

## A Study of The Scarlet Letter As A Psychological Novel

**Dr Raji Saju**

Lecturer in English

UTAS-Ibra

Sultanate of Oman

### Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" delves into the intricacies of human psychology, unraveling the complexities of guilt, shame, and the inner workings of the human mind. This exploration aims to illuminate the nuanced mental landscapes of the characters and the profound influence of societal expectations on their psyches.

The narrative focal point is Hester Prynne, condemned for adultery, navigating through the harsh judgments of 17th-century Puritan society. This research closely examines Hester's internal conflicts and the suppression of her emotions. Furthermore, the study scrutinizes the psychological toll on Arthur Dimmesdale, the tormented minister entangled in guilt, secrecy, and the clash between societal norms and personal morality. The scarlet letter itself becomes a potent symbol, a tangible representation of psychological trauma and societal stigmatization.

Additionally, the research delves into the role of the mysterious character Roger Chillingworth, whose quest for revenge against Dimmesdale adds another layer to the psychological complexity of the novel. This study also aims to unravel the intricate interplay between the conscious and unconscious minds of the characters, giving rise to a psychological turmoil. Hawthorne's masterpiece thus intricately explores the complexities of the human psyche by dissecting the characters' internal struggles, examining symbolic elements, and assessing the impact of societal forces.

**Keywords:** crime, psychological themes, punishment, sin, working of the mind

### Introduction:

"The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a classic American literary work that explores the complexities of human psychology and the profound impact of guilt, shame, and redemption on the human psyche. Published in 1850, the novel delves into the psychological dimensions of its characters, delving deep into their thoughts, emotions, and inner struggles. This paper aims to examine "The Scarlet Letter" as a psychological novel, focusing on the psychological themes, character analysis, and the exploration of the human mind.

The psychological themes in "The Scarlet Letter" permeate the narrative, providing a rich understanding of the characters' motivations and psychological states. The central theme of guilt

and its psychological effects on the characters is prominently depicted through the character of Hester Prynne, who is forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of her sin. Hester's inner turmoil and her journey towards self-acceptance and redemption offer profound insights into the human psyche.

The character analysis in the novel offers a deep psychological exploration of the main characters. Hester Prynne's internal struggles, her resilience, and her transformation from a social outcast to a symbol of strength and independence provide a nuanced portrayal of the psychological complexities of shame, guilt, and resilience. Arthur Dimmesdale, the tortured minister, embodies the psychological battle between the public persona and the private guilt he carries, leading to his deteriorating mental state. The enigmatic character of Roger Chillingworth, Hester's vengeful husband, represents the destructive power of revenge and the psychological toll it takes on an individual.

Moreover, "The Scarlet Letter" delves into the exploration of the human mind, showcasing the intricate workings of the characters' thoughts, desires, and emotions. Hawthorne skillfully utilizes introspection, symbolism, and vivid descriptions to provide readers with a deep understanding of the characters' inner worlds. The novel's narrative techniques, such as the use of the scaffold scenes and the introspective passages, allow readers to delve into the characters' psyches and witness their internal struggles firsthand. This paper also aims to shed light on the profound psychological themes, character analysis, and exploration of the human mind within the narrative. It seeks to unravel the complexities of guilt, shame, and redemption and their impact on the characters' psychological well-being. Furthermore, the analysis will highlight the psychological insights that "The Scarlet Letter" offers, inviting readers to contemplate the universal human experiences and emotions portrayed in the novel.

Stanley Williams in the *Literary History of the United States* calls Hawthorne the founder of the psychological novel in America. Though Nathaniel Hawthorne contributed much to the fiction of America, he is remembered today mainly as the author of *The Scarlet Letter*. This book is the greatest book ever written in the western hemisphere.

Hawthorne's imagination brooded over the past and the figures that appeared in Puritan America. Today, we remember *The Scarlet Letter* not as a historical novel, but as a brilliant psychological novel, unrivaled in its penetrating study of the human mind. When he started writing, the popular taste was all for the romantic, historic, and grand epics which offered heroic characters in splendid scenes. His characters were merely stereotypes, the gallant, brave dashing hero, fighting against the all-black villain. The heroine was all sweetness and purity, and very often the perfect damsel in distress. Hawthorne was well acquainted with these characters for he was familiar with the literature of his time. He preferred for his book the term 'romances' to 'novels'. He called his books psychological romance and aimed at burrowing into the depths of our common nature.

Hawthorne displays a deep psychological insight into the characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. He minutely analyses the inner workings in the minds of the main characters and their impact on their deeds and personalities.

### **Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter**

In 1976, in Colorado a family discovered an old notebook among some papers. It was presumed that the book had been with Hawthorne between 1835-1841. Like any writer's notebook, it was a collection of words, fragments of sentences and ideas, where Hawthorne had recorded the first thoughts for this future masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*.

Before he began writing the novel, in 1838, he had already created sketches of some of his characters. In his notes, he wrote about 'spiritual diseases and diseases of the body and about a sin that could cause a sore to appear on the body. The novel was taking form in his mind. At a later date, he decided to tell the story of a woman condemned to wear the letter A' as a sign of her adultery.

Was the Scarlet letter a true story? The story took place between 1642 and 1649 in the Puritan settlement of Boston. There are two main purposes of "The Custom House": Its first purpose is to connect two periods in time that are hundreds of years apart and to provide thematic and ideological context for the story to follow. In 'The Custom House' Hawthorne's introductory writing to *The Scarlet Letter*, he wrote that while working at the Custom House in Salem, he found a mysterious package that contained, a worn and faded, fine red cloth. There were traces of gold embroidery on it. After examining it carefully, he noticed that it was a capital letter 'A' and each leg of A measured exactly  $3\frac{3}{4}$  inches, about 6 cm in length. There were also faded sheets of paper in the mysterious package. They had been written several years ago by Surveyor Pue, who knew the tragic story. After further investigation, Hawthorne was able to gather more information regarding the life and sufferings of the woman who was condemned to wear the scarlet letter.

Eventually, in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* was published and was immediately recognized as a classic novel, destined to fame. It has constantly remained in print ever since its first publication. The fact that *The Scarlet Letter* involves universal themes such as love, sex, sin, evil, punishment, hypocrisy, revenge and hate makes it a novel that cannot be forgotten by any generation.

### **Hester Prynne and The Working Of Her Mind**

Hester Prynne, the central character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "*The Scarlet Letter*," offers a captivating exploration of the workings of the human mind, particularly in the face of guilt, shame, and redemption. As a woman marked by the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of her sin,

Hester's inner thoughts and emotions provide a window into her psychological journey throughout the novel.

From the moment Hester is introduced, her mind becomes a battleground of conflicting emotions. Initially, she experiences intense shame and guilt for her act of adultery, resulting in a constant inner turmoil. The scarlet letter she wears becomes both a public symbol and a constant reminder of her transgression, amplifying her psychological distress. Hester's mind becomes a site of internal conflict as she wrestles with societal expectations, moral judgment, and her own sense of identity.

Hawthorne skillfully reveals the working of Hester's mind through introspection and introspective passages. The narrative allows readers to witness her internal struggles, doubts, and moments of self-reflection. Hester's thoughts are often filled with introspective ponderings on the nature of sin, guilt, and the complexities of human morality. Through her internal dialogue, readers gain insight into her evolving perspectives and her gradual transformation from a sinner burdened by guilt to a woman who finds strength and purpose in her adversity.

The novel also explores Hester's mind in relation to the other key characters, particularly Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, with whom she shares a secret. Hester's thoughts are consumed by her relationship with Dimmesdale, oscillating between feelings of guilt, longing, and empathy. Her mental state is intricately tied to the guilt she feels for not revealing Dimmesdale's involvement in their shared sin. This internal conflict adds depth and complexity to her character, highlighting the profound impact of secrets and shared guilt on the workings of her mind.

Throughout the novel, Hester's mind serves as a vessel for the exploration of broader themes, such as societal judgment, individual identity, and the consequences of one's actions. Her introspective nature allows readers to delve into the depths of her psyche, witnessing her inner battles, her growth, and her pursuit of redemption.

It is not the purpose of the novelist to depict the custom-ridden society which crushes the physical weight of Hester Prynne. That is the external aspect of her suffering. What is more important is her will and passion. According to Levin, 'She is a complex figure' and Hawthorne sees that her natural vigor must also lead her to further trouble. Hawthorne had to see that the most interesting battle was not between the heart itself. She compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride. She embroiders the scarlet letter as an elaborate expression of ambiguous defiance and guilt and she dresses her daughter in equally flamboyant colors.

She has been psychologically treated. She recalls the memories of her past life while standing on the scaffold. This is a view of her past when compared with the present. The pictures of her parents, the old world, and her England village came up before her eyes at a time of harsh punishment. Taken back to prison, she suffers a nervous breakdown which should be viewed as a reaction to her calm and serene endurance of disgrace on the scaffold. After her return from Boston, she's full of repentance which is self-realization, prompted by the dictates of her mind depicting her inner conflict.

## Arthur Dimmesdale And The Working Of His Mind

Arthur Dimmesdale serves as the town minister in Puritan Boston during the 17th century and plays a significant role in the story. Throughout the novel, Dimmesdale's inner turmoil and the workings of his mind are explored in detail. At the beginning of the novel, Dimmesdale is depicted as a highly respected and influential figure in the community. However, it is gradually revealed that he is the father of Hester Prynne's illegitimate child, Pearl. Dimmesdale's guilt and shame over his secret sin become the driving forces behind his internal struggle.

Dimmesdale's mind is consumed by conflicting emotions and thoughts. On the one hand, he experiences immense guilt and self-hatred for his affair with Hester and the hypocrisy of his public image as a pious minister. He tortures himself with feelings of unworthiness and believes that he deserves severe punishment for his transgressions. On the other hand, Dimmesdale desires to confess his sins publicly and alleviate the burden of guilt. He recognizes the hypocrisy of his position and longs for redemption and spiritual renewal. However, his fear of public shame and the potential loss of his esteemed reputation hold him back from confessing his sins openly.

The internal struggle within Dimmesdale's mind manifests physically through his deteriorating health. He experiences physical and mental anguish, often depicted as clutching his chest and suffering from intense emotional turmoil. Dimmesdale's guilt and the inability to reconcile his public persona with his private guilt eventually lead to his demise.

In the declination of Dimmesdale too, Hawthorne shows his deep psychological knowledge and interest. His psychology is the best example of his being the founder of the psychological novel. The secret of his sin burns within him prompting him to confess yet Dimmesdale is afraid to reveal himself for what he is. Hence, his attempts at confession remain as a veiled suggestion of his own unworthiness, which really wins him greater admiration. Thus, he goes deeper and deeper into the pit of sin for he violates the Puritan belief that a man must be a true confessor. As in the case of Hester, we find that Dimmesdale's sin is not the simple one of adultery, but a more complex one. But sin eats into him and as an outward symbol, he is forced to sear the letter into his flesh. He has taken a thirst for self-torture, both physical and mental, as he is goaded on by an impulse for self-torture. The sure way in which Hawthorne goes on exploring the soul of his young minister is unparalleled in all literature for psychological interest, except in the work of Dostoevsky whom he resembles.

The depiction of Dimmesdale's self-agony, self-torture, and inner conflict to confess or not confess his sin publicly, his Hamlet-like delay in confessing his acts, and his constant introspection make the novel a fine psychological study of the human mind. In the first part of the novel, he is a coward, weak, infirm, indecisive, tormented, haunted, and hypocritical. In the second part, he becomes self-conscious, determined, bold, brave, and truly penitent.

Throughout the novel, Dimmesdale grapples with questions of morality, sin, and redemption. He is torn between his religious beliefs, societal expectations, and his own personal desires for confession and forgiveness. This internal conflict serves as a central theme in the novel,

highlighting the destructive power of guilt and the consequences of living a life built on lies and secrets. His mind is depicted as a battleground of guilt, shame, and conflicting emotions. His internal struggle and the workings of his mind form a significant part of the narrative, emphasizing the themes of sin, redemption, and the destructive effects of hidden guilt.

### **Roger Chillingworth And The Working Of His Mind**

Roger Chillingworth, another key character is initially introduced as Hester Prynne's long-lost husband, who arrives in Boston shortly after she is publicly shamed for her adultery. Chillingworth's character and the workings of his mind undergo significant development throughout the story. Chillingworth is a complex and enigmatic character, driven by his intense desire for revenge. Discovering Hester's affair, he assumes the pseudonym Roger Chillingworth and dedicates himself to uncovering the identity of her lover, whom he eventually realizes is Arthur Dimmesdale. Chillingworth's obsession with revenge becomes the primary force shaping his thoughts and actions.

The workings of Chillingworth's mind are characterized by an unrelenting pursuit of knowledge and a relentless thirst for vengeance. He transforms from a scholarly, learned man into a sinister and malevolent figure. Chillingworth is consumed by his dark purpose, seeking to mentally and emotionally torment Dimmesdale. His mind becomes consumed by thoughts of revenge and his ever-growing obsession with uncovering Dimmesdale's guilt. He uses his knowledge of medicine and his keen intellect to probe into Dimmesdale's inner turmoil, exploiting his weakness and unraveling his secrets. Chillingworth's methods are manipulative and psychologically oppressive, causing Dimmesdale's mental and physical deterioration.

However, as the story progresses, Chillingworth's single-minded pursuit of revenge begins to take its toll on his own mental and emotional well-being. The novel suggests that his intense desire for vengeance transforms him into a symbol of evil and depravity. His mind becomes consumed by darkness and malice, leading to his eventual moral decay. It is worth noting that Chillingworth's character also embodies the dangers of unchecked obsession and the destructive power of revenge. While his initial motivation may have been justified by societal norms, his inability to let go and move on ultimately destroys him as well as those around him.

Roger Chillingworth is the worst sinner in *The Scarlet Letter*. He is a hypocrite and a conceited fellow. He is a cunning man who has sold his soul to dogs. He is an unpardonable sinner, full of revenge and malice. He himself is a psychologist who confesses his sense of wrong to Hester in the prison. It was a mistake on his part to have induced a young girl to marry him in his old age. The analysis of his own self is the best example of psychological portraiture. The character of Chillingworth is made all the more sinister by making him dabble in black magic. He collected herbs and roots to give them touch or spell. His fame as a doctor is partly accountable to his power of working wonders over his medicines and patients. On the whole, he is a searching type of character, with an unwavering desire for revenge and an increasingly dark and malevolent nature, although it means his own isolation and destruction.

### **Pearl And Her Conduct**

Even in the depiction of little Pearl, Hawthorne gives evidence of his deep grasp of human nature. He calls her 'a born misfit of this infantile world'. All the factors of her birth and upbringing make it inevitable that Pearl should be what according to modern psychology is a problem child. Pearl is pictured as an abnormal child. She is extraordinary, brisk, sportive, witty, oracular and taxing. Even her mother feels irritated and nervous at her persistent questionings. She is not amenable to any discipline or rule. She is influenced by heredity, by her parents, who are both sinners. She is a constant tormentor to her mother by reminding her of the letter A in her gown. She often asks her about its meaning. She also wants to know if her mother had ever met the black man in the woods. She consciously tells nothing of her maker when Mr. Wilson examines her in Bellingham's hall. In a nutshell, he has shown remarkable subtlety in portraying Pearl and in studying the case of an abnormal child.

The entire novel rests on human psychology. The *Scarlet Letter* though based as an act of carnal love is singularly free from erotic or passionate elements. He was particularly interested in exploring the result of sin, the effect on the human conscience of guilt, pride, egotism and isolation. The effect of sin on four different persons is traced with greater dexterity. T.S. Eliot has said of Hawthorne: 'Hawthorne had ..... the firmness, the true coldness, the hard coldness of the genuine artist'.

### **The Scarlet Letter As A Story Of Sin, Crime And Punishment**

The *Scarlet Letter* is a grim story of crime and punishment. Its central theme is sexual crime and punishment. It is the cowardice saga of persons committing adultery which involves not only a penal crime but also a moral degradation. It constitutes an act of individual outrage directed towards both another individual and a violation of the established social code of ethics. In The Bible, it has been written, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' It is God's seventh commandment, and those who violate it are sinners. So, The *Scarlet Letter* is a story of sin also. This is why Hester and Dimmesdale, who commit adultery cannot be forgiven.

The *Scarlet Letter* takes us to the early days of the Puritan settlement at Massachusetts. The book derives its title from the custom strictly practiced by the Puritan settlers that a woman caught in adultery was to wear the letter A embroidered in scarlet on her dress. The novel begins with a scene on a summer morning in Boston. In the bustling market square of Boston, a young woman named Hester Prynne finds herself on the scaffold, cloaked in shame. She endeavors to conceal the scarlet letter 'A' adorning her gown by cradling her child close. Hester, a gentlewoman is made to endure this shame as she has borne a child while her husband has been thought lost at sea for a long time. Hester stands quietly and outwardly calm. She watches the crowd that stare at her through scornful eyes. It is said that Hester escaped death or branding by the intercession of the pious young minister Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. The chief ministers of the community urge her to confess the name of her lover, who should be sharing her shame with her. The one who most fervently urges her to reveal the name of her partner in guilt is Dimmesdale. But Hester remains silent. Her calm gives place to great mental agitation, when among the crowd,

she detects an elderly and almost deformed man whom she had married not out of love but out of sheer helplessness. Hester, the daughter of an old but impoverished family had married an elderly scholar. The couple had stayed in Antwerp for some time and two years back Hester was sent to Massachusetts colony. The idea was that her husband would soon follow her but it was thought that his ship was wrecked and he was killed. Now, however, he turns up just in time to witness the shame that his young wife has brought upon herself and on him. Seeing his wife on the scaffold, he decides to conceal his identity and hostility put his finger to his lips to warn Hester against betraying the slightest sign of recognition.

After the time fixed for her public disgrace, Hester is taken back to prison. She is in a state of high nervous excitement. A doctor is called to attend to her and it turns out to be none other than her husband who has assumed the name of Chillingworth. He tried to get the name of Hester's lover, but when she refuses to tell him, swears that he will stay in touch practicing medicine and will sooner or later find the guilty one. He befriends the clergyman, Dimmesdale and while treating the sick minister, the physician worms out the guilty secret from the minister, that he is the father of Hester's child, Pearl. The soul of Dimmesdale in shame and agony tries to find relief in vague confessions of guilt which his congregation take to be further evidences of his righteousness. One night, the tortured young man walks to the scaffold where Hester has stood alone with her child. Soon the mother and child pass that way and Dimmesdale call them to him, makes them stand at the pillory with him. The significant gesture is observed by Chillingworth and its meaning is certainly not lost upon him.

Observing the soul-crushing impact Chillingworth has on Dimmesdale, Hester implores her husband to show mercy to the tormented young man. But Chillingworth knows no mercy. Hester then warns Dimmesdale against his physician. Together they make a desperate plan to flee to the old world. They decide to leave on election day after the sermon preached by Dimmesdale.

The election sermon is much praised by the congregation. The church being full, Hester and Pearl stand at the scaffold hearing the young minister's sermon. After the sermon, while the procession moves out of the church, Dimmesdale walks like a man in a dream. He sees Hester and Pearl and taking them by their hand climbs the steps to the pillory. In a deep and impressive voice, he proclaims his guilt to the astounded congregation. Tearing open his ministerial band, he exposes his breast to the gaze of the people. On the flesh is unmistakably etched the scarlet letter 'A.' Reverend Dimmesdale collapses lifeless onto the platform.

Chillingworth's pursuit of revenge is thus over. Frustrated by this open confession of the minister, which Chillingworth tried hard to prevent, the physician dies within a year leaving his wealth to Pearl. Hester leaves the colony for a while but returns later to become a ministering angel to those in distress. The scarlet letter on her gown is transformed into an object of reverence, because of her goodness and kindness, when she dies her wish is that her tomb should be inscribed only with the letter 'A'.

Dimmesdale is a greater sinner than Hester. First, he goes against the purity of his profession; secondly, he tries to conceal his crime from the public. He adds hypocrisy to his sin. But though hypocrisy can save him from social dishonor into which he is afraid, he might fall after the



exposure of his crime, it is helpless in remedying his spiritual hunts. Dimmesdale surrenders to a second 'fall' when he accepts Hester's proposition of the fight. His conscience allows him no rest; he gets constant trouble from his soul. He is restless and deeply troubled, cannot sleep soundly. He burns midnight oil, over writing sermons, he scourges himself when he is all alone. But all this is of no avail.

The young minister Dimmesdale tormented by his awareness of his own sin is another remarkable study in psychology. The secret of his sin burns within, prompting him to confess. Yet Dimmesdale is afraid to reveal himself for what he is. Thus he goes deeper and deeper into the pit of sin. If we make use of the idea of the gradation of sin, Chillingworth is a greater sinner. He is made to represent Hawthorne's idea of the unpardonable sinner. The way in which he broods over revenge and marks down his victim and drives him steadily to self-destruction is creditable when he learns of Hester's shame, his one desire is to remain withdrawn from it all. He denies his very identity and pursues revenge. The character of Chillingworth is made all the more sinister by making him an expert in black magic.

The shadow of the parents' sin can be seen on their child, Pearl. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* is a tragic story of crime, sin and punishment. His concept of evil and sin was a puritan heritage-his constant theme. For him, evil was something inherent in man's nature. A sense of guilt generates a feeling of loneliness and shows how painful. Hester's loneliness is. It leads her to defiance and rebellion. The secret sin is more painful than the openly acknowledged sin like Hester's.

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