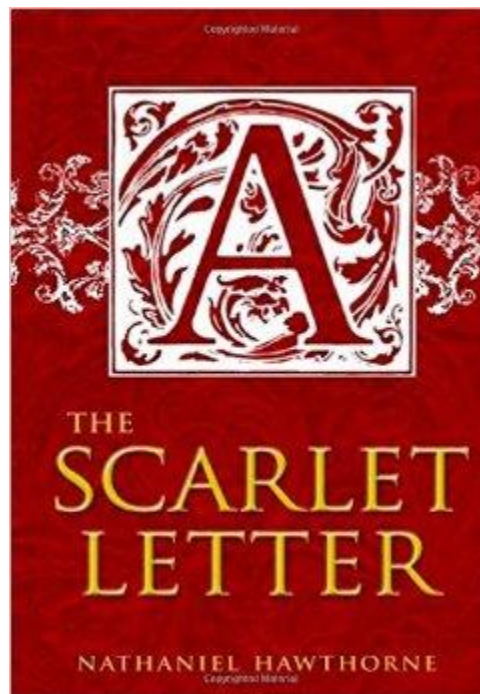


**Isolation and Gender Conflicts in Nathaniel Hawthorne's
*The Scarlet Letter***

M. Cinduja Kohila Vani, M.A.

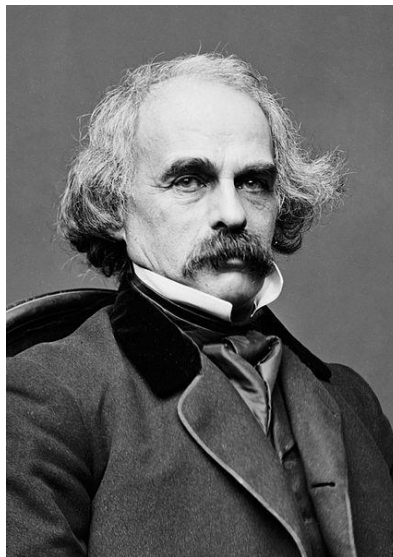


Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* was considered by many as the controversial novel of its time, given its themes of pride, sin, isolation, gender conflicts and vengeance. Every novel must necessarily present a certain view of life and of some of the problems of life says William H. Hudson in his book *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*. A few authors like Hawthorne have presented it genuinely. In his book, *The Scarlet Letter*, we could see his theme lies not upon the surface of existence, but with passions and gender conflicts and they belong to the essential texture of life. The Puritan setting also becomes an important element to pave way for the gender conflict. This paper is a study of how Hawthorne has weaved his characters by

presenting us with a startling depiction of isolation and gender conflicts. The society that the protagonist Hester lived was unforgiving, and hypocritical in nature. We can see the height of alienation that Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale suffer and how it pains them, in Dimmesdale's case even eating away at his life. *The Scarlet Letter* casts society in a light that is at once both condemning and bitter.

Key words: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, passions, gender conflicts, isolation, alienation.



Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne

Introduction

Hawthorne Nathaniel was the only son of Nathaniel and Elizabeth Clark Hawthorne (Manning). His father, a sea captain, died in 1808 of yellow fever while at sea. The family was left with meagre financial support and moved in with Elizabeth's wealthy brothers. A leg injury at an early age left Nathaniel immobile for a several months during which time he developed a voracious appetite for reading and set his sights on becoming a writer.

In his master piece *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne managed to bring gender-based inequality to light through the novel's male-dominated Puritan setting and by reversing the gender roles of characters, such as Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale.

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Focus on Gender-Based Inequality

The story was also set in a time when very few were thinking about the equality of men and women, but Hawthorne managed to bring gender-based inequality to light through the novel's male-dominated Puritan setting and by reversing the gender roles of characters, such as Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale.

A.C. Ward says that the literature is not the mere statement of a problem, however important, nor simply the pleading of a cause however worthy. Literature is a creative art written by literary creative artists. A novel is concerned directly with life – the thoughts and feelings, passions and motives, joys and sorrows, struggles, successes and failures with the life of men and women.

Hawthorne was a great thinker about life as well as he was a keen observer, he portrayed how women had been the victim of the male dominating and oppression and how she was treated like a beast of burden and an object for pleasure. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex, as his property; servile to him. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood.

17th Century America – Views on Adultery, Hester Prynne's Conflict

The action of the story of *The Scarlet Letter* took place almost in 17th century America. But even now the same trial is taking place all over the world. Like Hester – the protagonist of the novel is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She has not been understood from her feelings and emotions.

The sin is Adultery, the “Original sin, the breaking of the Ten Commandments of Christianity”, which is the source of Hester Prynne's conflict. But this sin has a partner too. But she is not ready to confess her lover's name. The irony here is the lover Arthur Dimmesdale himself is asking the name of the ‘lover’ with ‘trembling mouth’.

Prynne lacks energy and will. Dimmesdale is the pastor and Hester his spiritual ward. Yet he committed adultery with her. But the punishment goes to Hester alone. Dimmesdale's black cloak gives him benefits. He can wear mask and hide his real feelings in public.

A Strong Woman with a Badge of Shame

But Hester Prynne is presented to us ambiguously. She is a strong woman. She also hides her real self behind her mask of the scarlet letter and her smiling face. She does it because she has to live for her daughter Pearl.

Scaffold is used in the beginning as a symbol of sin in the middle and the end of the story. In chapter II, Hester is made to walk through the crowd to the market place. Here she is made to climb the scaffold while people observe her. She has committed a sin. She is having an illegitimate child with her. She has to wear letter "A" on her bosom for the duration of her life. In this novel, we remember most of the character suffers from isolation. In Hester's case, her isolation is a mark of her social caste. Her, "badge of shame", the scarlet letter gain her distance from people, but it also assures her intellectual and moral growth. She "transcends her separation from society by good deeds and the companionship of miserable people".

Private Torture Felt by the Pastor

In the minister's case, his sensitivity to his sin leads to suffering and private torture. His sin makes him conscious of his unworthiness, but it also makes him more acceptable to his admiring congregation. He feels suffocated in this atmosphere of repression.

Chillingworth's isolation is essentially the isolation of a man who has willfully cut his name off from the book of humanity, his willful defiance of God in violation of "the sanctity of the human heart" against advice causes his spiritual isolation and death.

Even Pearl is isolated from the society of the Puritan children by her mother's sin. She is a lonely child who plays with inanimate objects or with animals and brooks and flowers – a victim of the sin of her parents and the repressiveness of the Puritan society.

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But the society looks Hester as a sinner and Pearl as the product of the sin. Just because Hester is a woman, she has to undergo all the conflicts within her. Society is always and constantly against her. The community never makes her forget her sin.

A - Now Means Able, Angel

In the beginning of the story, the letter 'A' means Adulteress, but as the story develops, it also begins to mean 'Able' and 'Angel'. But it took years to change. Until then, she was the sinner among the people. Even the Minister Dimmesdale is also a part of a sinner. But in the eyes of the society, he is the 'godly youth', the Young priest. He is a pastor, a protector, of his followers, yet he betrays himself and Hester by committing adultery. He wants to confess, but will not, and so will punish himself secretly. He is a sinner and yet the best priest in the village because of his very sin. Any how he was torn between his consciousness and his deeds. He secretly stands in the scaffold to confer his sin.

With a Burning Blush, and Yet a Haughty Smile

But the conflict that Hester suffered is more than that of Dimmesdale. In the face of this scorn from society, Hester remained strong. Hawthorne says, 'She stood in front of the people' with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed. Other women outside the prison door says, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die". (II The Market Place) pg 7-8. Her strong mind refuses to allow the people's comment to crush her. She bears this out in her actions, too, quietly making a living for herself with her fine needle work. She devotes herself to her work, to her child, and to serving the poor and helping the sick.

Hester accepts insults as well as her humble position in society, and though she externally remains as a beacon-light to would-be sinners, internally, she does achieve a harmony with her society with her dutiful behavior and good deeds. The Scarlet Letter as well as Pearl, the symbols of her sin, assists Hester to achieve redemption with her mission as the Sister of Charity. Hester triumphs over her circumstance (fate) with her goodness and resolve it. In this sense, she

achieves a spiritual victory over her society, which acknowledges her changing status in her community.

Dimmesdale - a Hypocrite and a Coward

Dimmesdale is a hypocrite and a coward, and a secret sinner in the early part of the book. Jean Calvin, the 16th century French Father of Puritanism, made the idea of the eternal sinfulness of man in Christian history is very popular for his disciples (the Puritans). According to the Calvinist position, all men are eternally guilty in the presence of God and salvation can only come to man at God's will.

But inwardly Dimmesdale suffers terrible agony. His tormented conscience forces him to derive ways and means to "play out" his "punishment" in private. He keeps vigil, fasts and whips (scourges) himself. His habit of holding a hand over his heart indicates his mute confession of guilt.

Dimmesdale's raw conscience chafes him into constant self-torment through self-laceration and mortification. He hurts himself physically for his sin, but he "punishes" himself in secret. We can clearly see this that Hester stands on the scaffold at mid-day in June, Dimmesdale at midnight in May. "Mr. Dimmesdale reached the spot, where, now so long since, Hester Prynne had lived through her first hour of public ignominy... The Minister went up the steps". (XII The Minister's Vigil)

In a flush of triumph, he acknowledges Hester as his fellow-sinner, and Pearl as his daughter, tells Hester to leave everything in the hands of God, and dies on the Election Day (to mean, possibly that he has been 'elected' by God to go to heaven). In this sense, whereas Hester's "regeneration" is more social, Dimmesdale's regeneration is actually a "salvation". Like King Arthur of the legends, he has overcome sin, temptation and evil to emerge triumphant in his public confession of sin and death. Yet, his spiritual salvation is, perhaps, more subjective than actual, as it should in a deeply ambiguous book like *The Scarlet Letter*.

Gender Conflicts in *The Scarlet Letter*

The gender conflicts in *The Scarlet Letter* have become more and more intense as the novel progresses because of the gradual unfolding of the female's strength of mind becomes greater than that of the men's character. As a result, the male protagonist begins to lose their dominant position. Women might be the weaker gender, but, the way Hawthorne sees it, they have plenty of power. Even the social alienation and isolation breeds despair but no sense of redemption. Only society's uncorrupted acceptance can help its members rise from ignominy and find peace and virtue.

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