

Scarlet Letter Journal (Questions 2 and 6)

Thomas Smith

December 11, 2001

Chapters 1–4

Hester's attitude towards the crowd is interesting. In my mind's eye, she displays the scarlet letter with a glare, as if to say, "Here am I, and here is my letter. Thou starest at it! Art thou intelligent enough to find me behind my letter? If thou art not, why dost thou waste our time?"

Without this defiant attitude, I doubt that she could remain sane, while still carrying the ponderous burden of that small piece of fabric on her breast.

Hester is symbolic (surprise!). In these first few chapters, I feel that she symbolizes objects, people, and groups that other people tend to see as very simple and bad. This theme can be found in the world about us very, very easily. Many atheists tend to think along the lines of "How could a thinking, rational adult be religious?" while some theists think, "Their lives must be so shallow! How can they find meaning in their experiences without looking to the spirit?" Neither understands the other. Neither wants to.

The people of Hester's town symbolize the whole human race, with all its infirmities,

gossip, oppression, and unseeing gazes.

Chapters 5–8

Pearl is quite a character. She, the product of sin, acts as a redemptive force for her mother, the sinner. Pearl is not always a reassurance, though! She causes her mother endless pain between the few moments when she is the crown of a moment. She is a peculiar little child. What can her poor mother do? Hester does her best to raise Pearl well, but without the socialization that most children receive, there is no way that Pearl will grow up in any way “normal.”

Pearl symbolizes the truth. There is a saying, “The truth will set you free! But first, it will make you utterly miserable.” Little Pearl is not always nice, as is true of the truth. When she is truly needed, though, she bestows her childish insight unto a situation which, until her entry, seemed quite difficult. Sometimes she manages to do this feat simply by being present. She always seems to argue for or demonstrate what is right, sometimes in ways that are quite surprising.

Chapters 9–11

Chillingworth is evil. Earlier, in the jail house, he says that he realizes the wrongs that he has done to Hester. He seems to completely forget this statement, and the fact that he owes Hester a debt for being forgiven. He could repay her (and stop the plot dead in its tracks) by simply dissolving back into the wilderness from whence he came. But no! He must wreak

revenge on the poor minister Dimmesdale! I strongly feel that his motives are by no means just.

Chillingworth seems to also symbolize evil. His entrance on the scene earlier in the book plays interestingly with the way the townspeople symbolize the whole earthly family. He shows up with little explanation, looks around for two years, tortures their minister for seven years, and then disappears from the political situation and eventually dies. Thus, it would seem to me that the author portrays evil as something which might not already be present in humanity. On the other hand, the townspeople are not the kindest and most gentle lot one could find. Their ignorance, gossip, and mean-spiritedness, though, are nothing to Chillingworth's dedication of all his energies to the making of Dimmesdale's life miserable in the most subtle ways possible.

Chapters 12–15

Poor Dimmesdale feels the need to stand out in the cold of night, alone. Truly is he hard on himself. But just as truly is he hypocritical! This state of mind must be among the worst possible—to inflict penance upon one's self, but to be too afraid to do that which would make the penance unneeded. Why does Dimmesdale not reveal his sin to the world?

Dimmesdale symbolizes how pathetic humankind can be made to feel and act. He is not an evil person, but he is weak of will. This can be mostly attributed to the punishment that Chillingworth inflicts upon him, but is at least partially the fault of Dimmesdale. How much happier he could be!

The meteor could symbolize superstition, or perhaps the human tendency to assign sig-

nificance where none is warranted. It could even represent more abstract ideas, such as cynicism: when viewed in its light, everything appears far more ugly.

Chapters 16–20

The lengthy interview in the forest and its aftermath are quite interesting. When Hester and Dimmesdale talk, they are incredibly happy. They finally get to share their thoughts with each other. Surely, they have both been thinking, for all these years, about what they could say to each other. Now they get a chance to act it out. This triumphant moment is soon overshadowed by Pearl, though. She refuses to come near Hester when she is not wearing her scarlet letter. A person may think he is forgiven when truly he is not. Pearl reminds Hester that all is not well quite yet.

After the interview, Dimmesdale goes home, and on the way can barely restrain himself from various ill-advised deeds. Happiness makes us wiser and, at the same time, more foolish. The way Dimmesdale goes home, ecstatic with happiness, thinks for a few moments and gets slightly depressed, then cheers up and writes a sermon, seems rather familiar to me. Of course, my joy tends to come from slightly less taboo amusements than does Dimmesdale's, but this is of no import. I like writing about my feelings. Dimmesdale, bubbling with joy, sits down at his desk to write his sermon, then suddenly regains consciousness and has written the best sermon ever. This is what happiness can do.

Chapters 21–24

This day belongs to Dimmesdale. He draws attention to himself, from the time when he first shows his unusually-energetic face to his dying moments. This day is the crown of his life. It is by far its happiest day. Was it worth his whole life of sorrow for the glory of one day?

The symbolism of this question is clear: is it worth one's while to strive during one's entire life, for but a day of fulfillment?

Yes.