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AN ANALYSIS OF GUILT AND REDEMPTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF IN HAWTHORNE'S THE SCARLET LETTER

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the interplay of external and internal forces in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, ostensibly in conflict but in fact brings forth an effective intermingling of binaries into a unified whole. Nathaniel Hawthorne as a writer successfully highlights the conflict and connects the opposite into an organic link. The novel itself was described by Hawthorne as a romance where “the Actual and the imaginary may meet” (Marcus 455). This research paper makes an attempt to identify areas where the internal and external stimulus cohere and give a holistic dimension to the protagonist and the novel's development.

Keywords: External and Internal Conflict, Binaries, Protagonist, Development

Apparently, the plot revolves around Hester, and through her perspective other characters are woven into the main structure. The opening of the novel shows her on the scaffold, with the participants of the puritan community as onlookers. Puritan state and Puritan power in the novel, against the individual becomes a case of, more sinned against than sinning. For them religion and law are “identical” and “interfused” (46: ch.2). The responses even from her gender “Let her cover the mark ... the pang of it will be always in her heart” (47: ch.2) is rigid and unbending.

This first element, the polarity between public and private self, becomes a predominant force in *The Scarlet letter*. Hester stands with her self made public; her ordeal has been described by an onlooker “But, in their great mercy and tenderness of heart, they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand *only* (my italics) a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom” (58: ch.3).

She has been spared the penalty of death and the ‘only’ punishment embarked on her is a symbol in the form of a letter A, making her a public display for the rest of her life. The novel highlights those moral systems which suppress self-expressive acts, “disruptive, and destructive of authority” (Nina Baym qtd. in Desalvo 72).

The struggle between public and private appears contradictory and harmful; however, they work together for Hester towards a consolation in the end. This restriction imposed on Hester creates a transformation, turning her alienation into a humane outlook towards life. Nina Baym in her article “Hester Prynne as an ‘Outsider’” contends the evolution in Hester as, when she becomes a public figure through her punishment, her psyche is largely left alone ... It is hoped that the external letter will work its way down into Hester's heart and cause repentance, but nobody really cares and this indifference is

Hester's freedom ... turning her into a public symbol, it conceals her individuality and thus protects it. (60)

Her embellishment of the scarlet letter with fantastic embroidery and her ornate dress show her flouting the Puritan's sense of her conduct, as though so confident that she makes no outward concessions to the community's judgement. The "turmoil", "despair" and "anguish" (55: ch.3) endured during this exposure seem, exclusively related to her public disgrace rather than to an inward-looking response, such as guilt. This occurs because she does not pose to be a hypocrite and affirms her true identity. This "transformation is at first symbolic, then literal" (Harris 61). The effect that is created is of a spell, taking Hester out of her ordinary relations with humanity, and "inclosing her in the sphere by herself" (49: ch.2) and thus she converts this very punishment into her pride.

The title of the novel, a symbol in the story and the motif i.e. scarlet letter is mentioned frequently, gaining strength each time. The magnitude of the scarlet letter is exaggerated physically when Hester observes herself during the confrontational encounter in the Governor hall. In the convex mirror "the scarlet letter was presented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions" (98: ch.7). Whether the reality is distorted or the truth is misinterpreted is questioned by the use of the convex mirror; a mirror which tempers the real image. With the development of the novel the badge on her bosom becomes a mentor; according to Hester the badge has taught her and continues to be a source of knowledge.

The description of the scarlet letter is not marred by the omniscient narrator because of the stigma; rather it has been described as a fine piece of art: "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A." (48: ch.2). Further the elaboration of this symbol has been done by traits of "gorgeous luxuriance of fancy", "artistically done" and "fertility" all nourishing and life essential traits.

As Hester's symbol is a public one; her counterpart, Dimmesdale's scarlet letter is hidden" (Marcus 453). The colour of the letter is not dull, its brightness is associated with light and it "threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage way of the interior" (64: ch.3). The outward symbol becomes a reflection of the inward specimen of "of her delicate and imaginative skill" (75: ch.4) which adds a richer and more spiritual adornment in the fabrics of silk and gold, endows it with life.

Hester is unable to forgo what has been enforced on her by the collective consciousness. Still the very people in her life who are the consequence of her penance, Dimmesdale and Pearl, are the ones whom she cannot let go. Structurally, in the first half of the novel Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are simultaneously introduced. In terms of their likeness, they both are disagreeable. In fact, the deceived husband attracts some sympathies in comparison to the minister who is unable to stand by Hester in her hour of need rendering the perception of his love false.

In the second half, the two characters swap roles in degree of their likeability. This is done by Hawthorne through the introduction of flashback, explaining the circumstances that led to adultery. It is in the last part of the story where Dimmesdale tormented self makes him consider the possibility of a reunion with Hester and his daughter. His confession is merely the "last expression of the despondency of a broken spirit". His acknowledgement of Hester and, more particularly, of Pearl as the "tie that united them," restores the circle, which he has broken. Releasing his bondage to the past, it unites him with the part of himself which has an earthly future (Fossum 46-47).

Pearl who is often termed as an alter ego of Hester by the critics becomes the embodiment of good and evil inherent in man. The similarity with the mother is developed gradually with the introduction of Pearl's characteristics. Pearl brings out Hester's "femininity", "maternalism" and incarnate consciousness (Lasser 275). She has inherited all the enmity and passion of Hester's heart. The dichotomy of her response towards her daughter is evident when she mentions "Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too!" (104: ch.8). Incidentally pearl, the jewel, is also located inside the protection of a seashell; an extension of its creator.

Pearl becomes spiritually adapted to whatever drama has occupied the stage of her inner world and she plays her part in this grand plan. The superstitions attached to her character are evident when a hint is directed that "Pearl was a demon offspring such as, ever since old Catholic times, had occasionally been seen on earth, through the agency of their mothers' sin, and to promote some foul and wicked purpose" (91: ch.6).

Pearl becomes one, as well as the other. The constant reference to the evilness or darkness is questioning, whether it is an outward assemblage or another metamorphosis for the child, who is regarded an imp "seeking to mould itself into Pearl's shape" (98: ch.7). The naming of her daughter with a precious jewel is significant, the reason being Pearl, as being of great price has been purchased with all she had. She seems to be a hybrid; born of the interfusion of heaven and earth. Hester also points that her child must "seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!" (63: ch.3). Her daughter, Pearl derives this libidinal energy "from the spiritual world, and her bodily frame from its material of earth" (84: ch.6).

The dominance of suffocation is made evident through the characters. This inner heat radiates through language or the inability of words to express the emotions. Chillingworth is a fine specimen of this inner heat; and it sees an outward manifestation in his dialogues. He is unable to let go of the revenge fostering his mind and heart. "Hawthorne continues to link Chillingworth with the unwholesome and malignant" (Marcus 453). His focus on revenge takes a malignant tinge with its tragic effect felt by others, primarily Hester and Dimmesdale. Chillingworth has this intense heat radiating from him which is then directed towards Hester through a gesture when he feels the greatest punishment for Hester is to let her live. He says this by pointing his finger at Hester's scarlet sign and this "seemed to scorch into Hester's breast, as if it had been red-hot" (68: ch.4).

Hester's impulsive and passionate nature has been equated with fortification but at times her pent-up emotions need an outlet. "She felt, at moments, as if she must need shriek out with the full powers of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once" (52-53; ch.2). The external difference between Chillingworth's action and that of society is due to unlikeliness, not of inward motive, but of outward conditions. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth's responses intensify but do not change qualitatively, Hester's response to her crime evolves during the seven-year term of the novel.

The relationship between the two couples; one undesired yet joined by the bond of marriage and the other, the desired one but lacks bondage through a legal document. The first encounter between Hester and Chillingworth after Hester's punishment is described from both perspectives. Roger Chillingworth observes Hester emerging from her wilderness as a person in whom he hoped to find the warmth and cheerfulness of home was "set up as a type of sin before the people" (109: ch.9). The mysterious presence of Chillingworth has been described as "a white man clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume" (55: ch.3).

The intensity with which Hester's channels her gaze, while still standing on the pedestal, "was a fixed gaze towards the stranger; so, fixed a gaze, that, at moments of intense absorption, all other objects in the visible world seemed to vanish, leaving only him and her" (55: ch.3). She describes her relationship with her lawful husband "a false and unnatural relation" (69: ch.4) resulting in her decay.

If Chillingworth represents uncontrolled urge for revenge then we see passivity in the character of the minister, Dimmesdale. His initial appeals to reveal the sinner in the market place proves to be true for him when his repressed consciousness resurface. "Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burnt in secret!" (180: ch.17) His physical ailment is an outcome of his psychological torment. His psychological traumas result from his confused desire to fulfill religious obligations while at the same time living for those obligations. "Hawthorne correlates the moral and spiritual degradation with the physical deterioration" (Marcus 458). Dimmesdale, torn between his wish for renunciation of his hidden sin, yearns for redemption and regeneration.

The suspense in the novel is maintained throughout which is countered by intuitions and foreshadowing of the two characters; Pearl and Chillingworth. Suspense element involves the unuttered word throughout the novel i.e. adultery. Hawthorne is more interested in the reactions of the characters than the act itself. The secret has been given this dormant quality which tries to struggle out of characters' heart, "like a serpent from its hole" (74: ch.4).

Tactics used by Nathaniel Hawthorne to reveal Hester's partner gradually include ambiguity in narration, and constant switching between past and present leaving the reader bewildered. At the same time there are moments which bring the obvious and the unmentioned together with the constant outbursts of Chillingworth "He will be known! — He will be known! — He will be known!" (58: ch.3) and his insistence on revenge points towards impending doom. These are the inward and outward markers made evident in the text by the novelist.

Thus, Hester, the person with the least amount of real power in the novel is made, symbolically, the person with the most power and the most responsible for the outcome of the tale. This move deflects attention away from reality of Hester's utter powerlessness observed in the initial scenes. Hester is shown as a "kind of 'liminal' character caught betwixt and between social roles as a result of her passionate transgression" (Egan 198). Instead of presenting a tale of branding and thrashing, Hawthorne presents the story of Hester Prynne whose "beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped" (53: ch.3).

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