

“Now Comes the Trial”¹

Reading *The Scarlet Letter* through the Lens of Civil Rights (Kate Scally)

I. Intro

- a. As any high school student who is experimenting with new-found freedom can attest, **the crime happens² before the trial**. It may be a long time before the crucible comes—before mom, or the teacher, or the boyfriend “finds out”—but eventually, secrets do escape from the dark of the forest and come into the light. Almost inevitably, the revealing of the secret causes pain (for one or for many), but also almost inevitably, healing follows from the very same ordeal.
- b. America, in this way, is no different than American Literature students; she creates problems that take a terrifically long time to resolve.
 - i. **Slavery**, for example, predated the Pilgrims in the New World, and outlasted them by more than two-hundred years.
 - ii. The rumblings of the **Civil Rights** movement, which most Americans locate vaguely in the sixties, actually started about twenty years earlier, as black soldiers returned to inequality after risking their lives equally in WWII.
- c. Despite the fact that they were variously debated, slavery and Civil Rights took a back burner for many years; how else could they reach the rolling boil that erupts with the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement, respectively?
- d. Although two examples are given above, a case could be made that slavery and the Civil Rights movement are part of one larger problem: **the tendency of Americans to marginalize those who do not fit in with certain norms**, whether those norms be of age, race, sexual orientation—or any other category that modern-day corporations must promise not to discriminate against. **Although this inhumanity is a theme throughout American Literature, this essay will explore the role that discrimination plays in *The Scarlet Letter*, and will do so by reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic through the lens of Civil Rights texts, particularly those of Eudora Welty and Martin Luther King, Jr.**
- e. The pairing may initially seem odd, but there are documented connections between Hawthorne and Welty, and from Welty to other Civil Rights advocates.

¹ (Welty 172).

² This is, of course, assuming a fair justice system. There are countless examples of people who were put on trial without having committed a crime, and probably also examples of people who were so angry about being put on trial that they *then* went and committed a crime, “since I’m being punished anyway.”

- i. In her professional life, Welty elected to read from “The Birthmark” on more than one occasion, and spoke on the topic “A Southerner Looks at Hawthorne” to an audience at the Smithsonian (Weston 1, Marrs 482). According to Ruth D. Weston, Welty “recognized in Hawthorne a kindred spirit on many levels, even using ‘strikingly Hawthornian symbols in her fiction’” (Weston 2).
 1. As this essay will show, these “Hawthornian symbols”—specifically those most central to *The Scarlet Letter*³—abound in Welty’s short story “A Worn Path.”
- ii. Besides mirroring Hawthorne’s epic, “The Worn Path”—with its acknowledgement of both race and class—also serves as a jumping-off point to the tracts of other Civil Rights writers, whose works can in turn continue **to elucidate Hawthorne’s classic for modern readers facing issues of exclusion.**

II. Exclusion via the Visual Marker

- a. Visual markers are used to set characters apart all the way back to the Biblical story of Cain.
 - i. Cain killed his brother and is marked with a sign on his head, so everyone knows (a) what he has done, and (b) they may not kill him (QUOTE). He becomes anathema.
 - ii. Modern-day criminals are dressed in orange jump-suits so their separation from society is obvious to everyone passing on the highway.
 - iii. Hester Prynne famously wears the title garment, “the scarlet letter” as a warning to all that she has disobeyed the mores of society by committing adultery. She is ostracized.
- b. God punished Cain, society punished Hester, but Welty⁴ gives red as a clue.
 - i. Phoenix Jackson, too, wears red, as the reader discovers in the second line of the story: “there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag,” but she does so for a different reason (Welty 171).
 1. To be perfectly frank, Phoenix does not need a red bandana to set her apart from society, to make her anathema; she is poor, she is old, she is black, she is in Mississippi.
 - a. *When is the story set?*
 2. Nonetheless, the blunt red bandana sets the stage for an in-depth comparison between Hester and Phoenix.

³ According to biographer Dr. Suzanne Marrs, Welty was not only interested in Hawthorne in general but also in *The Scarlet Letter* in particular; she wrote about the novel an as-yet unreleased manuscript.

⁴ Interestingly enough, when reading “A Worn Path” for a NEH-produced video, Welty wears a bright red dress!

III. Close Reading

- a. visual markers (scarlet letter/blackness) set them outside of society. Much maligned. Much stared at.
- b. beginning of each woman's journey
 - i. Hester in jail, at the pillory QUOTE
 - ii. " 'Now comes the trial,' said Phoenix" (Welty 172).
 - 1. "like a festival figure in some parade" (Welty 172).
- c. Would perhaps give up if it was for themselves, but because they were not only alone in the world but also alone in the world with a dependent child, each woman obstinately perseveres
 - i. //MLKJ's "I have a dream" speech
- d. Walk through the woods – hazardous, symbolic
 - i. Hester is rumored to have met with the Devil in the woods and to have signed his book; supposedly how Hester got into her "situation"
 - ii. For Phoenix, is "the devil" the black dog that knocks her into the creek or the man w/ the gun from whom she steals \$ "w/ God watching"?
 - 1. " 'God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing'" (Welty 176).
 - iii. Phoenix's comment begs the question, Should someone here on earth be watching out for these women?
- e. they show the NEED for mandated Civil Rights. In the meantime, they brainstorm ways to help themselves... and dream of a future in which help will come to them.

IV. Dreams

- a. Hester
- b. Phoenix
 - i. "She entered a door, and there she saw nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head" (Welty 177).
 - ii. Name indicates certitude of rebirth
 - 1. perhaps Welty names her that in hopes of a renaissance for Jackson—the city in which Welty lives and Phoenix's last name – Welty had dreams, too!
- c. MLKJ "I have a dream" (August 28, 1963)

V. Active Reactions to being set apart – in society

- a. conscientious objection instead of violence
 - i. Hester accepts the pillory, chooses to remain in Salem (though it is not required) and later to come back to Salem after Pearl is grown
 - ii. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (MLKJr. – April 16, 1963)

VI. Society's reaction to their response

- a. Society to Hester - violence then gradual acceptance

- b. Shooting Medgar Evans
 - i. “ ‘We ain’t never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead’ ” (Welty 729).
 - c. both reactions → publicity
 - i. Hester becomes legendary as a witch (?), also a noted seamstress
 - ii. “ ‘It’s going to get him right back on TV,’ says my wife. ‘You watch for the funeral’ ” (Welty 729).
- VII. Though it is a slippery slope for the reader to analyze author intentionality as the sole explanation of the book, it is interesting—particularly in the cases of *The Scarlet Letter* and “Voice” to consider the **author’s point-of-view**
- a. Hawthorne wrote centuries after the setting, with guilt that his forefathers were judgment-flinging hypocrites, not quite from the point of view of the victim but with sympathy for her plight.
 - b. Welty wrote the night of Evans’ murder, from the point of view of murderer (see *One Writer’s Beginnings*)
 - i. “In the 1960s, in my home town of Jackson, the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered one night in darkness, and I wrote a story that same night about the murderer (his identity then unknown) called ‘Where Is the Voice Coming From?’ But all that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant to me. Trying for my utmost, I wrote it in the first person” (Welty 882-883).
- VIII. Topic of further study – perhaps a footnote in the Hester/Phoenix section
- a. Extrapolation
 - i. **Would Hester’s life when married to Chillingworth have been like Livvie’s life?**
 1. “He asked her, if she was choosing winter, would she pine for spring” (Welty 276).
 2. “But there was nobody, nobody at all, not even a white person. And if there had been anybody, Solomon would not have let Livvie look at them, just as he would not let her look at a field hand, or a field hand look at her” (Welty 278).
 3. bottle trees described as “prisoned trees” (Welty 290).
 4. “Cash belonged to Solomon” before anything happens between him and Livvie, whereas Chillingworth makes Dimmesdale his possession after Dimmesdale’s encounter with Hester (Welty 287).
 - ii. If so, that means she ages very quickly (catching up to grandmotherly Phoenix) after Pearl is born.
 1. short bloom of rose → milkweed
 - a. Plant analogies
 - i. Hester & the rose
 - ii. “Over she went in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed” (Welty 174).

- IX. Topic of further study
- a. **Comparison to the Bard adds new dimension**
 - i. Evident that Welty knew Shakespeare
 1. In “The Demonstrators” -- “she could amuse herself by giving out great wads of Shakespeare” (Welty 733).
 - ii. **Sonnet 29**
 - iii. **The Winter’s Tale**
 1. accusations of adultery
 2. “problem play” begins with psychological drama and ends in comedy
 3. meeting of bear in the woods
 4. daughter who lives on // Pearl & Civil Rights
 - iv. from John Chapman “Witless on the Delta” in *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty’s Fiction* Ed. Laurie Champion, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994. 139-140. *about *The Ponder Heart*
 1. “It is perhaps worth remarking that while Faulkner has dealt with the malignant aspects of mental deficiency and John Steinbeck with its pathos, Eudora Welty works it for its comedy. There are probably no profound conclusions to be drawn from the fact that these three writers have chosen to deal with fools, nor is it particularly important that Shakespeare knew his fools better. What may have some meaning, however, is the fact that writers, like contemporary painters, find it technically advantageous to produce deliberate distortion.”
 - a. Reiteration that “The Winter’s Tale” is an appropriate choice; though a “problem play,” it ends up a comedy!

X. conclusion

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