

Symbolic Representation of Sin and Redemption in The Cultural Context of The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* through the cultural lens of its symbolic depiction of sin and salvation. In this work, Hawthorne employs symbols to show how human identity and perspectives of the Puritan society are complex, set against the backdrop of the society's rigid moral code. The dynamic symbolism of the scarlet letter A includes not only transgression and humiliation but also power, perseverance, and moral transformation. Through Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, the novel explores the psychological burden of suppressed shame and the disparity between the results of an open confession and a private one. The cultural standards that shape our views of sin, punishment, and salvation, as well as the tension between societal expectations and our own moral compass, are also highlighted in the examination. This study argues that Hawthorne is criticizing Puritanism's moral absolutism and advocating a more humanistic understanding of human fallibility by setting the book in its historical and cultural context.

Keywords: Sin, Guilt, Punishment, Symbol, Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

One common thread running through many great works of literature is the eternal conflict between individuals and society. This is also true of Hawthorne's culminating work, *The Scarlet Letter*. The appearance vs reality topic emphasizes the struggle between societal and individual ideals. Hawthorne aims to obscure the truth by projecting an unresolved tension. Characters like Tess, Winston Smith, and Hester stand for private ideals that are at odds with public opinion; people who rebel against the 'sable' reality of outward appearance are symbols of the 'scarlet' reality.

There is an inherent issue of appearance vs truth in *The Scarlet Letter*, which is a story about a puritanical culture at war with one of its members for breaking a Puritanical norm. Hawthorne uses dramatic tension to make readers reevaluate how they use words like love and religion. In order to criticize Puritanism, Hawthorne uses the characters' portrayal of the issue of outward appearances against inner realities. When the reader is left with little prospect of reconciling the private and public lives of any one individual, the reader is best shown the duality of appearance and reality. At

"his... sensuous, individual... existence," Marx (1975) argues that "political man is... abstract, artificial man, man as... moral person" (p. 234), in contrast to "civil society is taken to be the real man" (p. 234). Attempting to shed light on the 'political' Puritan society and its depths, Hawthorne highlights the importance of the 'sensuous' person who rebels against the society, bringing about new laws, dismantling facades, and allowing experiences to be illuminated by truth. Despite the fact that Hawthorne was never a fully committed member of the transcendental movement and was never content with what they aimed to accomplish at Brook Farm, he is fairly forceful in dramatizing this battle (Connolly, 1970; many others).

In contrast to a Shakespearean play in which a character assumes a false identity in order to win the heart of another, *The Scarlet Letter* explores this paradox of appearances and reality from a human perspective. The magistrates, a privileged group in Hawthorne's society, impose religious rules on the populace that seem to be in their best interest but, as Fox (1991) points out, really serve to unite them into what he calls "social individuals" (p. 104) rather than individuals. When uniqueness disappears, so does awareness, according to Puritan thought. So, individuals transform into objects and mimic the output of a society that controls all aspects via outward appearances, using them to unite the populace and conceal the reality.

A symbolically and moralistically inclined writer like Hawthorne would see a member harboring a hidden sin as a representation of the inner turmoil experienced by a character who forges a new identity by defying authority and establishing her own set of principles based on the laws of nature. What follows is an analysis of the four binary sets in which the motif of appearance-versus-reality appears: Puritan Culture/Individual, Arthur Dimmesdale/Hester Prynne, Religion/Love, and Sable/Gules. This analysis reveals how the novel's final theme is cohered throughout, illuminating the technique used by both society to govern and maintain status quo and individuals to transform and build anew.

II. HAWTHORNE AND THE SCARLET LETTER

An antique notebook was found amid papers in 1976 in Colorado by a family. The book was said to have been in Hawthorne's possession from 1835 until 1841. This notebook, similar to any writer's, included Hawthorne's first ideas for his eventual masterwork, *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as words, sentence fragments, and ideas. In 1838, before he started writing the book, he had drawn several of the characters. A sin that might cause a sore to emerge on the body was mentioned in his notes, along with spiritual ailments and physical diseases. He was mentally shaping the narrative. Subsequently, he chose to recount the narrative of a lady whose infidelity was punished by being forced to wear the letter "A".

Do you know if the tale of the *Scarlet Letter* originally existed? Boston, a Puritan colony, was the setting for the events that transpired between 1642 and 1649. "The Custom House" serves primarily two functions: Its primary objective is to set the intellectual and conceptual tone for the drama that follows by bridging two centuries of history. In his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Custom House," Hawthorne described his experience working at the Salem Custom House and discovering an enigmatic parcel containing a delicate red fabric that had seen better days. Traces of golden



embroidery were visible on it. Upon closer inspection, he realized that it had the capital letter "A," and the length of its individual legs was precisely $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches, or around 6 cm. The enigmatic gift also included old, wrinkled pieces of paper. Surveyor Pue, who was familiar with the terrible tale, had penned them some time before. Hawthorne was able to learn more about the woman's life and the hardships she endured as a result of her scarlet letter condemnation after doing more research.

After much delay, *The Scarlet Letter* finally came out in 1850, and its classic status was instantly acknowledged. From the time of its first publication till now, it has maintained a steady circulation. No age will ever forget *The Scarlet Letter* because it deals with timeless issues like love, sexuality, sin, wickedness, retribution, hypocrisy, vengeance, and hatred.

III. SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF IN THE SCARLET LETTER AND SOME OBJECTS

Adultery

The scarlet letter "A" has several interpretations throughout the book. There has been a dramatic shift. Both the people and their communities undergo development throughout. Even in ancient times, the letter "A" was associated with wickedness and depravity. Later on in the novel, it represents Hester's feelings of isolation and loneliness. At last, it becomes a sign of being capable, honorable, and angelic.

As a sign of her adultery with Roger Chillingworth, Hester wears the letter "A" on her bosom. As punishment for her adultery, the puritans would have her wear a "A" on her chest and display it for all to see. People treat Hester with the contempt befitting a monster from hell because of the horrible act she committed. As a general rule, it is how the symbolic significance of the letter is explained. Blood and passion are represented by the color crimson. Because they are unable to resist their love for one another, Hester and Dimmesdale commit crimes against God. A lady who compromises her morals and a holy cleric who brings disgrace to his vocation are both subject to punishment. While most people see red as a sign of vitality and love, Hester is forced to wear the scarlet letter "A"—a sign of humiliation and punishment—due to the Puritans' inflexible rules.

Despite her feelings of humiliation, Hester decides to confront her transgression head-on. As a general rule, persons may choose to flee to a country where their transgressions are unknown. Nevertheless, Hester's courage in carrying on with her life displays her remarkable strength and honesty.

Alone and Alienation

Another meaning of the scarlet letter "A" is Hester's isolation in New England. Because of her disgraceful history, Hester had almost little social life. Despite the sarcastic remarks of others, she must bravely and competently endure life in this town. The land was too barren for farming, so the previous settler who had constructed the settlement eventually left. Because of her exceptional talent and boundless drive, Hester finds her place in the world. Nonetheless, she didn't have a sense of belonging wherever she went. Everyone she interacted with—through words, silence, and body language—suggested and frequently demonstrated that she was exiled and as alone as if she lived in another world or had different senses and organs to connect with nature than the rest of humanity.

She appeared to have kept just a little piece of the universal heart, her independence from moral interests. Pearl, a tiny girl, is Hester's only friend in an otherwise lonely existence. For others around her, communicating with Hester is a repugnant act since she is a criminal.

Able, Admirable and Angel

Many people still fail to see the scarlet letter "A" for what it originally meant; it was a strong emblem of her name. It is clear that the original meaning of the scarlet letter "A"—adultery—changes to being competent, angelic, and praiseworthy. At first, the town's residents disapproved of the lady due to her transgression. However, it is shown later on that Hester has exceptional needlework skills and consistently assists the underprivileged and ailing without seeking compensation or recognition. She puts the needs of others above her own and does her best to assist them with kindness and patience. Once the town's residents see her true character, their perception of her changes dramatically. Is that lady wearing the insignia with the embroidery visible to you? Our very own Hester, the Hester of our community, is the one who helps the ill, consoles the bereaved, and is so kind to the needy. The town's populace quickly starts to see the letter "A" as a protective symbol. She is a generous lady, and nobody should make her feel bad about herself. A messenger angel from God, Hester visits the community. Furthermore, rather than being punished by publicly displaying her transgression, she ought to earn the admiration and compassion of those around her.

There are three major revisions to the scarlet letter. They reveal her capacity, her isolated existence, and her sin in a linear fashion. Though she endures more mental anguish in one lifetime than the average person, Hester is an inspiring figure.

IV. THE SCARLET LETTER AS A STORY OF SIN, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Crime and retribution are the somber themes of *The Scarlet Letter*. The punishment for sexual offenses is its primary focus. It is the tragic tale of those who are too cowardly to stand up to the moral and legal consequences of adultery. In addition to being unethical and contrary to society norms, it is an act of personal fury aimed at another person. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" is the seventh commandment given by God, and anybody who disobeys it is considered a sinner, according to the Bible. Sin is also a theme in *The Scarlet Letter*. Because of this, the adulterous Hester and Dimmesdale will never be forgiven.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, we are transported back in time to the first days of the Puritan colony in Massachusetts. The Puritan settlers' severe punishment for an adulterous woman was to have the letter A stitched in scarlet into her garment, which is where the book's title comes from. A summer morning in Boston sets the setting for the novel's first scene. Hester Prynne, a young lady shrouded in shame, finds herself on the scaffold in the middle of Boston's busy market square. She tries to hide the red letter 'A' on her dress by holding her baby close. The fact that Hester, a lady, has given birth while her husband was missing at sea for so long brings her immense embarrassment. Hester seems composed and composed from the outside. She observes the onlookers with contempt as they scrutinize her. The story goes that Hester was spared either branding or death when the young, devout preacher Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale intervened on her behalf. She is urged by the community's leading leaders to reveal her lover's identity, as they believe he should be sharing her



humiliation. Dimmesdale is the one who begs her the most to tell everyone who her guilty accomplice is. But Hester says nothing. In the midst of the throng, she spots an old, almost disfigured guy whom she had wed not because she loved him but because she was hopeless. Her composure gives way to severe mental turmoil. An aged scholar wed Hester, the daughter of a poor, ancient family. After spending some time in Antwerp, the couple had Hester transferred to the Massachusetts colony two years ago. The plan was for her husband to come after her, but he was believed to have perished in a shipwreck. But now he arrives at the scene of his young wife's disgrace, which she has inflicted upon herself and him. He puts his finger to his lips in an angry warning to Hester not to show even the tiniest hint of recognition as he resolves to hide his identity and watch his wife suffer on the gallows.

Returning to jail is the next step for Hester after the scheduled time for her public humiliation. She feels a great deal of anxious excitement. She ends herself in the hands of a doctor, who turns out to be her husband—now going by the name Chillingworth—in disguise. Following Hester's refusal to reveal her lover's identity, he makes a solemn vow to remain in contact while practicing medicine and, eventually, identify the guilty party. The doctor forms a friendship with Dimmesdale, a priest, and discovers the minister's shameful secret—that he is the father of Pearl, Hester's child—as he treats the minister's illness. While Dimmesdale's congregation takes his nebulous admissions of guilt as more proof of his holiness, his shameful and anguished soul seeks to find solace in them. As Hester stands alone with her infant on the scaffold one night, the tormented youth makes his way there. The woman and kid will soon be passing that way when Dimmesdale summons them to stand at the pillory beside him. Chillingworth notices the meaningful gesture, and he surely does not miss its significance.

Watching the devastating attack As Chillingworth lays siege to Dimmesdale, Hester begs her husband to spare the young man's life. However, Chillingworth has no compassion. Hester proceeds to caution Dimmesdale not to trust his doctor. A last-ditch effort to return to the old world is devised by them in concert. Following Dimmesdale's lecture on election day, they make the decision to go. Members in the congregation give high marks to the sermon on the election. With the chapel packed, Hester and Pearl listen to the sermon delivered by the young preacher from the scaffold. Dimmesdale seems to be walking like a man in a dream as the procession leaves the church after the sermon. He seizes Hester and Pearl's hands and leads them up the stairs to the pillory. He acclaims his remorse to the shocked assembly in a powerful and profound voice. He strips down to his ministerial band and bares his breasts for all to see. The scarlet letter 'A' is clearly imprinted on the skin as Reverend Dimmesdale falls motionless onto the platform.

The quest for vengeance by Chillingworth has therefore come to an end. Within a year of Pearl inheriting his fortune, the doctor dies, enraged by the minister's public revelation, which Chillingworth had worked tirelessly to avoid. For a while, Hester is away from the colony, but she comes back to serve as an angel for those in need. Dimmesdale is much more of a sinner than Hester; her compassion and generosity turn the scarlet letter on her gown into a sacred symbol, and she wishes for nothing more than to have her grave marked with the letter "A" when she passes away. He attempts to hide his wrongdoing from the public while simultaneously violating the ethics of his

profession. On top of his immorality, he is hypocritical. While hypocrisy may protect him from the social shame he fears he may face as a result of his crime's exposure, it will do nothing to benefit him in his spiritual quests. When Dimmesdale agrees to fight Hester, he gives in to a second "fall". Constantly troubled by his soul, his conscience refuses to let him slumber. Insomnia sets in as he is agitated and emotionally disturbed. When he is alone, he scourges himself and writes sermons till the wee hours of the morning. However, this serves no purpose.

Another outstanding psychological study is that of the young pastor Dimmesdale, who is haunted by the knowledge of his own transgression. Confessing his guilt is his only option as the secret nags at him. Still, Dimmesdale hides his true identity. So he sinks farther and further into the abyss of sin. According to the principle of progressive sin, Chillingworth is the wicked of the two. He is portrayed as the embodiment of Hawthorne's concept of the irredeemable sinner. His obsession with avenging his wrongdoing, identifying his victim, and ultimately leading himself to self-destruction is admirable. However, upon discovering Hester's guilt, his only objective is to distance himself from everything. He seeks vengeance while denying his very identity. Making Chillingworth an authority in black magic only serves to heighten his villainous persona.

Pearl bears the mark of her parents' transgressions. Thus, sin, retribution, and crime are sad themes in *The Scarlet Letter*. His puritan upbringing informed his view of sin and evil, which he consistently addressed. He believed that evil was inherent to the human condition. Feeling guilty makes you feel lonely and highlights how hurtful it is. Hester's isolation is. This causes her to rebel and act defiantly. Openly recognized sins, such as Hester's, are less unpleasant than covert sins.

V. CONCLUSION

Hester Prynne and Pearl, the daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's protagonist, leave Boston at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* but come back years later. Even though she still wears the scarlet letter, Hester goes from being reviled to beloved by the community as a result of her selfless acts of kindness. Shortly after the news of Dimmesdale's death spreads, Chillingworth passes away as well. A joint tombstone engraved with a 'A' marks the final resting place of Hester and Dimmesdale, who are reunited in their love at the conclusion of the play. At the end of the book, the characters think back on the story's social and moral implications.

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