

Paratextuality and the Meaning of Text to the Fiction of Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter

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ABSTRACT

“A text without paratext does not exist and never existed”. This is the line from Gerard Genett's *Paratexts. Thresholds to Interpretation* exactly defines the function of paratext in a text. Paratext are those devices surrounding the text that are meant to draw the reader inside ; the paratext covers everything from the book's cover, footnotes, interview with author or publisher and preface of the book. In the paper investigates how Nathaniel Hawthorne used paratext “The Custom House” as introductory text to the Scarlet Letter.

Keywords: paratext, preface, footnotes, discourse

Paratext combines the prefix para (Meaning beyond or adjacent to), More specifically, paratexts are those devices surrounding the text that are meant to draw the reader inside; the term “Paratext” covers everything from the book's cover over footnotes to even, interviews with the author or publisher. The paratext then is “What enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and more generally, to the public”.

The general denomination of ‘Paratext’ can be divided into subcategories: Firstly, there is the peritxt, which is located “Within the same volume” and it contains such elements as the title or preface and sometimes inserted into interstices of the text, such as chapter title or certain notes. Secondly, epitext such elements which don't appear inside

of the book or anywhere near its direct surroundings. These are all messages that, least originally, are located outside of book, generally with the help of media (interviews, conversation or under the cover of private communications letter, diaries).

Over the past decades, literary theory has gradually been moving from a writer-oriented perspective to the current poststructuralist reader-focused view; paratexts too, claim to be connected with how books are presented to the reader. What may strike one as odd about paratexts and what certainly sparked my interest, is its emphasis on authorial responsibility. The author is the figure in charge of the paratexts and surrounds a text and such as he also indirectly controls their influence on the reader. I wanted to present the role of author in our conception of meaning and intention in any given work of fiction.

The text that features most prominently is of course Genette's paratexts. This paper mostly inspired by Roland Barthe's '*The Death of Author*' which establishes the idea that the interpretation of a work does not depend on the one who has created it, but on the one who reads it. In that sense, one should say that each reader mentally re-writes any given story, making it entirely his own, and that the author is simply one of these many readers whose interpretation is equally valuable to that of his peers. This idea has been the starting point of the paper which will take on a meaningfully reader-oriented approach, as opposed to Genette's author focused one in paratexts.

The author can be responsible for numerous paratexts surrounding his own work, from introductions or prefaces over footnotes and explanatory notes and even as for example Nathaniel Hawthorne's introductory text to the scarlet letter.

"The Custom-House" in the *Scarlet Letter*.

In the work, *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne continued to play with the idea of authority and interpretation, and although the paratext had not been given its name in his day, he often applied it to influence and confuse his readers. '*The Custom-House*', the introductory preface to *The Scarlet Letter* written by the author himself, is perhaps the

most notorious and widely discussed paratext in Hawthorne's entire oeuvre. Critics have often dismissed '*The Custom-House*' as irrelevant to the 'Masterpiece' that follows it.

However, from Gennett's definition and understanding of the paratext as an intrinsic part to any work of literature, regardless of its genre, '*The Custom-House*' is in fact, extremely relevant to the story, not only because it was originally written as a preface to a collection of short stories in which *The Scarlet Letter* would have been the centre piece, but also because it has a direct effect on the meaning and interpretation on Hester Prynne's story in particular.

In '*The Custom-House*', Hawthorne describes his 'Weighty responsibility as executive officer of The Custom-House, a job which seemed to have extinguished his interest in literature and writing entirely for the next few years.

From Hawthorne's narrative tone and very detailed information he provides about his time as Custom-House officer, it would seem as though 'The Custom House' is an autobiographical sketch in its entirety indeed '*The Custom-House*' is one of only two moments in Hawthorne's life where he felt the need to be autobiographical writing. The reason Hawthorne proposes for its inclusion in *The Scarlet Letter*, he explains, is to assure the 'authenticity' of the narrative therein contained to his audience. Hence, the reader is led to believe that '*The Custom-House*' functions as proof for the historical accuracy of the story of Hester Prynne. Still, records of any such events involving a scarlet letter to ever have occurred in Puritan New England history has yet to be discovered. As such, according to the event in *The Scarlet Letter* are not based on historical facts, and that '*The Custom House*' was probably only inserted in the volume to add complexity to the story. And yet even through the humoristic undertone of the 'Custom-House' is hard to overlook, dismissing the entire preface as farce simple to puzzle the reader would be all too shallow an approach to this story. The difficulty for the reader in trying to form an interpretation of '*The Custom-House*' is in part due to Hawthorne's own idea on the function of fiction, and his suggestion, that his novel is based on true events must be taken more seriously than it has been by many critics and scholars until now.

The introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* does not actually confirm the veracity of Hester Prynne's story, even though Hawthorne jokingly refer to it as being 'autobiographical', but neither does it negate it; by exploring the boundaries of fact and fiction of authenticity, Hawthorne illustrates how these terms often intermingle. The *Scarlet Letter* does not tell a tale of true events', it is witness to the custom of puritan doctrine that governed seventeenth century America and thus to novel is an historically retraceable as the later part of the preface is autobiographical, the story of the *Scarlet Letter* is something that could have happened, Hawthorne uses his paratext to paradoxically defy what was considered appropriate fiction in his day; under the guise of the autobiography and with the argument that what he was written is based on true event, he strives for a more tolerant approach toward fiction and the imagination, arguing that events he describes in the *Scarlet Letter* were not unlikely to have happened in case of adultery in Puritan New England. However much or little the paratext might affect the interpretation and reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, for it motivates can be hard to decipher for unpracticed reader, to dismiss it as entirely irrelevant is to deny the novel's publication, history and such a large part of its journey from manuscript to finished work.

The text, however deal with an author who use the paratext to draw his reader into the story. Their presence in the story is of a definite influence on the reader, though they never dictate him how he should interpret the text. Hence, the authorial peritext influence the reader, although it does not force the reader into the direction of one single interpretation. Instead it coerces him to look beyond the authorial note and into the infinite of meaning a literary text may contain.

In the literary work, *The Scarlet Letter* provides valuable information about the way in which paratext might influence the reader. In the work the author questions the authority of historical facts and how the knowledge of them relevant to the reading of fictional work; Hawthorne seems to prove that even though works of fiction is not always based on true events-although they often presented to be this does not have to mean that

they are irrelevant to the study of the past. The most importantly The Scarlet Letter shows the effect of the paratext on interpretation.

In the paper I have given a short introduction to Gennett's paratexts. Though the analysis of Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter' I have attempted to expound that even though author often seem to use paratexts to slip their own intentions and interpretations of the story into the text, the paratext need not work in such a way at all; in fact, the reader is free to take heed of the author's comments on the text or to ignore them entirely.

Further more; I have endeavoured to prove that authorial paratexts and more specifically peritexts are often used not to limit the reader in the interpreting process but to challenge him to look deeper into the text in search of meaning that had not previously discovered. However the authorial Peritext will always leave a certain impression on the reader and it will always affect his interpretation to certain context.

It can be concluded then, that even though there have been many attempt to turn the table, the author is still the person that is at the centre of literary study while recent developments in literary criticism have attempted to put the reader more at the forefront, looking at the author in order to the 'Correct' interpretation of a literary work is still a common practice among scholars, while the author never had full control over his own work once it was being published. The author does not even always want to control his reader interpretation by means of paratext. The reader seems to be moving more and more to background in literary theory again, even though the study of individual interpretation might tell us more about the layer of meaning of a work than any authorial or editorial paratexts ever could.

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