Blood Vengeance in *The Scarlet Letter*

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"In the spirit of men there is no blood"
Julius Caesar 11.1.168

When blood is drawn, the human tendency leans toward Old Testament "eye-for-an-eye" retribution. But how may one avenge a wrong committed by a society en masse? By withholding what is vital to the common good, as is the case of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. D. H. Lawrence sarcastically qualifies the novel as a "romance" by stating that "nobody has muddy boots in *The Scarlet Letter*" (1:121). Lawrence could as easily have said that no one has bloody hands either. Although the word "blood" occurs twelve times in the text, "bloody" three times, and "bloodthirstiness" once, we see no blood shed. In fact, the verb "bleed" does not occur in the novel. One way to interpret this curious absence of shed blood is to think in terms of Hawthorne's purposely repressing the historical record of violence that accompanied the emergence of his Puritan forebears. A historically repressive interpretation could be considered valid if the romance stood alone as a text. We see a scaffold equipped with the Puritan machines of punishment, yet none is used. We see the armor that governor Bellingham wore in the Pequod War (1:105–06) but it glistens and sparkles, clean of the shed blood of the Indians.

We could easily accuse Hawthorne of eliding the violence that stands behind Puritan progress and achievement, accuse him of pandering to the cultural symbolism of the election-day procession and Dimmesdale's sanguine prophecy for New England in his sermon on that occasion, and accuse him of covering over blood as "guilt for bloodshed" (OED) if the romance were not inextricably tied to "The Custom-House." In that preface, Hawthorne's narrator reminds us that it is the nature of America to draw blood. The American eagle perched atop the Custom House is capable at any time of turning on those it has protected "with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows" (1:5). Even so ubiquitous a symbol as the American flag

hanging over the Custom House entrance sports red stripes to symbolize (in the words of the Continental Congress) "hardiness and valor," but even these noble qualities sometimes demand blood.

Hawthorne's bloodless tale is no manifestation of conventional American aesthetic, a keeping of the violence offstage, as it were. Many of Hawthorne's predecessors and contemporaries spattered their scenes with gore.[1] Since Hawthorne graphically presents blood in "Endicott and the Red Cross," where the blood of a wolf's head, nailed to the meeting house, is "still plashing on the doorstep" (9:434), in "Alice Doane's Appeal," where appears a "bloodstained hearth" (11:273), and in *The House of the Seven Gables*, where appears the bloody ruff and beard of Colonel Pyncheon (2:15), one may conclude that if *The Scarlet Letter* observes a bloodless aesthetic, it is a voluntary one, not Hawthorne's adherence to protocol.

Neither did Hawthorne shrink from portraying the gruesome details of Puritan punishments in other writings, notably "Endicott and the Red Cross." He treats the reader to images of visceral horror: "But among the crowd were several whose punishment would be life-long; some, whose ears had been cropped, like those of puppy-dogs; others, whose cheeks had been branded with the initials of their misdemeanors; one, with his nostrils slit and seared." Also among them is "a young woman, with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown," thus suggesting that these punishments were historically coexistent and that Hester's penalty represents no refinement of Puritan charity in a later generation (9:435).

To assume that Hawthorne was simply pandering to his ancestors' memory, however, is to minimize his artistic skill, especially his clever use of blood imagery. The separation of the romance from "The Custom-House" allows Hawthorne to isolate two versions of history in a fairly discrete way and to treat blood in a strictly figurative fashion. As Hyatt Waggoner declares about Hawthorne's use of images in *The Scarlet Letter*, "Even in their absence, they help to tell the tale" (138). By employing blood figuratively rather than substantively, Hawthorne allows the reader to associate all of the figures of speech that refer to blood, along with all of its connotations.

In "The Custom-House" sketch, Hawthorne refers to the dry bones of his ancestor, John Hathorne, who "inherited the persecuting spirit,

and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him. So deep a stain, indeed, that his old dry bones, in the Charter Street burial-ground, must still retain it, if they have not crumbled utterly to dust!" (1:9). He also refers to the figurative "dry bones" of the old Salem society into which he attempts to breathe life through his telling of the tale of Hester Prynne: "Poking and burrowing into the heaped-up rubbish in the corner; . . . glancing at such matters with the saddened, weary, half-reluctant interest which we bestow on the corpse of dead activity,—and exerting my fancy, sluggish with little use, to raise up from these dry bones an image of the old town's brighter aspect" (1:29). The allusion to the book of Ezekiel, chapter 37, which tells of the resurrection of the masses of dry bones is perhaps a key to understanding Hawthorne's exsanguination of Puritan society in the romance.

In this Old Testament vision, Ezekiel is shown a valley of "dry bones" revitalized by God, picturing the restoration of his chosen people, the Israelites, to His favor and their redemption from the Babylonian Captivity. In portraying his progenitors in the old days of Salem as dry bones, Hawthorne opens the novel to interpretation of the seventeenth-century Puritans as being like their typological forebears the Israelites, a collection of "dry bones," a passionless, bloodless people who have strayed from God's favor and who therefore need redemption. Implicit also in the absence of blood is the absence of the blood shed by Christ with all of its redemptive power, a foundation of Christian belief. There is a need for "new blood" in the colony to revitalize the dry bones as a generation passes, corresponding with a need for new blood in Hawthorne's time to revitalize a Salem that has become a dessicated husk of its former self, the legacy of its bloodless Puritan progenitors suggested by the lifeless old men of the Custom House, neither hardy nor valorous. This progressive decay, generation by generation, bears out Hawthorne's prophecy in "Earth's Holocaust," in which he writes, "all the old stoutness, fervor, nobleness, generosity, and magnanimity of the race would disappear; these qualities, as they affirmed, requiring blood for their nourishment" (10:389, 390).

Hawthorne suggests in *The House of the Seven Gables* that such nourishing blood should be the blood of new breeding stock when Holgrave says, "The truth is, that, once in every half-century, at longest, a family

should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors" (2:185). The Puritans and their New England descendants are the family writ large.

Hawthorne's romance Puritans are in fact curiously bloodless. They shed no blood on the scaffold in punishment; neither do they bleed. Chillingworth, "the leech," as physicians were known in the seventeenth century, is never shown bleeding anyone, though the medical practice of bleeding was common during the period. This omission suggests that the romance Puritans were generally a dry, bloodless lot. If one interprets blood as passion, then Jonathan Arac's description of the Puritans as having "principle without passion" also applies (290).

The Puritan society is a closed system because of its intolerance of other religions and interfaith marriage. New blood must come into the colony in the form of immigrants like Hester. She is a Puritan of common lineage (religious if not genealogical) with the Puritan elders, and so her blood differs from that of the Catholic European immigrants of Hawthorne's day, with its potentially mongrelizing influence. As immigrants like Hester are absorbed into the colonial Puritan society, they contribute their sweat and blood as have their forebears to the colony's development and toward that progress which the Puritans saw as their divine mission prior to the Second Coming. When the laws are broken, progress is threatened, and blood must be drawn to compensate. Puritan punishments were indeed violent and bloody, including the cropping of ears, branding, and whipping at the pillory (Miller and Johnson 386), all of which Hawthorne mentions in "Endicott and the Red Cross." In The Scarlet Letter, however, Hawthorne casts such punishments aside, assigning Hester the bloodless punishment of public ignominy on the scaffold and the wearing of the sign or token of the letter A. The color, however, suggests symbolic blood, as if the letter had been incised in her skin and Hester had bled through her bodice. Since there appears no indication that the Magistrates prescribed the color of the letter, we may attribute that choice to Hester, the color to be interpreted in ways other than simply the scarlet of the immoral woman.

If taken as blood, the letter A becomes a symbolic stigma in the tradition of religious saints who bleed miraculously. Marjorie Pryse, in her study of stigma in American fiction, credits the Puritan elders with marking Hester with a physical stigma (15), but if we assume that

Hester chose the bloody hue of the letter, we are justified in crediting her with investing in the symbolic letter the blood of her suffering and the blood of her passion. As Joanne Feit Diehl says, the hue of the letter "recalls the blood of the torn hymen . . . and the color of sexual passion," and "the embroidered letter" evokes a "potentially threatening vision of blood and pubic hair, the Medusan coils of active sexuality" (667, 668). In this context, the letter may further evoke, as Shari Benstock writes, "a relation between babies and words, between biological reproduction and symbolic representations" (289). Thus the letter would suggest the menstrual blood of the reproductive function, the very blood that, when manifest, marked women of Biblical times as "unclean." Such a reading, considering the Puritans' habit of likening themselves to the Old Testament Israelites, would entail a broad typological irony. For what would have once marked Hester as unclean now becomes the manifestation that prevents her from being persecuted in a bloody fashion. It is because Hester does not bleed (due to pregnancy) that she suffers public scorn. If any blood is drawn from Hester, it is subcutaneous, like a bruise. The three-dimensional letter becomes more like a welt inflicted by whipping or branding as viewed from the outside. From the inside, however, it becomes a swelling of anger in Hester's bosom that must eventually find expression. Hester's refusal to name Pearl's father may reflect stoicism that leads her to hold her pain inside, or it may manifest her love for Dimmesdale, because she knows that the Puritan punishers would draw his blood literally rather than in the figurative way they have drawn hers.

Moreover, if we accept the view of some witnesses, the revelation by Dimmesdale at the book's end may be interpreted as the revelation of a similar stigma bleeding from his chest, but we never see actual blood. In the final scaffold scene, Dimmesdale calls it "his own red stigma" (1:255). Hawthorne's narrator too refers to the alleged mark on Dimmesdale's chest as a "stigma" (1:258). We could argue perhaps that, since the narrator claims that most of the witnesses to the revelation report seeing "a SCARLET LETTER . . . imprinted in the flesh" (1:258) of Dimmesdale's chest, it cannot be a blood stigma, that it may have been perhaps a scar or a brand. Yet the closest the tale actually comes to bloodshed appears in the reference to Dimmesdale's "bloody scourge," but the sight of his self-flagellation and blood-letting is reserved strictly

for "that ever-wakeful" eye of God (1:148). For the reader, the actual substance of the blood remains sub rosa.

We understand that Hester and Dimmesdale have blood in them, both in a figurative and in a literal sense. They have passion in common, and Hester's subjection to public scorn causes a "burning blush" to rise in her cheek (1:52), just as the fear of public exposure contrarily drives the blood from Dimmesdale's (1:67). His paling suggests that participation in the Puritan justice ritual leaches the blood from him as it already has from his fellow Puritan elders.

The blood of Hester and Dimmesdale obviously mingles in Pearl, who shares both of their essences. As relative newcomers to the colony, Hester and Dimmesdale are a source of new blood for its progress. Pearl's potential is doubled, inasmuch as the child shares the blood of both. Because she is sired by Dimmesdale rather than Chillingworth, Pearl escapes inheriting the leech's deformity as well as his evil nature, symbolized in visible manifestations like the black plant that Dimmesdale sees growing from a grave, suggesting veiled sinfulness brought to light. Chillingworth belongs to the generation of the town elders; Dimmesdale does not. Thus Hawthorne affords Pearl a genealogical opportunity to escape the older generation's indoctrination. He speculates at the novel's end that, had Hester not taken Pearl to someplace in Europe, she could have provided a new and potentially vital breeding stock not only for Puritan society but also for America's future: "Had the mother and child remained here, little Pearl, at a marriageable period of life, might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all" (1:261). Pearl therefore represents a potential that remains unfulfilled for revitalizing the dry bones of Puritan Society. Her removal can be seen as Hester's revenge on the colony for figuratively drawing her blood.

The danger inherent in new blood is that it may bring with it new or heretical ideas. Hester's ideas come to be associated with Anne Hutchinson, concealed from the searching gaze of the Puritan fathers, except as they manifest themselves proudly, luxuriantly, in the scarlet letter and Pearl's red dress. Otherwise, her ideas would have to be controlled, channeled into an acceptable orthodox religious and social direction, or done away with entirely. Focusing on the immediate sin of adultery, the Puritan fathers never realize the greater danger Hester

poses to their established order. As the narrator says in "Another View of Hester": "The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. . . . Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter" (1:164).

Hester is perhaps clever enough to appreciate the irony inherent in her removal of Pearl; and thus her return to the colony and resumption of the A may be construed as a return to observe her vengeance firsthand as the colony gradually deteriorates.[2] Hawthorne remarks on the observable difference between New England women of Hester's day and those of his time: "Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of Old English birth and breeding than in their fair descendants, separated from them by a series of six or seven generations; for throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity, than her own" (1:50).

By Hawthorne's day, the day of the Custom House, new blood had to come to America in the form of immigrants from Europe in, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, "record waves," approximately three million in one decade (74). Accompanying them were ideas imported from Europe, ideologies both disturbing and threatening to the American establishment including revolutionary and socialistic sentiments that had erupted in Europe in 1848 (74). Particularly disturbing to an American establishment, based on the prejudices and intolerance of the Puritan founding fathers was the immigrants' Catholicism. Of this Bercovitch says that the "Puritans figured not only as the model settlers [for the waves of European immigrants] but as the foil to the perceived dangers of Catholicism (from Irish, German, and Italian immigrants)" (50).

That immigrants were on Hawthorne's mind in the mid-nineteenth century is made apparent by his references to them in his travel sketches of the 1830s. Hawthorne received what Beth Lueck calls "his first introduction on a large scale to the immigration issue" during his 1832 tour

of New England and New York (1). Hawthorne's remarks about immigrants in general and Irish Catholic immigrants in particular smack of latent bigotry. Hawthorne refers to the Irish immigrants as a "mob of desperate individuals" and "poor wanderers." According to Lueck, "Hawthorne's views of immigrants and their situation in America are generally negative. In the travel sketches and notebooks immigrants are most often stereotyped as lazy, drinking, licentious foreigners . . . . occasionally immigrants can figure positively . . . by presenting a picturesque view that, at a distance, ignores their poverty . . ." (6).

To Lueck, a key aspect of Hawthorne's response to immigrants involves how they will be integrated into American society. Hawthorne hopes that "[most immigrants] will be saved, at least in part, by 'the strength of moral influences, diffused throughout our land'" (6). The American ideology vaunts a plurality that can absorb a variety of peoples and backgrounds, and, according to Lueck, the huge waves of immigrants who arrived in Hawthorne's time would prove the most severe trial of that principle. She avers that Hawthorne doubted the ability of America to absorb them and still experience a common improvement of lot for America and for the immigrants in a progressive and cumulative fashion: if poverty, combined with the Atlantic crossing, can undermine a group's ability to maintain a sense of community and human dignity, then the great melting pot of the American nation might not serve each new wave of immigrants as successfully as the last (6). In essence, as the purity of the blood of the founding fathers is diluted and adulterated by the blood of other cultures, literally and figuratively, the moral fabric of the nation will correspondingly weaken to the nation's detriment, pulling America away from the millennial destiny foreseen by the Puritans. Instead of maintaining a pure bloodline and a pure cultural and religious line, America has had, in the name of progress, to import "new blood" for territorial and economic development, and the ethnic purity of the Bay Colony has been lost to the microcosm of nineteenth-century Salem and to the macrocosm of nineteenth-century America.

Byron L. Stay asserts that Hawthorne "recognized the spiritual, political, and psychological disintegration [reflected in] the decline that Hawthorne saw in the character of the mid-century American" (290). A clue to what Hawthorne saw as the source of this disintegration is provided by Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* when he tells the

tale of Fauntleroy, who takes up residence in a once-fashionable quarter of the city of Boston:

> He had fled northward, to the New England Metropolis, and had taken up his abode under another name, in a squalid street, or court, of the older portion of the city. There he dwelt among poverty-stricken wretches, sinners, and forlorn good people, Irish, and whomsoever else were neediest. Many families were clustered in each house together, above stairs and below, in the little peaked garrets, and even in the dusky cellars. The house, where Fauntleroy paid weekly rent for a chamber and a closet, had been a stately habitation, in its day. An old colonial Governor had built it, and lived there, long ago, and held his levees in a great room where now slept twenty Irish bedfellows. . . . Tattered hangings, a marble hearth, traversed with many cracks and fissures, a richly carved oaken mantel-piece, partly hacked away for kindling-stuff, a stuccoed ceiling, defaced with great unsightly patches of the naked laths,—such was the chamber's aspect, as if it were a kind of practical gibe at this poor, ruined man of show. (3:183–84)

The details of this deterioriation are a fitting symbol of the dilution of the old Puritan ideology and its replacement by the adulterated standards of subsequent generations mingled with immigrant hordes who sleep twenty to a room and who cannibalize the trappings of grandeur for kindling wood. The splintered mantelpiece suggests a gradual, insidious whittling away at the substance of American society by immigrants, rather than a great revolutionary overthrow. The Custom House of Hawthorne's day should be the guardian of America, examining, testing, weighing what arrives on her shores, and it should have been all along. The nodding old men Hawthorne describes in the Custom House are sleeping watchmen, lulled into idleness by ease and comfort, no longer tested by hardship, privation, and war. Frederick Newberry writes that they "relinquish consciousness owing to their lack of imagination and gumption, their lethargy paralleling the dwindling business of Salem's port" (154). They have failed at their symbolic charge, let in the corrupting influences, and the result is a society diluted in its moral purity and sense of purpose. Hawthorne suggests that Pearl may have forestalled this entropic process, but Hester shrewdly removes her from it.[3]

In the closing scene, Pearl finally consents to kiss Dimmesdale. It is perhaps a kiss of forgiveness and love, but Hawthorne allows the reader the latitude to interpret it in other ways. If Dimmesdale continues to represent the ideology of the old Puritan society and its aspirations as he has just preached in the Election Day Sermon, Pearl's kiss may be seen as a farewell to that society to which she has contributed nothing except an aborted possibility; she has not (as Hawthorne has suggested) mixed her blood with the Puritan stock, nor will she. One may also interpret the kiss as the kiss of death to the unadulterated blood of the Puritans, an inbred blood that would weaken literally and figuratively with each passing generation, until Hawthorne's day, when the onslaught of immigrants would dilute New England purity as a uniquely American quality past the point of redemption with each new generation of immigrants and thus weaken the grip of Puritan mentality on American society.

The Scarlet Letter's Puritans are bloodless because their blood has been spent in building their colony and trying to maintain it through severe, persecutorial means. New blood will not come from the likes of Pearl, who is rescued from intermarriage with their exsanguinated stock; new blood will have to come from lesser peoples, who, by Hawthorne's day, have strained the elasticity of the "both-and" ideology of America to its breaking point. The narrator of "The Custom-House," wiser for his learning of Hester's experience, decides that his offspring will not perpetuate the process: "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. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth" (1:11, 12). Hester's blood vengeance is sanguinely sweet.

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Notes

1 Charles Brockden Brown leads the pack with such works as *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793*, in which the narrator proclaims, "a torrent of blood was gushing from my nostrils" (329), and "blood gushed in a stream" (528). James Fenimore Cooper's characters assuredly bleed, for Cooper tells us in *The Deerslayer* about

"the blood that trickled from her bare bosom" (798) and that "the unseemly blood was wiped" (836). In *The Last of the Mohicans*, people bleed even more profusely: "as the blood flowed freely from around the severed tendons of the wrist" (84), and "The flow of blood might be likened to the outbreaking of a torrent" (207). In "Benito Cereno," Herman Melville describes "a gash from which blood flowed" (558), and in *Redburn* he shows us a sail "spattered with a torrent of blood from his lungs" (284). Edgar Allan Poe, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* regales the reader with "blood issuing in a stream from a deep wound in the throat" (118), "a deep wound in the forehead from which the blood was flowing in a continued stream" (82), and "a copious flow of blood ensuing" (92).

[2] Notwithstanding Sacvan Bercovitch, who suggests that Hester's return to America after Pearl is married in Europe is one of reconciliation and redemption (107, 43).

[3] Frederick Newberry suggests that by removing Pearl from America, Hester removes with her the potential for artistic development in the colony. He writes that when Hester and Pearl leave, "they take with them the aesthetic continuity between England and America that they have represented. They leave America, in other words, aesthetically barren—with the very 'gap' that Hester once filled and that Pearl could one day fill in her turn" (180).

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