

Renegotiating the Saint's Past and the Sinner's Future in the Context of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Pooja Shankar

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English
Central University Dharamshala
Himachal Pradesh, India.

Abstract

Life is ruled by the law of change. Sometimes change makes the harsh realities of life more apparent to us. Some changes reveal a hidden truth and bring the past into the present, while others bring prosperity for the future and inspire us to move forward in life. Normal changes in a common man's life always appear normal, and unusual changes always have a significant impact on our lives. But what if? It occurs in the lives of both saints and sinners. Oscar Wilde once said that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future and these lines seem true in the context of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The saint's past in the phrase is suggested to be a horrible one, filled with sin. Similarly, the sinner's future is indicated to be one of goodness and redemption.

Keywords: Change, Hidden Truth, Sin, Saint, Future, Past and Present.

Introduction

The Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony is the setting for the narrative of Hester Prynne, a married woman who has an affair and subsequently struggles to forge a new life of freedom and dignity. The story takes place between 1642-1649. Hester Prynne, the most famous female heroine in American literature, is introduced to the reader as a strong young lady who is labelled as a sinner, ridiculed by her neighbours, chastised by the leaders, and stands on a stage.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* is an American piece of literature that was first published in 1850. Sin, guilt and optimism are explored in the novel. The discussion in this paper “Renegotiating the Saint’s Past and the Sinner’s Future in the Context of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*” is restricted to Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne's lives and how their tragic past and promising future relate to one another.

The narrative is initially presented during the heroine Hester Prynne's transfer from the prison to a scaffold, where she has to stand for three hours while cradling her baby daughter. Embroidered on her chest is an intricate scarlet letter "A" an indicative of her adultery. She gave birth to an infant by another man during the two years that Hester's husband was away from England. Wilson and the young clergyman Arthur Dimmesdale ask her to reveal the name of her daughter's father. She resists giving into the pressure and does not give the girl up to the magistrate. Hester Prynne, the anti-puritan, rejects all of the standards of behaviour set out by the puritans.

She pushes back against the town beadle at the start of the novel. “by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will” (Hawthorne 39). Observing her intention, Lehtie Chalise Thomson writes, “Hester, the anti-Puritan, arrives in splendour and grandeur, shocking the spectators with her self-assurance and boldness. Such an introduction to her hints that she has no intention of obeying the Puritan magistrates” (72).

If we talk about Dimmesdale, he is a well-educated, ordained Puritan priest with an interest in philosophy. He is unquestionably a man of God's devotion, fervently pious, and a powerful orator. Despite his seemingly saintly image, nobody was aware of the truth behind it. Guilt and sin are explored in the novel. Since Hester won't reveal the father of her child, she is forced to live with the scarlet letter for the rest of her days. In an unfortunate turn of events, one of the Indians holding her husband hostage takes him to the town the day following his arrival. If she confesses her affair and repents, she is allowed to remove the scarlet letter, but she chooses not to since she does not want the puritans to abuse their power over her. Despite their best efforts, Puritans are unable to control her and squelch her freedom.

She appears to be alone in a sphere, separated from the throng surrounding her by the cursed red letter "A" pinned to her clothes. Although she quietly endures the humiliation, she does not revolt against the puritan's treatment. She complies with puritan rules on the one hand, but she also defies them on the other. Ironically, she embellishes the letter with "elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread," giving the impression that she is wearing a golden thread that expresses her actual thoughts, even though she is wearing the badge of shame as a punishment.

Matide Mansilla writes in her research paper titled "An Insight into the Inward Sphere in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*" that, "It is through such provocative exhibition of individuality that Hester makes it known that while enduring her punishment, she can simultaneously leads her life as she chooses"(221). Due to its orateness, the letter is far away from serving its real purpose.

Hester goes into reflection. She conjectures about morality in general, societal structure, and human nature. Hester's trials also make her tough and independent-minded. The tone of the writer's narrative suggests that, despite his outward disapproval of Hester's autonomous philosophical thought, inwardly admires her independence and her views. According to Prof. Syed Zaheer Hasan Abidi and Ms. Mursalin Jahan, "Relying on her own potential, she works as a seamstress to forge a new life and new identity without conforming to the rules set by the puritans"(103). Hester's experiences also make her into a type of parental figure who is empathetic. Because she is aware that acting rashly may result in the loss of her daughter Pearl, Hester controls her impulsive tendencies. Hester is a socially conscious mother figure who provides food and clothing to the underprivileged.

By the novel's final episode, the women in the town look up to Hester as a mother figure. She no longer feels the guilt associated with her scarlet letter. According to Prof. Syed Zaheer Hasan Abidi and Ms. Mursalin Jahan, "Though the meaning of the scarlet letter is re-evaluated but she hardly pays any heed to people's re-evaluation of the letter. She does not let puritans feel that their punishment has humbled her. In fact, "the scarlet letter has not done its office". It does not serve the purpose for which it is meant: humiliate Hester. Even when she is asked to remove the letter she refuses, because for her its removal is as futile as its original placement" (104).

Hester is presented in *The Scarlet Letter* as a skilled, knowledgeable, but not particularly a remarkable woman but her unique upbringing is what has shaped her into such a significant person. Hester's perseverance in the face of societal resentment is essential to her survival and a fundamental aspect of who she is.

D. H. Lawrence concedes that Hester prevailed against general beliefs: Hester lives on, pious as pie, being a public nurse. She becomes at last an acknowledged saint, Abel of the Scarlet Letter. She would, being a woman. She has had her triumph over the individual man, so she quite loves subscribing to the whole spiritual life of society. She will make herself false as hell, for society's sake, once she's had her triumph ... (Lawrence, 91).

When we talk about Arthur Dimmesdale, for instance, we see that his identity is more a result of his surroundings than of anything intrinsic. The reader is informed that Dimmesdale was a renowned professor at Oxford University. His past suggests that he is probably a reclusive person who does not naturally have a great deal of empathy for everyday people. Dimmesdale does, however, have a very engaged conscience. His conscience is aroused by the reality that Hester bears sole responsibility for their common wrongdoing, and the ensuing mental distress and physical frailty help him to become more understanding of other people. As a result, he develops into a kind and persuasive speaker as well as a caring leader, and his congregation may benefit from his insightful spiritual advice.

Paradoxically, the villagers don't take Dimmesdale's claims of immorality seriously. Considering, his past and his inclination towards rhetorical discourse rather than being statements of personal guilt, Dimmesdale's sermons are typically interpreted allegorically by his audience. Dimmesdale's physical and spiritual deterioration is accelerated as a result of his increased internalization of guilt and self-punishment. After his final lecture on Election Day, the town's idolization of him reaches unprecedented heights when in a fit of passion, he climbs the scaffold with his partner Hester and his daughter Pearl and admits his guilt in front of everyone, and reveals a red letter burned into his chest. When he passes away, Pearl gives him a kiss.

Conclusion

Consequently, we may state in conclusion that the alphabet 'A' in this novel was a symbol of adultery in the first part of the novel, but afterwards, though, Hester transforms it into ability with her optimistic attitude and strength. Undoubtedly, if Hester in the novel had not been optimistic and strong, perhaps she would not have been able to earn the respect that she earned by accepting her punishment. Hester proved people's opinion wrong with her strong determination. She brought about a change in her life which was completely opposite to what other people thought. She changed all the assumptions related to her future that people had made for her. "People brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble." (Hawthorne, 275). She had transformed the shame associated with her character into strength. This quality of hers had filled Dimmesdale with guilt, only then at last he gathers so much courage that he accepts Pearl as his daughter in front of everyone. Through her actions, she proved that if someone has committed a sin, the stigma associated with it can be removed and a path towards a bright future can be found. On the other hand Dimmesdale's character illustrates how he battled inner agony when guilt consumed him and produced a deadly atmosphere that left him discontented. Dimmesdale's life points towards this universal truth that the mistakes made by man in the past suddenly make their presence visible in the present, whether he is an ordinary person or a saintly figure. But on this point, it cannot be denied that it is much more difficult for a saintly figure to accept mistakes than an ordinary person.

Works Cited

1. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Penguin Classics, 2016.
2. Jahan, Mursalin, and Syed Zaheer Hasan Abidi. "Individualism of Hester Prynne in the Seventeenth Century" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, Vol. 4, no. 2, February, 2016, pp. 100-106
3. Lawrence, D. H. "Nathaniel Hawthorne and "The Scarlet Letter". *Studies in Classic American Literature*. The Viking Press, 1961.
4. Mansilla, Matilda. "An Insight into the Inward Sphere in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter" *Many Sundry Wits Gathered Together*. Universidade da Coruna, 1997.

5. Thomson, Lehtie Chalise. *A Moral Wilderness*": Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. 2011. Boise State University, PhD Thesis.
<https://www.coursehero.com/file/117668341/A-Moral-Wilderness-Nathaniel-Hawthornes-The-Scarlet-Letter-PDFDrive-pdf/>
6. Wilde, Oscar. *A Woman of No Importance*. Digireads, 2005.