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## UNIT 9 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND STRUCTURE

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### Structure

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### 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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We have already told you that the narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* is quite complicated. It encompasses both action and commentary. The commentary is through a narrator, projected in the Introduction, who examines the past from the point of view of a nineteenth century observer. Even the supernatural and the folk beliefs of mid-seventeenth century New England are subjected to the narrator's incisive irony and scepticism. In this unit we will also give you an idea of the symmetrical design, form and content and open-endedness of the text.

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### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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*The Scarlet Letter* is a carefully designed work of fiction in which the supernatural, the marvellous, and the strange have been artistically fused. Although Hawthorne considered himself a romancer rather than a novelist, he also admired the well-made novel in which the incidents and scenes are arranged in a symmetrical order, leading to a profound concentration and intensification of meaning. F.O. Matthiessen has rightly observed that Hawthorne has developed in *The Scarlet Letter* his most coherent plot (Norton Critical Edition, p.279). It is the result of beginning the tale with a scaffold scene and also rounding the tale with a scaffold scene near the end. There is also a scaffold scene right in the middle of the tale. There is no wonder that the scaffold of the pillory comes to acquire a hallowed status for the three major characters in the romance-novel.

While F.O. Matthiessen looks at the structure of the romance-novel in terms of the sequencing of the scaffold scenes, with the second scaffold scene showing Dimmesdale in Chillingworth's grip, John C. Gerber makes a four-fold division of *The Scarlet Letter*. In chapters I-VIII, it is the community in Boston that initiates the action and the main characters simply suffer the action. While Chillingworth dominates the action in chapters XI-XII, Hester dominates the action in chapters XIII-XX. It is Dimmesdale, the priest, who dominates the action in chapters XXI-XXIV. According to Gerber's analysis, it is the community--and the state--in Boston that sets the tune and later on Chillingworth, Hester and Dimmesdale seize the initiative. The thrust of the narrative is to show how the community creates a challenging situation and how the major characters respond to the challenge. The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* shows both the authority of the community and the state and also the resilience and resourcefulness of the major characters like Chillingworth, Hester and Dimmesdale. Thus, the form and content are dexterously dovetailed in the romance-novel.

There is also a kind of openendedness of the text because of the use of the device of multiple choice by the narrator who looks upon the incidents and events of mid-seventeenth century New England from the ironic and sceptical perspective of a mid-nineteenth century observer. You could recall the narrator's comment on the meteors during the second scaffold scene at midnight and also on Dimmesdale's baring of his chest in the last scaffold scene. While the incidents are visualised in all their awe and mystery, the narrator's voice is ironic and sceptical. It is the narrator's voice that makes the superstitions and folk beliefs of mid-seventeenth century colonial New England somewhat credible to a reader of our time.

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## 9.2 SYMMETRICAL DESIGN

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If the three scaffold scenes provide a kind of narrative focus on the drama of sin and redemption in colonial New England, the scenes around the lonely cottage and the forest liberate Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl from the clutches of the stern Puritanic ethos and enable them to slowly work their way towards reunion and happiness in the Old World. While the scaffold scenes show that a natural life of passion and joy was just not possible in mid-seventeenth century New England, the forest scenes show that a natural life of passion and joy was quite possible for the major characters like Hester and Dimmesdale. While the scaffold scenes are dramatic and sombre, the forest scenes are lyrical and romantic. It is through a subtle inter-weaving of the scaffold scenes and the forest scenes, the dramatic and the lyrical, that the complex narrative structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is created.

It has to be noted, however, that even in the romantic scenes in the forest, the sinister shadow of Chillingworth is not entirely absent. It is in the forest that Hester tells Dimmesdale that the old man, Chillingworth, has been her husband. It is in the forest that Hester throws away *The Scarlet Letter* and realises her dream to be free. It is in the forest that Pearl refuses to accept her mother till she puts on the badge of shame and dishonour on her bosom. It is in the forest that Hester realises that she cannot undo her past. It is in the forest that Hester puts on her cap over her lovely, flowing hair and becomes appropriately subdued and sedate as a nun. It is true that the scaffold scenes and the forest scenes, by and large, convey the contrary outlooks of conformity, order and submission to divine will on the one hand, and individualism, rebellion and assertion of human will on the other hand. The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is so artfully designed that the forest scenes and the scaffold scenes interpenetrate and create an absorbing drama in which the sacred and the profane are inextricably fused. There is no wonder that a radical critic like D.H. Lawrence finds in the romance-novel "a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy" (Richard Chase, p.9). Needless to add that the morality is embedded in the scaffold scenes and the passion in the forest scenes. One can look at the tale from the point of view of Dimmesdale and one can also look at the tale from the point of view of Hester. While for Dimmesdale their sexual relationship was a sin, for Hester it was a celebration of the erotic impulse. It is in this sense that the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses both the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the carnal, the divine and the demonic.

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## 9.3 FORM AND CONTENT

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In his perceptive essay "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*" John C. Gerber has looked at the structure of the romance-novel in a different manner. Instead of focussing on the binary contrast between the forest scenes and the scaffold scenes, Gerber divides the romance-novel into four distinct clusters of scenes. Each cluster has

a distinct activating agent. The critic is of the view, "Thus the community, aside from the main characters, is responsible for the action in the first part (chapters I-VIII); Chillingworth for that in the second (XI-XII); Hester for that in the third (XIII-XX); and Dimmesdale for that in the fourth XXI-XXIV)" (Norton Critical Edition, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.284). The focus of the narrative in the first part is on the people in Boston. Apart from the church and the state, the common people also react to the basic situation unfolded. The reactions of the women in the market are very revealing. One old woman of fifty says that the authorities have been very lenient to Hester. They should have imposed on her a more stern punishment. Another one says that Hester's forehead should have been branded with a hot iron. When a young woman shows sympathy towards Hester, there is another one who says that "This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.70).

The nature of the community and the state is sharply brought out in the first part of the romance-novel. While the narrative creates an antipathy towards the Puritan community in Boston, it also creates sympathy towards Hester and Pearl. The scene in the Governor's House marks the end of this phase of the narrative. Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth play a crucial role in this scene. While Dimmesdale defends Hester's right to bring up Pearl, Chillingworth wonders why the priest advocates her case so vehemently. From this point one can see a smooth transition to the second part of the tale in which Chillingworth plays a crucial role. In this section, Dimmesdale is helpless and Chillingworth plays the role of the hunter. It is Dimmesdale's helplessness against the hunter that leads to Hester's activating role in the forest scenes, chapters XIII-XX. In the fourth section of the tale, Dimmesdale's Election Sermon and confession are the direct outcome of his being rejuvenated by Hester in the forest. In keeping with the nature of the romance-novel, both Dimmesdale and Hester are also used as the instrument of a prophecy. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* becomes a kind of dialogue between the past and the future. It encompasses both the terrible burden of the past and the immense possibilities of the life in the future.

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## 9.4 OPEN-ENDEDNESS

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We have told you that the text of *The Scarlet Letter* has the capacity to encompass diametrically opposite and conflicting outlooks. While for Dimmesdale the sexual relationship between Hester and the priest was a sin, for Hester, "What we did, had a consecration of its own" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.236). One can look at the tale as a drama of sin and redemption. One can also look at the tale as a love story and on Hester as an Oriental, a pagan. While the scaffold scenes are grim and sombre, the forest scenes are, by and large, lyrical and joyous. The juxtaposition of opposite and conflicting outlooks, the piety and the passion, creates an open-endedness in the text. Focussing on the ambiguity of the text, Sacvan Bercovitch says, "It entails a sustained open-ended tension between fundamentally conflicting outlooks" (*The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, p.25). It is a fact that the narrator, by and large, presents the tale of mid-seventeenth century New England from the ironic and sceptical perspective of a nineteenth century observer. There is no wonder that in the first scaffold scene, Hester is described by the narrator through an intensely Catholic image of Virgin Mary. *The Scarlet Letter* which is a badge of sin and shame appears to Indians as a symbol of "a personage of high dignity among her people" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.296). Later on, even to the Puritans of Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* ceases to be a badge of sin and damnation and becomes holy as the cross on a nun's bosom. One can safely affirm that the narrator's voice through irony and diverse images creates a sort of polyphony. The community in Boston that is initially so hostile to Hester's defiant radicalism, eventually accepts her as a holy nun.

There are gaps and silences in the text. When Dimmesdale returns from the forest, he is a rejuvenated man. He is full of energy and a vision. In his Election Sermon he visualises a glorious future for the Republic in New England. After he makes his

confession, he is completely debilitated. He collapses suddenly and dies in the arms of Hester. It is difficult to understand that a man who returns from the forest completely rejuvenated becomes so weak after his confession. It can only be taken as a mystery of life. Perhaps, the burst of energy after he returns from the forest could be taken as the last flicker of a dying candle. There is no doubt that the text is open-ended and could be interpreted differently. Hester becomes pious as a nun towards the end of the tale yet the narrator's voice is sceptical as ever, "Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow" (p.315).

Even Hester's radicalism is subject to the narrator's irony and scepticism.

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## 9.5 LET US SUM UP

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The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses both action and commentary. The commentary is from the perspective of a mid-nineteenth century observer of the life in colonial New England.

The symmetry of the narrative design is due to the three scaffold scenes at the beginning, the middle and the end. They hold the scenes together. While the scaffold scenes are grim, sombre and dramatic the forest scenes are lively, bright and lyrical. While the scaffold scenes are charged with piety, the forest scenes are charged with passion.

The narrative generates a kind of dialogue between the past and the future. There is also a kind of open-endedness embedded in the text.

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## 9.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

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1. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tradition and Revolution* by Charles Swann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
2. *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, by Sacvan Bercovitch (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991).
3. "Hawthorne in Our Time" from *Beyond Culture* by Lionel Trilling (Oxford University Press, 1980).
4. "The Romances" from Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Truth of Dreams* by Rita K. Gollin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).
5. *Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies* by Michael Dunne (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1995).
6. *The American Historical Romance* by George Dekker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
7. *The Scarlet Letter* by F.O. Matthiessen and "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*" by John C. Gerber included in Norton Critical Edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, 1961. (Strongly recommended.)