

“Our Wild Forest-Land”

England(s) and Love in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

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The various landscapes of *The Scarlet Letter* profoundly affect its characters and their relationships, as Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, transplanted from England’s topography and culture, encounter the unrefined and alien New World that surrounds the Massachusetts settlement. In addition to this transatlantic shift, the novel’s protagonists move between town and wilderness, (European) civilization and Nature. Cultural and natural forces influence the emotions of love, fear, and hatred that develop between Hester, her husband, and her lover. Hawthorne’s representations of Old and New England are, like love, complex and contradictory—repression and celebration, tyranny and liberty, aridity and fecundity variously characterize the two lands and their inhabitants.

Hawthorne explores issues of ancestry and homeland in the novel’s autobiographical introduction “The Custom House”, mentioning both the tendency to settle “oyster-like” in a locality (11) and the necessity of avoiding this: “Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil.” (12). For the New World settlers (and for Hawthorne himself) moving away from what is comfortable and familiar catalyses psychological change. Hester and the two men confront this impetus to change as they move between the narrative’s spatial and cultural places, though their corresponding psychological journeys differ greatly. The writer also feels the inescapable ties of inheritance: “the figure of that first ancestor ... still haunts me, and induces a sort of home-feeling with the past” (9). Indeed his people have *become* the land, “mingled their earthy substance with the soil; until no small portion of it must necessarily be akin to the mortal frame wherewith, for a little while, I walk the streets.” (9). The legitimate bond to the land conferred by Hawthorne’s ancestors brings with it responsibility for their sins—he is compelled to take on the shame of their past judicial cruelties much as Hester dutifully bears the burden of her (and her lover’s) sin. Hawthorne suggests that the bonds of ancestral inheritance, homeland, and the land-made-home define and challenge the individual. For the characters of *The Scarlet Letter*, these lands are the

Englands of the Old and New World. How then, do these old and new inheritances of land and culture affect the emotional transactions between Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth?

Hester's sexual vitality and defiant residency beyond the town's physical and social boundaries suggest the vigour implicit in a new world. Despite their role as her persecutors, the English Puritan colonists, spiritually energised by the need to escape religious persecution and establish a "new Zion" distant from the homeland constitute part of this symbol, but there is much of the primal, unrefined essence of the American wilderness in Hester. Under the town's constant scrutiny (and that of the scarlet letter to which she submits), she must hold back this force of nature, yet we know that it has previously burst free in her sexual encounter with Arthur Dimmesdale. In the morally unregulated landscape of the forest/wilderness, Hester, casting off her badge of shame, reveals her natural self—hair unbound and flowing free, cheeks flushed, eyes alive with light, a "gushing from the very heart of womanhood." (210). Like the forest landscape itself, the lovers are free from the artificial order of human society: "Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illuminated by higher truth—with the bliss of these two spirits!" (211).

If Hester embodies a vital American England removed from the "worn-out soil" of the homeland, is there anything of the old country in her character? Hawthorne draws a marked physical and spiritual contrast between Hester and her countrywomen on her release from the Boston Prison. These "wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding" are of "a coarser fibre", "the beef and ale of their native land." (52). Hester emerges into this gaggle of Shakespearian goodwives "tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale ... beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion" (55), evocative of a statuesque goddess. Hawthorne's portrayal of old England is by no means uniformly negative however—in the same chapter, Hester recalls her homeland with fondness: her father's home "decayed" but with an "antique gentility" (60) compared to the "rude market-place of the Puritan settlement" (61) in which she now finds herself. Furthermore, Hawthorne describes the colony's public holiday as a "dim reflection of a remembered splendor, a colorless and manifold diluted repetition of what they had beheld in proud old London" (239). Though "not born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom" these "native Englishmen" (239) celebrate in a restrained, less spontaneous manner than did their immediate ancestors in utopian "Merrie England." Hawthorne notes that the legacy of the "blackest shade of Puritanism ... so darkened the national visage ... that all the subsequent years have not sufficed to clear it up." and that "We have yet to learn the forgotten art of gayety." (241). Hester Prynne, in addition to her American-ness has retained the refinement of old England, and though it cannot be freely expressed, the natural impulse of unselfconscious celebration.

Arthur Dimmesdale, enfeebled by guilt and unable to publicly confess his crime of love, exhibits none of Hester's potency by the time the narrative begins. Conceivably, some measure of dynamism propelled the young minister away from "the rich bosom of the English Church" (111) to bring "all the learning of the age into our wild forest-land." (68). Hawthorne does not permit us to witness Hester and Arthur's trysts, yet the minister must have been charged with some of England's native liveliness in order to transgress to such an extent (and presumably, for Hester to be inspired to similar passion). Dimmesdale's vitality is all but extinguished post coitus, and only resurges briefly: in the liberating space of the forest, and at his climactic and terminal confession. New England is not a land in which Dimmesdale can flourish. However vital he may have been before the crisis precipitated by his

outlawed love with Hester, he is clearly too delicate a bloom to survive long in the Puritan colony's harsh soil, despite the praise lavished upon him by the community. The primal wilderness soil causes his growth to bolt—following his touching and optimistic reunion with Hester in the forest a reckless mania seizes him that he can barely contain.

Dimmesdale, as his name suggests, belongs in the misty, gentle vales of old England, not Hester's bright and stormy New England. In America, he is "a being who felt himself quite astray" (69) and can find "a home only in the midst of civilization and refinement; the higher the state, the more delicately adapted to it the man." (223). Hester brings with her the refinement of her genteel parents, but Dimmesdale is over-refined—all natural good has been replaced by self-conscious, introspective, intellectual morality. This may suffice in the austere and uninspiring terrain of the settlement, but the primal American life-force that surrounds the Puritan enclave (and Hester herself) is more than his civilized system can assimilate.

Hester's aged husband Roger Chillingworth lurks at the threshold of both Englands—in Europe amongst "the intricate and narrow thoroughfares, the tall, gray houses ... of a Continental city" (61) and later emerging from the wilderness (in the company of an "Indian") "clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume." (62). Chillingworth is a chthonic being, grubbing for roots in the earth into which Hester fancies he might even sink "leaving a barren and blasted spot, where, in due course of time, would be seen deadly nightshade, dogwood, henbane, and whatever else of vegetable wickedness the climate could produce, all flourishing with hideous luxuriance" (181). He is very much the Hades to Hester's Persephone, returning from the underworld to drag her below. Concealing his identity from everyone but his wife, the old doctor "chose to withdraw his name from the roll of mankind ... to vanish out of life as completely as if he indeed lay at the bottom of the ocean, whither rumor had long ago consigned him." (121). This subterranean, shadowy aspect of Chillingworth's nature allows him to creep beneath and between the very lands that surround the two Englands—Europe and the American wilderness—insinuated within the soil of each, yet unnatural and malignant. Chillingworth personifies the cold damp of old England remarked upon by Hawthorne in *The English Notebooks*: "I have had some experience of this ugly fragrance in the poor streets of Liverpool; but I think I never smelt it before crossing the Atlantic. It is the odor of an old system of life; the scent of the pine-forests is still too recent with us for it to be known in America." (Claisse, par. 17). This musty, ancient essence repels Hester who turns toward the gentle English sunshine of Arthur's drier intellect. Hawthorne, "a beneficiary of the American Revolution and a product of its new world" (Kazin, xi), may even have conceived Hester's unhappy and unnatural wedlock to the malformed, older man as an allegory of the struggle for American independence.

The characters at the outset of *The Scarlet Letter* are then, transformed by relocation to New England and the criminal love affair's dislocating effects. Each embarks upon additional journeys in the course of the narrative that bring about further changes both within and between them. Dimmesdale's brief trespass into the forest outlands—the emancipating and challenging "free space" that is the province of both unfettered love and sinful compact with the "Black Man"—is his sole subsequent movement. He "had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws" and is a "poor pilgrim on his dreary and desert path" (208). Arthur's journey is laboured,

torturous, and purely internal; it does not deviate from the path of self-reproach. As Hester points out to him at the figurative crossroads of the forest, the path that leads back to the settlement also leads onward into the wilderness, and “the broad pathway of the sea” that “brought thee hither. If thou so choose . . . will bear thee back again.” (204). The defeated Arthur can only admit that he “has had no other thought than to drag on my earthly existence in the sphere where Providence hath placed me.” (205). Although he clings to this dream of escape back to the Old World, Chillingworth’s leech-like persistence forces Dimmesdale to take the path to the very epicenter of his prison: the scaffold from which he makes his final confession and departs life.

Following his return from captivity in the wilderness, Chillingworth can go only where Dimmesdale goes—a “black-a-visaged, hump-shouldered” parasite whose death soon follows that of his host. He too, cannot make the return journey across the Atlantic. Interestingly, he bequeaths land in both Englands to Pearl—the offspring of the union between Old England’s Dimmesdale and America’s Hester. The two lands are thus brought together in the child—both in their physical aspect and in her alchemic combination of “the fairies, whom we left in our dear old England” (214) and the wild life-force of the New World.

However, Hester’s movement between the novel’s landscapes proves the most transformative. Hawthorne makes this explicit discussing her exile from society—“Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods.” (207). Indeed, “The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread.” (207). The physical and social isolation Hester accepts after her crime becomes public knowledge is painful yet empowering. Her independence and dignified submission to the letter’s stigma eventually afford her a homeland both within and without the New England colony—one that interfaces both with the Puritan society and the native liberty and energy of the new world. It is Hester who organizes the lovers’ escape from the land in which their sin blights them, Hester whose enthusiasm kindles light in Arthur’s eyes (206), whose shoulder he leans on (physically and emotionally) as he finally admits his guilt to the community. (262).

Yet, even Hester is unable to return to England permanently. She and Pearl disappear (Hawthorne hints to England) for many years, but Hester later takes up the scarlet letter once more and sees out her life sentence in the cottage on the outskirts of the settlement. Why does she return to the “scene of the crime”? Hawthorne tells us “there was more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence.” (272). Does she consider her crime not yet paid for? Her actions seem far from Dimmesdale’s impotent self-flagellations—rather, she becomes revered by the community for her wisdom, counsel, and perseverance. The sin she carries (by now almost self-imposed) and the growth and transformation it inspired seem so intimately bound with the land that it is impossible for Hester to find home elsewhere. As Dominique Régis Claisse states in his discussion of transatlantic journeys in Hawthorne, “the American native soil has changed the nature of European seeds” (par. 11)—Hester now has deep roots in the New England ground. The novel’s final paragraph reveals another reason why Hester is tied to this land—on her death she is buried alongside Arthur: “It was near that old and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to

mingle.” (273). As with Hawthorne’s ancestors, their being becomes the earth of the land in which they loved, sinned, and transformed themselves.

Land and homeland are a powerful influence on character for Hawthorne, both in terms of ancestral inheritance, and transformation initiated by a change of place. The heavy symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* readily suggests the manifestation of the two Englands’ characteristics in Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, yet they present complex and mutable mixes of both lands. Hawthorne draws on something much deeper than national stereotypes—the intimate bond with the land from which we are born, and the land in which we grow and draw our sustenance. These may not be the same space, yet we are indelibly *of* these lands. Hester succeeds in the integration of her dual English inheritances and, though though she suffers greatly, becomes “a citizen of somewhere else.” (47).

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