



The Scarlet Letter: The Formal Analysis

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Abstract

The present paper is a study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and how this novel can be related to contemporary society. The story takes place in the Puritan society, where men did not only have the physical and intellectual superior power that the patriarchal society granted them, but also the spiritual one, so women were considered to be inferior to them in all spheres of life. This paper will interpret *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspective of narrative strategy, discuss the text of the novel, and try to further interpret the novel and its far-reaching influence. This paper will expose how the actions in the story progress from the aspects of characterization, symbolism and technique of using Rising action, Climax and Falling action. In this process, Hawthorne's writing skills can be depicted and provide reference for the vast number of literature lovers. Hence, the analysis of this novel through a feminist perspective will elucidate the fact that, although four centuries have passed, gender inequality is still present nowadays.

Keywords: Scarlet, Puritan society, Sin, Adultery, Fellow-Sinner, Repentance, Scaffold

INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter written by Nathaniel Hawthorne expresses the characteristics prevalent in the Puritan society of 17th Society, Boston which includes relations, religion, public, discipline and punishment. It appeared as if Religion ruled over all, and adultery was considered to be a bad sin in the eyes of everyone. At that time in 17th century Boston, everyone was to follow the rules strictly.

Wang, Yueming (2017), Hawthorne depicts through four aspects on Hester's life, Hester's rebel, Hawthorne's own family relationship to advocate feminism in his novel.

In this story Hester Prynne, the protagonist of the novel had committed the sin of Adultery, which is the perfect example of the beliefs of that period. The first scene of the novel reflects the burden of values upon society which is evident from the gathering which is there not for an execution but for public punishment to be given to Hester, who has committed the sin of adultery. This scene articulates that public is to be discouraged from committing such type of sin. The community played an important role in punishment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To throw light on existing Puritan community in seventeenth century believing in adultery as a major punishable sin and public trials and punishments as a tool to prevent others from committing adultery or other crimes.
- To further relate it with modern reader by throwing light on its psychological factor of sin and consequences and as a moral story about sin and redemption.

FORMAL ANALYSIS: THE SCARLET LETTER

The Scarlet Letter, authored in 1850 by Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American writer is a work of fiction. It recounts the story of Hester Prynne who has been punished by the strict Puritan society for committing the sin of adultery.

The novel reflects the story of her struggle to relive her life along with bringing up her daughter Pearl. *The Scarlet Letter* is undeniably one of the greatest novels of American literature in which the HESTER a female character with her beauty, intellect and strength comes to the level of heroic proportions.

Garrido Sanz, Eva.(2020) As in the 17th century, women are still subjected to judgment for their sexual liberation, while men are praised for doing the same thing. This behavior reproduces the Puritan sexual repression of women seen in *The Scarlet Letter* through the characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, which is displayed in the feminist analysis of the novel.

The story has been written with utmost care and precision and has been united as a whole without any loose ends. Even "The Custom House" section, in the very beginning of the narration, appears to have no connection with the story but on a close reading seems to be woven beautifully with the rest of the novel. It seems as if different chapters look like focusing on a single character, one at a time, but they are unified as a whole because other characters have not been completely neglected. The three scaffold scenes suggest an accord to the narration and the forest scenes shape a significant part of the story. The plot also involves a pattern of emerging action, climax, crisis, descending action and conclusion. Literary devices of irony, ambiguity and symbolism have also been used to provide unity to the novel.

The narrator is a nineteenth-century man, quite well-balanced in his perspective, thoughtful and broad-minded but also little ironical. The narrator, as it is informed was once engaged in the custom house of Salem. There, one day, he noticed a packet belonging to one Jonathan Pue. The packet had a red cloth with gold embroidery of the shape of letter 'A' and many foolscap sheets having details about the life of Hester Prynne. The narrator tells us that he has taken up the main facts of the story from these documents. Thus, it can be said that the nineteenth-century narrator, with a broad-minded mind-set on life, is reproducing the story of seventeenth century characters.

Kreger, Erika M. (1999), *The Scarlet Letter's "moral"* closely links it to the conservative worldview of antebellum middle-class culture and popular fiction.

In his treatment with the narrative, it seems as if the understanding of the narrator is divided between Puritans and offenders. He expresses his empathetic attitude towards his protagonists, but at the same time, he does not approve their adultery. The dual approach is very complex which can be observed throughout the novel. His pitch in the forest scenes and the consequent chapter "The Minister in a Maze" is a good example of it. The lovers, Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale, meet after a long period of time. Both plan to escape from the Puritan society. Hester, when she removes the scarlet letter and takes away her cap, is rewarded by "a sudden smile of heaven" (p.124) in the form of sunshine. Dimmesdale also takes a breath freely after a long time. Here, Hawthorne appears to be on the side of the lovers but his pitch in the next chapter perplexes us. The narrator comments, "Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself up in deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin" and that the infectious poison of that sin had "stupefied all blessed impulses, and awakened into vivid life the whole brotherhood of bad ones" (p.233). This duality of opinions is prevalent in the whole narrative.

Hawthorne has intentionally used the devices of sarcasm, ambiguity and symbolism to unite the various parts of his narrative together and to add fullness to that. The reader wishes the narrator to emphasize the difference between a logical fact and an irrational idea finds himself to be frustrated. The narrator appears to prefer the use of "might", "perhaps", "it was whispered" and "it was rumoured". It has not clarified whether the symbol at Hester's bosom actually hone at nighttime. It was a mystery if Mistress Hibbins was really a witch and had gone into the forest to be within the company of witches. The existence of Black within the forest is neither contradicted nor confirmed.

The high time of expression is depicted, even when there is no certainty whether Dimmesdale actually made a confession or it had been just his saint like gesture to die within the arms of an unchaste woman. Another major example of ambiguity is reflected while describing the character of little Pearl. We also wonder along with Hester if Pearl is aware why her mother is wearing the emblem or if Pearl has been sent as "messenger of anguish" to trouble Hester.

Another device restored by the narrator in his narrative is that of symbolism. The foremost important symbol, the emblem "A" is introduced in "The Custom House" section as adultery but as the novel progresses, it symbolizes many things. The Puritans also start interpreting it in a different way. They levy its meaning "Able" and regard it as sacred as a cross on nun's bosom. But it also becomes the symbol of alienation and loneliness for Hester. We observe within the chapter "The geographical area Holiday" that a magic circle is constructed round the scarlet-letter attire of Hester from where nobody has courage to venture.

In the last chapter, the emblem is symbolic of the fear and awe that Hester stimulates within the people of Boston. The minister's hand on his heart is symbolic of the impression of guilt feelings which go on tormenting him. Hester's needle work is a symbolic representation of her freedom and also the passionate side of her nature. The forest place which has been represented as the background of the momentous meeting between Hester and Dimmesdale, is symbolic of moral wilderness. The scaffold, which is there for punishment in the beginning of the novel, symbolizes redemption at the extremity of the story. Dimmesdale is the only one on the scaffold, all set to escape Chillingworth and achieve salvation. The ironic mode of narration which is so eminent in "The Custom House" section is preserved within the rest of the novel. A reasonable incident of the irony of things is found within the third chapter, where we discover Hester's companion-sinner, urging her to reveal the name of the father of her child. Another example of irony is found within the opinions of the folks that God has sent Chillingworth bodily through the air to heal Dimmesdale; whereas Chillingworth wishes to take revenge on him. It is ironic that Hester is denied any contact by the society, whereas her fellow-sinner is idolized and considered a "miracle of holiness" (p.147).

The three scaffold scenes which are the most dramatic and important also give wholeness to *The Scarlet Letter*. In reality, the whole story of *The Scarlet Letter* revolves around the scaffold. There are three scaffold scenes, which come at the beginning, middle and end of the story. In every scene, the main characters are present and the scarlet letter is brought as important. In the first scaffold scene, Chillingworth is not aware of the identity of Hester's lover. In the second scaffold scene, he is fully aware of the identity of the lover and has also been successful in taking the worst possible revenge on Dimmesdale by administering mental and spiritual torture. In fact, it is Chillingworth who takes the minister to the scaffold in the middle of the night, thus achieving an evident success. But we soon come to know that his victory is short lived, when we find that Chillingworth is miserably trying to stop Dimmesdale from confessing in the third scaffold scene but is unsuccessful. Pearl's fight with the world initiates in the first scaffold scene itself, when she penetrates the air with her furious cries. Her fight with the world concludes in the end with a kiss to Dimmesdale, her father, at the scaffold. Dimmesdale, doesn't ascend the scaffold along with her in the first scaffold scene. He is fully aware of having committed a sin, but he assured himself that to achieve Divine Mercy,

public confession is not required. But it is his sensitive soul which does not allow him to take rest in peace. He executes true repentance and achieves salvation then only when he makes a voluntary and deliberate acknowledgement before the Puritan community in the third scaffold scene that took his life.

The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* would be incomplete without discussion and reference to the forest scenes. The four forest scenes are fully dedicated in the novel. Besides, references to the forest and Black man are also described. In Chapter VIII, Miss Hibbins invites Hester to the forest with the promise of "a merry company in the forest" (p.19). In Chapter XII, there is a reference to Mistress Hibbins' journeys into the forest. As we observe closely, the forest is not mainly a place of Evil; the profound secret love of Hester and Arthur, after a long time, is expressed in these scenes. It is the meeting between them in the forest which lightens the fatal depression of Dimmesdale and motivates him to deliver the Election sermon. It is through the forest scenes, the beauty and womanhood of Hester is also portrayed. The forest scenes also tell Dimmesdale's second fall. For the first time, he intentionally agrees to do something that he is aware of, to be wrong. In the forest, he has also identified his common mortality. He realizes that his feelings for Hester haven't changed at all. He has to convince himself that these feelings are basic to human nature but after coming back from the forest, he refuses to listen to his heart. He decides against leaving his community. He still wishes to lead his fellowmen. This he does by climbing the scaffold, thus rushing the story to its end.

There is little action in the novel. Chapters V, VI, IX, XI, and XXIV are explanatory in nature and accommodate characters. Limited but required information is provided about all individual characters which would have been otherwise difficult to attain through dialogues. The novel is typically psychological in nature, taking the reader from rising action to climax and then to the falling action. The immediate action is that of the sinful act of adultery committed by Hester and her husband Chillingworth instigated to take revenge. The rising action is on the part of Chillingworth and steps taken by him to make sure his revenge. He moves in with Dimmesdale and makes so obsessed with guilt that eventually Dimmesdale is driven to the scaffold, thus, being responsive to sin which leads the action to its climax. The turning point in the novel comes when Hester meets her lover in the forest to familiarize him with the actual identity of Chillingworth. Here comes the turning point, when two lovers, after seven years of sufferings plan to run away from the town. The falling action comprises of the chapter describing the impact of the meeting on Dimmesdale and the chapters which come before the death of minister.

Though *The Scarlet Letter* has little action in it, its plot is quite conservative and integrated.

Even the exposition by the author is not immediate. Everything is disclosed slowly and steadily as the identity of Hester's lover is not revealed immediately. Even the identity of Chillingworth is confirmed in the fourth chapter, but a strong clue from Hester's reaction to his presence in the third chapter is given to the reader. Nobody could suspect the pale minister who seems to be very innocent and a symbol of purity. In the chapter "The Elf and the Minister", Dimmesdale has been shown pleading for Hester, but it seems as if he doing so in the power of Pastor. The reader is taken along with Chillingworth in his search of Hester's lover. The special consideration he confers on Dimmesdale allows the reader to suspect Dimmesdale as Hester's lover which is confirmed in the second scaffold scene, when the minister calls upon Hester and Pearl to climb down the scaffold with him. Even the strong relationship that is still present between Hester and Dimmesdale is not revealed till the last forest scene of the novel. Thus, we see that the relations between the different characters are not exposed instantly, but the hints have been continuously given by Hawthorne randomly that allows an observant reader to understand these relations.

Even in his characterization, all the traits of a character are not exposed by Hawthorne immediately. The fact may be, his characters keep on changing and developing. We see Hester silently bearing the nasty behavior of the society in the chapter "Hester at Her Needle" She is even so kind and full of charity that she makes rough garments for the poor. The only hint in this chapter "freedom of speculation" is that she will later on grow and acquire the new feeling that she is not the only sinner in Boston. Only one thing that keeps her away from being an absolute rebel is, little Pearl. It is also not surprising when she advises Dimmesdale to flee Boston and returns to Boston after marrying off Pearl.

Chillingworth's nature also changes as the novel progresses. The first change is noticed through Hester's eyes in the chapter "The Elf and the Minister" where his features have been described as uglier and his figure more deformed than before. His personality further deteriorates in the next seven years.

Dimmesdale's nature, too, is not unwrapped all at once. We are made aware of this change, again through Hester's eyes in the chapter "Hester and the Physician". His serene and quiet scholarly personality is replaced by an "eager, searching, almost fierce, yet carefully guarded look" (pp.176). Even after his death, he "shriveled away and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wittingly in the sun" (pp.272) We first see him trying to convince Hester to disclose the name of her lover. It is Chillingworth who fills doubts in the mind of the reader about the fervent side of Dimmesdale's sacred temperament. He thinks that he has committed a sin by listening to his heart and now the weight of his guilt is too heavy for him that he is ready to flee away from Boston. This decision takes him down deep into an ethical perplexity, that is very much clear in his actions in the Chapter "The Minister in a Maze". Eventually, he comes out of his confusion and eases his soul from the burden of guilt by making his confession.

The fourth main character Pearl has also been portrayed as of complex nature. She being rejected by society is always at fight with it. In the chapter "The Flood of Sunshine", her extraordinary closeness with nature is exposed. The acceptance of Pearl by Dimmesdale, however, develops all her sympathies and forces her to accept responsibility in the world. As the book moves further, we are assured that Pearl has, at last, adapted herself to the world.

Alenezi, Majed (June 1, 2022): Hawthorne, in this novel, suggests that being a woman is in itself fighting back. Thus, it is only through womanhood that the female character is able to arrive at reconciliation with themselves and with their consciences.

Through *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne has conveyed that this harsh and rigid society will finally move towards the laws of nature as a basis for public and private behaviour. We can say that *The Scarlet Letter* has great unity of plot and structure. To make the novel more effective Hawthorne has even

woven irony, ambiguity and symbols which further make his narrative a unified whole. Each and every scene has relevance, so *The Scarlet Letter*, in a manner accepts evidence to Hawthorne's greatness as one of the incomparable writers of American literature.

CONCLUSION

By the end of the novel, his compassions lie with Hester as a prophetess of a better time and place where personal contacts can be based on more compassionate beliefs. By selecting Puritan New England as setting, Hawthorne has given a rich quality to the drama of human suffering. His ending, written in the nineteenth century, appears as an optimistic sign that future generations will venture into less gloomy, less repressive society where human compassion and tolerance will balance the community laws.

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