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Puritan and Vietnamese Views on Self, Sin, Love and Moral Mission - Present-Day Vietnamese Readers' Views at Hue College of Foreign Languages

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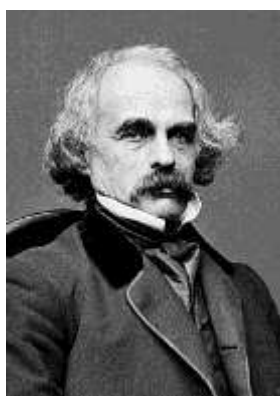
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Introduction

General thoughts of morality and justice have held the first place in American literature and philosophy (Smith, 1934). *The Scarlet Letter* written in 1850 by Nathaniel Hawthorne appears to be a valuable novel for readers to consider opposite issues including conventional versus unconventional gender roles and presumed guilt versus innocence. Many English-major students and EFL teachers at Hue College of Foreign Languages, Vietnam, showed their sympathy to the forbidden love affair linking Arthur Dimmesdale, a religious and respectable minister, with Hester Prynne, a sensitive and beautiful wife assuming her husband's death at sea. Adultery, in this case, becomes a disputable issue between humiliation of society and true love for oneself.

This article explains why and how a relationship outside marriage like Prynne and Dimmesdale's received such a widespread sympathy from contemporary Vietnamese readers. Therefore, the paper is not an effort to criticize the Puritan values, but it compares and contrasts the Puritan and Vietnamese views on self, sin, love and moral mission. In addition, this investigation aims to provide those interested in American Romanticism and Nathaniel Hawthorne with a deeper interpretation of historical perspective and personal issues.

Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter*



Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

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Having a complex sensibility, richly compounded for appreciating subtleties, Nathaniel Hawthorne has been considered one of the greatest American authors, a position he shows no sign of losing. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, he was a sturdy patriot, a Yankee of Puritan ancestor, an enthusiastic Democrat, a writer of Gothic Romances and a master of symbolism (Turner, 1961). In his literary works, Hawthorne never abandoned his enduring interest in “the truth of the human heart”; the characters in his tales and romances are in effect symbolic (or allegorical) Adams and Eves thrust into archetypal struggles between good and evil, reason and emotion, and pride and humility (Stallman & Waldhorn, 1961, p. 275).

The Scarlet Letter, a story of Hester Prynne standing under the stern law in the public pillory of the adulteress with the charming child of her guilt, has appeared on lists of the world’s greatest novels and regularly placed at the head of all American fictions. Gohdes (1944, p. 138) considered *The Scarlet Letter* as “the most profound, the boldest, and the most riveting analytical romance.” Hubbell (1972, p. 139) stated that the two greatest American novels were *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

According to Vanspanckeren (1994), *The Scarlet Letter*, for its time, was a daring and even subversive book; however, Hawthorne’s gentle style, remote historical setting, and ambiguity softened his grim themes and contented the general public. “Its psychology is that of the concealment of sin amid circumstances that make a sin of concealment itself. The sin itself might, one may almost say, be almost any other. And this constitutes no small part of the book’s formal originality. To fail to perceive this is quite to misconceive it” (Jones, 1963, p. 7).

The Puritans and the Sin of Adultery under the Puritan Judgment

Without some knowledge of the Puritans, their society, values and beliefs, readers may not fully understand *The Scarlet Letter*. According to Miller (1956), before setting foot on the

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New World in the 17th century, the Puritans were members of the excessively strict Protestant Party in England in the 16th century. They were very strict persons in religion or morals, looking upon many kinds of pleasure as sinful. “They believed that human beings were all inherently sinful, corrupt and deserving of damnation. Rescue from damnation was only by arbitrary divine grace” (Inge, 1993, p. 129).

According to Leisy (1962), in the Puritan society, “Adultery is conceived of not as an affair of the civil order, but as a problem that concerns the immortal soul” (p. 39). Meserole, Sutton and Weber (1969) said that marriage for the Puritans was a godly duty; when a woman and a man got married to each other, they were morally tied by God, and later if one of them had an affair with any other person, he or she was committing adultery or infidelity, and deserved damnation.

Boynton (1919) stated that one part of the reputation Puritanism in the 17th century was its intolerance; under the Puritan view, moral responsibility was that wife owed the primary loyalty to husband and the nature of human love was also a moral or religious element. Adultery, therefore, was regarded as one of the most severe sins involving mistrust, betrayal, hurting, unfairness, lies, and forbidding.

However, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne married Roger Chillingworth but she did not have any feelings for him. After assuming her husband’s death at sea, she fell in her first and only true love with Arthur Dimmesdale and had a daughter with him. This can partly explain why many Vietnamese readers at Hue College of Foreign Languages sympathize with Hester Prynne.

Under the Puritan judgment, “whosoever does commit Adultery shall be severely punished by whipping two several times; ... and likewise to wear the capital letter "A" cut out in cloth and sewed on their uppermost garments on their arms or backs; and if at any time

they shall be taken without the said letter while they are in the Government so worn to be forthwith taken and publicly whipped” (Bradley, Beatty and Long, 1965, p. 191).

The opening scene of *The Scarlet Letter* shows how terrible and cold-blooded the Puritans were. Wearing the scarlet letter A, Prynne received scornful looks when she walked through the market place. More cruelly, most of the old women thought that Prynne deserved a worse punishment, and one of them even said that at the very least, Prynne should be put a brand of a hot iron on her forehead.

Analyzing the merciless punishment inflicted upon Hester Prynne, Short (1960) concluded that “the Puritan judgment in this scene appeared with its harsh and austere heart” (p. 25). In short, the Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* believed that the sinners of adultery had to be severely punished for their offence. The shameful badge the Puritans put on Hester Prynne’s bosom, together with their alienation and humiliation, expressed their view on this sin. However, the harsh punishment Prynne received seemed to reveal the Puritans’ lack of charity and love in their austere laws and in their actions as well.

Methodology

This study aims to manifest and compare the 17th century Puritan with the 21st century Vietnamese view on Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale’s forbidden love; therefore, it is informative and interpretative by nature.

The data for this qualitative research was collected from 50 participants’ responses to a survey (questionnaire). These subjects consist of 42 English-majored students (16 males and 26 females aged 21-23) and 8 EFL teachers (4 males and 4 females aged 24-50) at Hue College of Foreign Languages. All the students were single, 6 teachers were married, 1 teacher was divorced and 1 teacher was a widow. These participants were Buddhists, Catholics, Christians, Protestants and religion-free.

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Data Analysis

The gathered data was first classified according to the subject's religion. It was then analyzed with the compare and contrast method, which was integrated with the authors' argument, interpretation, description and evaluation of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The Vietnamese View versus the Puritan View about Adultery

As mentioned before in this paper, the Puritans believed that marriage was an arrangement in which God brought a man and a woman together into "one flesh"; therefore, they condemned adultery or sex outside marriage and defined it as one of the most serious sins against God's moral law. Moreover, in the Puritan society, adulterers as well as adulteresses had to endure severe and brutal punishments. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Prynne and Dimmesdale, even in death, were not allowed to mix their dust.

In contrast to the Puritan beliefs, 46 out of 50 Vietnamese readers said that adultery, an issue belonging to the world of human nature, in some circumstances may receive sympathy. With a much more merciful and tender perspective, these Vietnamese people thoughtfully considered the possible reasons behind a marital betrayal, which could help clarify why a spouse did "escape" from his/her marital-bond to follow another partner.

38 out of 50 participants also stated that the unsatisfactory feelings in the sentimental life were the number one cause of infidelity while the rest (12/50) thought that the combination of both unsatisfactory materialistic and sentimental life might be the most possible cause.

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Nobody thought that only the shortage of material or the hard daily life could lead people to commit adultery. This manifests the Vietnamese readers' awareness of the importance of the passionate sentiment in maintaining and reinforcing the couple's happiness.

To explain their acceptance of "situational adultery", the Vietnamese informants said that if the marriage was loveless or one spouse did ignore his/her partner for a long time, then the occurrence of changes in emotions would be unavoidable and reasonable. No man can foresee what kind of man he/she will be the next day. In marriage, the problem even becomes doubled when the two partners live far away from each other. Apparently, Hester Prynne and Roger Chillingworth's marriage was loveless and before falling in love with Arthur Dimmesdale, she did not hear anything about her husband for a long time (she assumed his death).

With regard to the question about the Puritan punishment, 46 Vietnamese readers replied that the Puritans were hard-hearted and egoistic when transforming Prynne into a living sermon against sin, by forcing her to wear the mark of infamy for the remainder of her life. This indicated that the severity of a punishment is rather difficult to get a consensus. 49 out of 50 participants also expressed their disapproval of the idea that all people committing adultery must receive harsh and austere punishments. These participants confirmed that some assumed sinners might be innocent in some aspects and they deserved tolerance and forgiveness. Only one third-year student supposed that sinners of adultery ought to be deeply punished no matter how minor their wrongdoings were.

To sum up, the twenty-first century Vietnamese readers in Hue and the seventeenth century Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* seemed to possess quite opposite views about adultery. The Puritans viewed adultery as a threat to their community that had to be punished and suppressed. The Vietnamese readers, on the other hand, respected the bond of love and accepted that men were united in a brotherhood of imperfection. They considered the Puritan beliefs as a lack of human warmth and love, and emphasized that a presumed guilt

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of adultery in some cases could become a debatable between immorality and sacred human right of seeking happiness.

The Scarlet Letter “A” or “Able” for Hester Prynne

What does it mean to be humans? Humans, in general, cannot get rid of their weaknesses. No man is perfect and infallible, and no man lives without faults and offences. Hester Prynne’s affair with Arthur Dimmesdale makes her into a human being with whom the 21st century readers are familiar. According to Hawthorne (1992), the scarlet letter “A” on Prynne’s bosom remarkably functioned as “her passport into regions where other women dared not tread” (p. 170).

The Puritans’ purpose was to blaze the letter “A” not only upon Prynne’s bosom but also into her heart and mind as a physical reminder of her infamy. Nevertheless, the letter’s meaning shifted as time passed, and at the end of the book, it came out to have a positive meaning. It is easy to see that Nathaniel Hawthorne, a master of symbolism, successfully portrayed the diverse symbols of the letter “A”.

Readers of this story might think of the letter with quite different meanings: Allegory, American, Assimilation, Ambiguity, Angel and even Able. However, within the limitations of this investigation, the authors only check whether the scarlet letter “A” can stand for “ABLE” under the Vietnamese readers’ views, and search for prospective explanation from these participants of different religions.

As expected, a significantly substantial proportion of the Vietnamese readers absolutely approved of the idea that in Hester Prynne’s situation, the scarlet letter “A” can be understood as “ABLE”. The evidence for this comes from the following table.

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Question	Responses	Religions	Participants (N = 50)	
			Male(s) (N = 20)	Female(s) (N = 30)
Do you agree that Hester Prynne’s the scarlet letter “A” can stand for “ABLE”?	Yes	Christianity	1/1	4/4
		Protestantism	0/0	4/4
		None	8/8	8/8
		Catholicism	4/5	4/5
		Buddhism	5/6	8/9
	No	Christianity	0/1	0/4
		Protestantism	0/0	0/4
		None	0/8	0/8
		Catholicism	1/5	1/5
		Buddhism	1/6	1/9

The above table shows that 46 out of 50 informants had the same answer “Yes”. There are many factors which help Prynne acquire these informants’ sympathy and approval. One of these factors is the consensus of Chillingworth’s death at sea. According to these readers, a married woman will be bound by the law with her husband as long as he is alive, but if the husband is dead, she will be free from that law. Then if she has some relationship with another man, she should not be called adulteress. Chillingworth had left Hester Prynne alone for more than two years without any information. Moreover, Prynne and Chillingworth’s marriage was clearly not rooted in a true love. Some participants even believed that there had been not any special feelings between them. Meanwhile, Dimmesdale was the first and only man to whom Prynne really devoted her heart. She believed that she had done the righteous thing in her world of love; therefore, she made the letter “A” into a lovely, skillful, and subtle decoration, and constantly wore it with a sense of pride and dignity. She also did many good things to prove that she was “ABLE”, particularly her care for the poor and those receiving the community’s alienation. Consequently, society began to view her differently; “they said that it meant “ABLE”; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (Hawthorne, 1992, p. 139).

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In addition, the survey found that 45 out of 50 readers strongly expressed their sympathy for Prynne and Dimmesdale's passion and they all agreed that it was a true genuine love. Only 3 informants thought it was anyway shameful and sinful, and the rest 2 participants did not have clear answers. Among the readers supporting Hester Prynne, there were 25 people even supposed that Hester Prynne with her sacred love as well as her actions in defense of love was the highest moral character in the novel. These informants regarded the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of Prynne's dignity and they frankly expressed their admiration to her strong spirit. They also argued that by the end of the novel, Hester Prynne became a highly respected woman in the town, so the hangdog meaning attached to her scarlet letter no longer existed. Eventually, Prynne with her courage, pride and effort, diverted all the negative meanings against her letter and successfully went beyond the conventional rules.

In conclusion, Hester Prynne was an extreme sinner through the Puritans' eyes and she ought to feel repentant for her immoral deed; however, under the Vietnamese view, Prynne should hold up her head without regret and the scarlet letter "A" appeared to be the thing she could be proud of.

Conclusion

It may be bias but when a topic of the Puritan society is brought up, most people think of a conservative, rigorous and devotional community. The Puritans seemed to be known as uptight and stick-in-the-mud killjoys, who pitiless lashed out on anyone deemed unfit to their society. Hester Prynne and the harsh punishment she endured in *The Scarlet Letter* told us about the austere Puritan view on morality, particularly on infidelity.

In the contemporary world, adultery appears to be a noticeable and debatable issue under the Vietnamese point of view. These twenty-first century readers sympathetically looked

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for the acceptable reasons behind a marital betrayal, and most of them stated that the call of true love would never be the call of sinful desire.

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