covers this complex of values, it is nature.

Hester, as all the commentators point out, is the great exponent of romantic values in the story. As the narrator says, “For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortune had been to set her free” (chapter 18). The great conflict in romantic literature is the individual against society, and by that standard Hester is a thoroughgoing romantic heroine.

In the view of Hester, as also of critics who share her romantic values, Hester and Dimmesdale are the victims of society. If only they could escape from the restrictions of civilization and Christian morality, they would be free. This is exactly the view that Hester espouses in the climactic forest meeting with Dimmesdale when she urges their escape with these words: “Whither leads yonder forest-track? …Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step; until, some few miles hence, the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man’s tread. There thou are free! …Or there is the broad pathway of the sea! …What hast thou to do with all these iron men and their opinions?”

Hester’s attitude toward the adultery also reveals her romantic impulse when she says to Dimmesdale, “What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so!” (chapter 17). This is the romantic attitude that feeling is the norm.

What becomes of the romantic world view in the story? Early in the story, when Hester and the Puritan community are the only antagonists on the scene, the Puritans appear in such an ugly light that for at least half of the story we sympathize rather completely with Hester and regard romantic values as the normative viewpoint in the work. But as the story progresses we come to readjust our view of what constitutes reality. Hawthorne has employed what one critic calls “the technique of the guilty reader,” in which the author leads readers to sympathize initially with a character and viewpoint that the readers later come to see as wrong. Such a strategy involves readers directly in the moral action of the story, forcing them to become critics of their own moral responses. There is no more brilliant example of the technique than The Scarlet Letter.

One commentator has documented “the progressive moral dereliction of Hester” late in the story. The reader is meant to sympathize with Hester in her suffering and in the human redemption that it wins for her in the community, but late in the story her romantic outlook is juxtaposed to a Christian world view and is shown to be lacking. Hawthorne does not allow his two protagonists to escape from a world of moral consequences into a world of amoral freedom.
In the climactic confession scene at the end of the story, it is not society that destroys Dimmesdale. We read that the Puritan community “remained silent and inactive spectators of the judgment which Providence seemed about to work.” In fact, the Puritan society cannot have judged Dimmesdale because it is ignorant of his sins of adultery and hypocrisy.

The Christian World View

There is, finally, the Christian viewpoint in the story, embodied in Reverend Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale’s quest throughout the story is for forgiveness and renewed communion with God and with his fellow humans. This quest reflects the Christian priority of values. Throughout the story, Dimmesdale sees his problem all too clearly: He must be forgiven by God and must make a public confession of his sins of adultery and hypocrisy. James’s statement, “Confess your sins to one another… that you may be healed” (5:16), is the great truth dramatized in the final salvation of Dimmesdale.

The Christian world view, which places the Christian God of forgiveness at the center of reality, emerges as the normative viewpoint at the end of the story with Dimmesdale’s public confession, one of the greatest climaxes of all literature. In that scene, Dimmesdale sees himself not simply as the violator of a social code, as the romanticist would have it, but in a relationship to God. “God’s eye beheld it!” shouts Dimmesdale regarding his sins of adultery and hypocrisy. Furthermore, Dimmesdale espouses a Christian view of reality when he asserts that his confession and the renewed communion with God that it brings are the highest values that he can attain. As he mounts the scaffold, he turns to Hester and asks, “Is not this better than what we dreamed of in the forest?” And Hester, the true romanticist who had conceived of happiness as escape from civilized restraints, replies, “I know not! I know not!”

Why, in Dimmesdale’s view, is it better to make a public confession of sin than to escape? Because in his world view, forgiveness of sin is the highest state that a person can achieve. It is a wholly Christian view of things. That, incidentally, explains why Dimmesdale says in his moment of exposure, “Thanks be to Him who hath led me hither!” and why he calls his confession an act of “triumphant ignominy.”

To the romanticist Hester, the adultery had a “consecration of its own.” Dimmesdale takes the Christian view toward moral sin and says regarding the adultery, “We forgot our God… we violated our reverence for the other’s soul.” In his concluding words, which resolve the plot of the entire story, Dimmesdale repeatedly defines his quest in life in terms of his relationship to God, with forgiveness and salvation as the highest values: “God hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! …By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people. Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!” Dimmesdale ends his life praising God, and therein lies the key to the story’s final meaning.

Someone writes regarding this conclusion, “Thus in his profoundest character-creation, and in the resolution of his greatest book, Hawthorne has employed the Christian thesis, “Father, not my will, but thine be done.”” Someone else correctly notes that “the protagonist of the novel is Arthur Dimmesdale and …the progress of the novel is the working out of Dimmesdale’s redemption.” “The last scene on the scaffold,” notes
yet another critic, “is a complete vision of salvation.” Christian conversion has never been portrayed with greater conviction than in this great chapter of Hawthorne’s novel.

The story ultimately affirms the Christian world view and contains within itself the antidote to the Puritan and romantic world views. As might be expected, critics with romantic values themselves have not read the novel in this way. But critics with Christian sensitivities have gotten the point. As one of them said, “More than any other writer of his time, Hawthorne was a God-centered writer. He was innately religious, as his profound reverence for the mysteries of Christianity demonstrates.”

Summary

The arts can embody truth in four different ways. The arts tell us the truth about human preoccupations, values, longings, and fears. Art is also true to life when it adheres to the reality principle—when it accurately pictures the contours of external or internal reality.

Because artists interpret the experiences that they present, the truthfulness of art can also be assessed at the level of perspective or slant on life. Considered in very general terms, the ideas in works of art often constitute truthful insights into life. At its most specific, the intellectual content of works of art consists of a world view—basic premises about reality, morality, and values, as well as a central integrating values that gives coherence to all of life.

Works of art do not automatically tell the truth at every level. But they always have a high potential to tell us the truth at one or more levels.

Leland Ryken
Ch. 5: “Art and Truth”
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