Scarlet Letter Model for Passage Analysis

“The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of [Boston](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/sl01-n.html#Boston) had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of [Cornhill](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/sl01-n.html#Boston), almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on [Isaac Johnson](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/sl01-n.html#Boston)'s lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the [congregated](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhg.html#congregated) [sepulchres](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhg.html#sepulchres) in the old church-yard of [King's Chapel](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/sl01-n.html#Boston). Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty [years](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhc.html#1642) after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the [ponderous](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhg.html#ponderous) iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than any thing else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, [apple-peru](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhg.html#apple-peru), and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the [portal](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhg.html#portal), and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of [June](http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/nhc.html#1642), with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.” (33).

1. What is the primary significance of the passage?

The passage sets up the contrast between the idealism and the reality of colonial life. Here, despite the preaching of “human virtue and happiness,” which are the goals of the Utopia, the realities of the real world must be faced. Hawthorne highlights these as death and criminal behavior, something that the Puritans were unable to legislate against. He creates an early contrast with “first burial ground,” which “became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchers” and then transitions into the description of his focal point, the prison door.

1. Identify the literary techniques used by Hawthorne.  Relate them to the content

In this passage, Hawthorne uses antithesis, creating a contrast between the idealism and the realities in the passage. To emphasize this contrast, “human virtue and happiness” are set against the image of the “cemetery” and the “prison.” Additionally, Hawthorne’s word choice reflects the reality of these early additions to the world of the town, calling them “practical necessities.” Hawthorne amplifies the description of the jail, noting its “beetle-browed and gloomy front” and that “it looked more antique than any thing else in the new world.”

1. Which techniques are typical of Hawthorne in his novel and his short story, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment"?

Hawthorne loves to create contrasts between the ideal and the real. In this passage, he makes a comment on how ideals are frustrated by the actions of individuals that undermine or that run counter to the goals of virtue. Here, a paradox develops between the new world and its Utopian vision, and the “darker aspect” of human nature symbolized by the prison. Here, Hawthrone argues “like all that pertains to crime, it [the prison] seemed never to have known a youthful era.”

1. What are the effects of the dominant images used in this passage?

The dominant image in the passage centers around the description of the prison, its door and the surrounding plot. Here, the “ugly edifice” with its “rust on the ponderous iron-work” and the “unsightly vegetation” which amplify the negative aspects of the society are contrasted by the “wild rosebush” and “its delicate gems” that offer comfort to one entering the prison or facing their public judgment. By focusing on the prison itself, Hawthorne seeks to provide a reality check to the goals of an Utopia, calling into question whether a Utopia is possible, giving the long history of dishonorable actions of individuals.

1. What do you think the important theme is expressed?

Hawthorne evidences his belief that Utopia cannot exist. He creates a counterbalance between virtue and vice. Additionally, he also creates an ironic contrast between the ugliness of human nature, as symbolized by the prison itself, which is contrasted with the beauty of the natural world, as symbolized by rosebush growing on the plot of land. Ultimately, Hawthorne argues that “the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him,” even when the criminal faces their punishment by society.