

Notes on *The Scarlet Letter*

General characteristics/patterns to look for:

- Hawthorne's priority is exploring and portraying the psychology of his characters (and through them, human nature); many of the characteristics of his diction, syntax, point of view, narrative structure, etc. reflect this goal

- writing this kind of story would be impossible with a leaner, more "external" style like Hemingway's
- adjectives to describe style: dramatic, philosophical, romantic, not realistic or naturalistic
- great psychological complexity and insight: e.g. the filtering of perceptions through one's own biases, desires, fears, etc.; self-deception and rationalization; internal conflict; complex and sometimes contradictory feelings and desires make characters seem real and well developed

• characteristics of diction:

1. dramatic and extreme words: used to make descriptions vivid, convey intensity of emotion
2. imagery involving opposites: also used to add to emotional intensity
 - e.g. white vs. black, light vs. dark, truth vs. falsehood, good vs. evil, purity vs. corruption
3. religious imagery also used to convey feelings of characters—narrator is not telling the story from a Puritan perspective, but religious ideas and images have profound emotional and philosophical significance for the characters, so it is appropriate for him to explore their thoughts and feelings through such images
4. replete with figurative language: metaphors, similes, personification, pathetic fallacy—used to explain concepts and convey emotions

• characteristics of syntax:

1. complex sentences allow for subtle exploration of complex ideas—replete with contrasts, explanations, examples, analogies
2. use of many conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs to show logical progression
3. repetition frequently used to emphasize certain ideas or feelings
4. sentences and paragraphs tend to build to an emotional climax
5. exclamatory sentences and rhetorical questions frequently used to heighten emotional intensity

• characteristics of narrative structure/voice:

1. long passages of description and analysis alternated with specific encounters among characters involving dialogue: extended passages allow for deep, detailed presentation of complex concepts and emotions
2. point of view: essentially third person omniscient, which allows for direct depiction of characters' thoughts and feelings, in line with Hawthorne's narrative priorities
 - sometimes suggests limitations of narrator's knowledge—adds mystery and gives the narration the feel of a story being told by a storyteller
3. story heavily filtered through narrator's voice, reflecting his perceptions and feelings—not "objective" and neutral like some narrative styles
4. foreshadowing employed to build anticipation, increase suspense
5. narrative voice expresses sympathy, compassion for characters; makes some judgments

• characteristics of dialogue

1. dialogue often used as a kind of dialectic (a progressive development of ideas based on exchange of opinions): sometimes even seems like an interior monologue
2. not particularly realistic: dialogue is highly ordered and limited to matters of direct import to the story—not the more haphazard, off-the-cuff kind of exchange that people usually have in the real world—to some degree, dialogue sounds more like written English than spoken English
3. dialogue of townspeople and some characters used to suggest misperceptions of things presented accurately by the narrator

- **themes and motifs:**

1. appearance vs. reality: tendency of people to perceive wrongly, deceive themselves, etc.
 - most obvious example: identities of main characters and others' perceptions of them
2. the corrupting effect of hatred, bitterness, vengeance
3. the destructive power of hidden guilt vs. the liberating power of confession
4. the healing power of love, redemption, and forgiveness
5. humanistic, liberal, compassionate perspective on people, spirituality, and love contrasted with dogmatic, judgmental, conservative religious perspective
6. philosophical/spiritual/moral/emotional independence: the power of the individual to transcend limits of society (despite superficial lack of freedom) and find personal redemption
7. flaws in human nature: self-deception and rationalization, hard-heartedness, tyrannical tendencies, vengeance
 - for Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, similar to the "fatal flaw" of the tragic hero