

THE SCARLET LETTER - LIBRETTO

Summary and Synopsis
Patricia Herzog

Copyright © 1916 by Patricia Herzog

I saw in an American newspaper yesterday, that an opera, still unfinished, had been written on the story of 'The Scarlet Letter,' and that several scenes of it had been performed successfully in New York. I should think it might possibly succeed as an opera, though it would certainly fail as a play.

(The English Note-Books, Sept. 17, 1855 Nathaniel Hawthorne)

It is hard to imagine a work of American literature more operatic than Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Not surprisingly, therefore, more than one attempt has been made at turning *The Scarlet Letter* into an opera. There are to date six, to the best of my knowledge, starting in 1896 with composer Walter Damrosch and librettist George Lathrop (Hawthorne's son-in-law) and leading up to the present. In offering yet another libretto, I can only say that a work of great literary genius bears and indeed invites multiple interpretations.

Set in Puritan New England in the year 1642, *The Scarlet Letter* is the story of the illicit and ill-fated love between Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester Prynne has a child by a man other than her husband. She is ostracized and forced to wear the letter A for adultery. Arthur Dimmesdale, the child's yet-to-be-discovered father, is a beloved preacher and minister. The other main characters are Roger Chillingworth, the cuckolded husband who seeks to uncover the father's identity and wreak his revenge, and the child, a girl named Pearl, whom we first meet as an infant.

Apart from the special appeal of the lines I have written and the dramatic unfolding of the scenes, my libretto differs from all the others in the central role I give to Pearl (there are versions, including the aforementioned, in which she neither sings nor speaks a word). In this, Hawthorne's greatest work, little Pearl is Hawthorne's most original creation: a vexing child by turns loving, loyal, contrary and cruel; an elfin child living alone with her mother at the margins of society and having only the forest for a playmate; a bold child of preternatural intelligence who sees through to the truth and is not afraid to speak it; a captivatingly beautiful child, elaborately outfitted, flitting about and catching the sunlight like a tropical bird.

In giving Pearl a central role, I mean to be faithful Hawthorne. Nevertheless, in giving voice to Hawthorne's narrator, I take the liberty in the epilogue of having the grownup Pearl come back to Boston and stand with her daughter Rose before the conjoined graves of Hester and Dimmesdale.

With Pearl's answer I give the concluding thoughts of Hawthorne's narrator.

Act I (1642)

Scene 1. Hester Prynne is led forth from the prison door to the scaffold, tightly clutching her crying infant. A red A, elaborately embroidered by her own hand, is pinned to the bodice of her drab gray dress. A noble mien disguises the pain of her humiliation before the jeering crowd.

Scene 2. Hester stands atop the scaffold and is forced to confront the faces in the crowd. She spies the husband she abandoned in England, a 'stranger' just arrived, who calls himself Chillingworth. He quietly signals to Hester that she not let on: their relationship is to remain a secret. Withering in the blistering heat of the noonday sun, Hester is exhorted by the dignitaries sitting in the balcony overlooking the scaffold to reveal the father's identity. Dimmesdale, as the pastor in care of her soul, presses her repeatedly and possibly even earnestly, but Hester steadfastly refuses.

Scene 3. Hester is led back to prison, where in the privacy of her own confines she breaks down and is in a state of great agitation. The infant, too, is greatly agitated. Chillingworth, professing to be a doctor, enters her cell. Husband and wife exchange bitter words. Still, Chillingworth convinces Hester that he will do no harm to either her or the infant by administering draughts to calm their nerves. The medicine works. Pearl quiets and falls asleep and Chillingworth prepares to leave, but not before vowing to identify her father and exact his revenge.

Act II (three years later)

Scene 1. Mother and child are home in their cottage by the sea. Pearl repeatedly asks who her father is, but Hester dodges the question by insisting he is the Heavenly Father.

Scene 2. A pair of gloves embroidered with Hester's fine needlework occasions a trip to the Governor's mansion. In addition to the Governor, Hester and Pearl encounter Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and the Reverend Wilson. There is talk of removing Pearl from Hester's care in order to raise her in a civilized manner. Hester insists that Pearl has been taught properly, but when the gentlemen test her she refuses to cooperate. Hester implores Dimmesdale to speak for her as her pastor. He cleverly and successfully reasons that the child ought to stay with her mother.

Act III (four years later)

Scene 1. The ill-intentioned Chillingworth is sharing an apartment with the ever-weakening Dimmesdale. He tells the minister that he will not get better unless he unburdens his troubled soul. Dimmesdale angrily refuses and they exchange heated words. Chillingworth retreats to his room and Dimmesdale, collapsed in his chair, is

soon fast asleep. The ill-intentioned Chillingworth creeps back into the room and uncovers Dimmesdale's chest. What he sees makes him jump for devilish joy.

Scene 2. Midnight, the same day. Dimmesdale is walking about confusedly in a dense fog, muttering to himself and mocking his hypocrisy. He climbs up the steps to the scaffold, from where he cries out to an imaginary congregation in a vain attempt to confess his sin. Hester, with little Pearl by her side, has been an errand of mercy to a dying man and is on her way home. Dimmesdale hears Pearl laughing and calls out to them to come up and join him. They stand together on the scaffold and Dimmesdale takes Pearl's hand. She entreats him to hold her hand in the light of the next day, but he tells her no. Chillingworth appears. He, too, is on his way back from the dying man's house. He entreats Dimmesdale to get down from the scaffold and the minister follows him meekly home.

Scene 3. Hester, shocked at Dimmesdale's deteriorated condition, decides to confront Chillingworth. Husband and wife acknowledge having wronged the other: she scorned and abandoned him; he convinced her to marry him knowing it would make her unhappy. Hester begs his forgiveness and urges Chillingworth to forgive in turn. He tells her that he can never forgive Dimmesdale, whereupon she vows to tell Dimmesdale that Chillingworth is her scorned husband and his sworn enemy.

Act IV (shortly thereafter)

Scene 1. Hester looks to encounter Dimmesdale along a deserted forest path. They have not met alone and spoken plainly for seven years. They passionately renew their pledge of love. She unpins the scarlet letter from her bosom and casts it aside, then loosens her cap and lets fall her luxuriant hair. Dimmesdale's passion restores his vigor. She tells him of the danger he is in and urges him to leave town. Dimmesdale is frightened but unable to act. Hester has made a plan of escape, Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale will set sail in four days' time on a freighter bound for England. Hester calls to Pearl, whom she has sent off to play across the creek, to come give Dimmesdale a kiss. Pearl remains standing on the other side of the creek and will not approach. She is greatly disturbed at the sight of her mother without the scarlet letter, and says that she will not kiss Dimmesdale unless he pledges to hold her hand in the light of day. Still resolving to escape, Dimmesdale goes away without his kiss. Hester re-assumes her dreary appearance, refastening the letter and hiding her hair back inside her cap.

Scene 2 (three days later). The people are celebrating the installation of a new governor. Dignitaries, townspeople and all sorts of strange and wondrous characters from the outskirts have gathered for the occasion. It is a carnival-like atmosphere and Pearl is much amused. There are people inside the church and an overflow crowd outside, awaiting Dimmesdale's benediction, the great installation sermon. Dimmesdale and the other dignitaries process to the church with great ceremony. He passes by Hester, standing with little Pearl, but pays them no notice. They are set to depart the

very next day and Hester grows concerned. Her premonition is turns out to be correct. She learns, indirectly, that Chillingworth has caught on to their plan. She need pay for only two berths, not three; the doctor has paid for his and Dimmesdale's. After seven long years of strong, stony silence, Hester breaks down. She tells Pearl they are all doomed. Pearl, not fully comprehending, tries to save her mother by telling her an Indian she has just made friends with will take them with him far away.

Scene 3. The church doors swing open and the people pour out, extolling their pastor's virtues. Dimmesdale processes away from the church and it is evident to everyone that he is on the verge of collapse. He reaches the base of the scaffold, near where Hester and Pearl are standing. The Reverend Wilson rushes up to him, fearing he will fall over, but Dimmesdale gestures that he does not want his help. Instead, he turns to Hester and Pearl, reaches his arms out, and beckons them to come to him. Seeing what is about the happen, Chillingworth is greatly alarmed and tries to interpose himself, but Dimmesdale repulses him as if he were the devil. Pearl runs to Dimmesdale and clasps her arms around his knees. With Hester's help, they ascend the steps of the scaffold. Pearl stands there, finally, for all to see, holding hands with Dimmesdale. Gathering just enough strength to address the already-shocked crowd, Dimmesdale, their beloved and esteemed minister, lays bare his chest and confesses his sin. He asks for and receives a kiss from Pearl, then bids Hester farewell. Dimmesdale collapses and dies in Hester's arms, but not before extinguishing her final and fervent hope that they will be united once again in eternity.

Slowly, so as not to disturb her mother, greatly distracted with grief, Pearl unfastens the letter from her bosom and tosses it away. It lands in a corner of scaffold, where the repulsive Chillingworth has been crouching. He greedily grabs the discarded letter and clasps it to his chest, as if it were his very own scarlet letter, a prized possession. Hester descends the scaffold and Pearl leads her away. The crowd is greatly moved with sympathy and entreats her to stay, but she does not hear them and continues to move away.

Epilogue (many years later)

Pearl and her seven-year-old daughter Rose are standing before the conjoined graves of Hester and Dimmesdale. "What does it all mean, Mother? What did the people see when the minister bared his chest? What did you see, Mother? What did Grandmother see?" In giving Rose the answers, Pearl does her best to unravel the tangled threads of the scarlet letter.