

The Haunts of Memory

The places of unfathomable loss and despair in life exist as shadowy shipwrecks beneath the calm sea of consciousness. They wait patiently to drag the mind down from its idyllic surface, and force it to confront the uglier aspects of life. The lost, the lonely, and those who wish to remember and cannot forget, haunt these locations of terrible misery like the unquiet spirits of long-dead mariners. Perhaps drifting around the physical location of their torment gives these people a kind of peace that comes only from settling with the past, a peace which many seek, and few ever find. Nathaniel Hawthorne remarks on this condition of humanity in his novel The Scarlet Letter. He writes, “But there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghostlike, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistible, the darker the tinge that saddens it” (83).

Hawthorne’s observation serves to illustrate the idea that human nature often makes a person unable to leave a place where a major event in his or her life has taken place. Hawthorne feels that if an event brings memories of darkness and pain, then the likelihood of a person haunting its location will grow. The passage shows, in Hawthorne’s view, one of the universal truths and forgone conclusions of human nature. The twin specters of fate and doom contained within the passage reflect the deep Puritan belief in predestination held by the characters in The Scarlet Letter. The idea of lingering near a place of profound tragedy, however, can apply to more than just a novel about seventeenth century Puritans. The concept of people who find themselves unable to leave the site of a major event in their lives pertains to both The Scarlet Letter and to today’s society.

Hester Prynne exemplifies the observation of lingering, because she continues to live near Boston, where she endures daily public humiliation for her sin. The leaders of the Puritan community force Hester to stand upon the town scaffold and face shame for her sin of adultery. The punishment also requires that Hester wear a scarlet letter A for the rest of her life, so that all might know her sin and learn from it. Hester could have chosen to flee the Puritan settlement and fashion a new existence for herself in another land. Instead, she decides to dwell in a cottage just outside of Boston for the rest of her life. Hawthorne gives some insight into Hester's mindset when he writes, "Here, she said to herself, should be the scene of her guilt, and should be the scene of her earthly punishment" (84). Perhaps, she believes, this punishment could purge her soul and confer to her anew the purity that she lost. In her heart, however, there exists a faint and tempting hope that she can still have a relationship with Reverend Dimmesdale, her partner in sin and the father of her child. This love keeps Hester from fleeing. Hester truly desires to salvage the rusting hulk of her old life, not by escaping to a different locale, but by righting the wrongs of the past, and coming to terms with her traumatic experiences. Because she confesses her sin and, although it still haunts her, Hester succeeds in surviving and carrying on with life. The passion and the humiliation both become indelible parts of Hester's experience and her character. As Hawthorne writes, "Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil" (83). She cannot stray far from her home without losing important facets of herself, or a chance at gaining closure. As Hawthorne conveys, the events of Hester's adultery and ignominy doom her to haunt the area where they occurred. The small cottage outside of Boston serves for Hester as a testament to her shame, and a memorial to her lost innocence.

In today's world, there exists a far larger, but no less emotional, symbol of tragedy and loss than a simple Puritan cottage. The memorial being built on the former site of the World

Trade Center in New York applies to the idea of remaining near the site of a memory, because it exemplifies humanity's need to revisit the places of life's barnacle-covered wreckage. On the morning of September 11th, 2001, jetliners in the hands of Islamic extremists struck the twin towers and caused them to collapse. Almost 3,000 people died in the acts of violence in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, which constituted the worst terrorist attacks ever to take place in America. Now, following the fifth anniversary of those tragedies, construction has commenced on the World Trade Center memorial. The final design, called Reflecting Absence, consists of two pools, one in each of the footprints that the towers left behind. Waterfalls, trees, and walls containing the names of the victims will surround the pools. Designed by architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker, the memorial seeks to provide a quiet place of meditation and solemn reflection for all who visit. Some critics of the design have called it inappropriate, because they believe that the endless motion of the waterfalls mimics the motion of the towers' collapse, as if they will never stop falling. The design of the waterfalls, whether intentional or not, shows that there exists a need to make sense of the events of that day by consciously or subconsciously reliving them. Amidst all the construction currently underway on the World Trade Center memorial, there stands the last remaining relic of the towers. The main stairway from the World Trade Center plaza, which so many people used as an escape route on that fateful day, stands alone in a sea of new development. Many survivors have become concerned about its preservation. In an interview with Spiegel Magazine, Gerry Bogacz, one of the founders of the Survivors' Network, and one of the most vocal supporters of preserving the stairway, imparts this about the survivors of 9/11:

In our network, we can talk about things nobody else can understand. And we can talk about stuff nobody else wants to hear anymore. Life moves on, and you

should too. Consign it to the past: That, roughly, is society's response. Five years on, many of the survivors' own families no longer want to hear about 9/11. But for those who were there, it will never go away. It will always be a part of their lives.

Bogacz relates the idea that those who lived through the attack cannot stop reliving it. Those people will doom themselves to revisit, at least in their minds, the place where they stood in a living vision of hell. Tom Canavan, who survived 9/11 only because he escaped down that still-standing staircase, tells Spiegel Magazine of the memories that torment him:

I would try to go to sleep, but my mind wouldn't. It would just replay everything. During the day, you're working, doing things, talking to people. So your mind is geared to other things. But at night, once you go to sleep and shut down, it just wouldn't go away. The sounds. The smell. And then the questions: How come you survived? Why didn't you take a different staircase? Somebody was trying to kill me. I hadn't done anything to anyone.

Canavan suffered from doubt and rage for years. Medication prescribed by doctors just made him feel like a zombie. Finally, he found the strength to stop taking the medication in October of 2005, by reflecting on his experiences while visiting the Gettysburg Memorial. At long last, he found a small measure of peace amid the tumultuous storms of emotion and memory that often dash the lives of others upon the rocks of adversity. Others who suffer as Canavan may choose simply to block the unpleasant memories from their minds, because they cannot cope with them any other way. The lucky ones, however, will succeed in settling the score with their pasts and move on with lessons learned. Memorials may help more people to deal with their raw recollections. Mankind builds memorials not just to honor the memory of the past, but also to help those in the present find a feeling of resolution, so that they might learn from the past and

dredge up a better future from beneath the crushing waves of endless reliving. Hester Prynne and the survivors of the 9/11 attacks exist as kindred spirits in their desire to deal with their suffering, while molding their memories into beneficial experiences that give them strength for the present, as well as hope for the future.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's observation of the very human compulsion to haunt the site of a devastating experience applies to his novel, The Scarlet Letter, by providing insight into Hester Prynne's actions, and to today by showing some of the feelings that exist alongside the building of the World Trade Center memorial. Hawthorne comments upon the strong attraction that people feel towards places where major events, especially tragic ones, have shaped their lives. He presents this almost gravitational pull as a part of human nature, but that does not mean it always prevents other chains of events from taking place. Hester Prynne could have fled her little cottage for another country. The place where the twin towers once stood could have been covered over completely with new development. Neither of these events occurred. Why, then, does humanity persist in remembering sorrow, when forgetting it seems less agonizing? The answer lies partly in the fact that anguish has powerful lessons to teach the world. Suffering strengthens, and makes its recipient less likely to inflict pain on others. If the world can ever hope to alleviate agony, it cannot allow itself to forget all the past agonies that men have inflicted upon each other. The great misfortunes in life also become a part of people's characters, and give them something tangible, no matter how unpleasant, to root them in the unyielding seabed of reality and connect them with their neighbors. This desire for a firm handhold in life provides a powerful incentive for people to ground themselves in memory. Time may even soften the callous blows of adversity, and allow the oppressed a sense of gratitude for the transforming power granted by remaining near the site of a memory. As coral and the degradations of time

eventually shape a shipwreck to conform to the contours of the depths, so, too, will the hardships and disasters of life become enduring parts of the great ocean of the soul.