

Treatment of Sin, Isolation and Purgation in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

The Scarlet Letter is one of the most important and powerful novels by Nathaniel Hawthorne in which the novelist has given us an authentic picture of Puritan society. Hester Prynne, the protagonist of the novel, is the victim of rigid and repressive codes of the society in which adultery is completely banned, but Hester gives way to her repressed feelings when she is a co-partner in the sin of adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale. She commits the sin of passion and not of principle, but she feels that she had not violated the sanctity of a human heart. So, the committed sin is of no

importance in itself. It is a story of sin, salvation and purgation.

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The Scarlet Letter is a powerful study of the socio-fabric of the Puritan society in relation to the basic human nature where the psycho-spiritual analysis of the mind, heart and soul of the main characters speak of the social complex of the age and documentation of the novel. Hawthorne is deeply concerned with the injustice perpetrated by his ancestors in the past for which he remorsefully wants to atone. That

is what Herbert Gorman rightly remarks” Hawthorne is not concerned with sin as sin. The curious enough is a mere starting point for him. When Hester in the forest meeting says what we did in consecration of its own, the critic comments’ In this flashing instant Hawthorne springs clear of Puritan Influence”¹ but, John C. Gerber in a complicating relativist reading stresses his belief that sin means’ something different to each character in the story’²

That is why, the genesis of *The Scarlet Letter* as a work of art lies more in its social stream than in the psychological penetration in to the mindscape of the characters in the story. In fact, the red letter A which stands for the sin of adultery, is symbolically rich in its import and importance as it is the central pivot around which all the characters, events, and situations revolve. So, while discussing the

title of the novel, we also discuss the theme of the novel as well as the values of the Puritan society of the seventeenth century.

Since, the novelist is concerned more with the consequences of sin than with the acts and causes of that sin, so Hester Prynne, right from the beginning when budding youth, is married to the decay of age, Roger Chillingworth, who is also known as a young, charming and vibrant lady of sovereign nature, hardly amenable to the rigid and suffocating values of Puritan society. She thinks that by indulging in the adulterous affairs with Arthur Dimmesdale, the minister of church, she might have broken some great moral laws, but she does not violate any divine laws as god gifts her with a beautiful child.

Moreover, when she is being taken out of the prison to stand on the scaffold, Hawthorne associates her with the purity

and fragrance of the flowers as well as while standing on the scaffold surrounded by the crowd of people of Boston, she maintains a rueful silence and haughty smile as if to sneer at the hollow moral edifice and ethics of society.

In her confrontation with the Puritan society in the first Scaffold scene, the intrinsic strength of her mind and the purity of her soul are revealed to us as succinctly as is expressed by the hypocritical pseudo-morality of the Puritan society. By not divulging the identity of her co-partner, as he is the minister of church, Hester is doing favour to the society which is totally bent upon punishing and humiliating her for the guilt.

Here, we get feel and peep in the vulnerable and fragile social structure of the society as a whole when pitted against the innocent, pure, independent and

spontaneous human nature. Hester's decision not to leave Boston and child itself speaks of the firmness and righteousness of her act of adultery for it will constantly remind her of her guilt.

Athur Dimmesdale, on the other hand, proves to be remorseful hypocrite and timid cowardice who could not master enough courage to confess his guilt publically, albeit he undertakes night vigils, fasting and self-torture at personal level.

In the personality and mindscape of the husband, Hawthorne powerfully explores the demonic and destructive facets of human nature when applied to the pursuits of personal revenge. But, even here the personal action, both of the social as well as biological father of Pearl, are the direct offshoot of the Puritan society. Hawthorne here reveals how a healthy mind in Roger Chillingworth and a pure soul in

Dimmesdale degenerate into revengeful are in one and psycho-spiritual angst in second.

The second scaffold scene where Hester and Pearl are joined by Dimmesdale on the scaffold in the mid of the night symbolically expresses their psycho- spiritual harmony buried by the social fear and personal humiliation. Hawthorne, first calls this scene as a mockery of the earlier scaffold scene, and calls Dimmesdale as remorseful hypocrite and Roger Chillingworth a feind. The burning of red letter A in the sky along with its blazing sensation felt by Dimmesdale on his chest are the symbolic externalization of his inner anguish besides lending an aura of romance to the novel.

Hester Prynne, with her repeated acts of kindness and courtesy shown to the people of Boston, succeeds in transforming the meaning of the scarlet letter A from adultery to an angel where Hawthorne, too,

emphasizes the social implications and human significance of the title of the novel in relation to its actions. In the forest, where perhaps the adultery was committed, we find Hester Prynne again romantically vibrant suggesting Dimmesdale to elope from the society of Boston.

However, Dimmesdale on his way back to town, gives expressions to his untamed feelings and finally decides to make a public confession of his guilt. So, the third and the last scaffold scene is a replica of the first scaffold scene, except the main actor on the stage who is not Hester, but Dimmesdale himself. So the whole of the novel appears to be a shockingly and startling expression of the delay on the part of Arthur Dimmesdale to unite with Hester publically, emotionally, physically and mentally.

Without any shadow of doubt, now there is no fear or force which can obstruct or avert

Dimmesdale's death in the arms of Hester Prynne. The social significance of the child Pearl lies in her being a social stigma and disgrace for her mother as well as in her being a psycho-spiritual inspiration for her real father who, in the beginning of the novel, persuades the people to let the child remain with the mother, but in the end persuades himself to own the child as her father. The total price paid by both Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne at the altar of Puritan society to declare their bond as legitimately human and humanly justifiable.

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IN this way, after analyzing the different characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, we can safely and rightly aver that the novel has originated from the doctrine of *Felix culpa* i.e. the 'Fortune Fall'. According to this, sin is the source of wisdom and spiritual enlightenment as both Hester and

Dimmesdale not only pay for their sin through it but also they achieve wisdom, self-knowledge and spiritual greatness, which compensate them for their suffering, and that is why, *The Scarlet Letter* may also be read as the story of redemption and purgation too.

In this way, Hawthorne makes a powerful psycho-analytical study of the heart in Hester, the mind in Roger Chillingworth, and the soul in Dimmesdale when confronted with the rigid and repressive Puritan society which constitutes the central thematic thrust of the novel besides lending a psychological and spiritual density to the compact structure of the book.

So, *The Scarlet Letter* is not merely the nominal title of the book rather it is the central thrust and is all inclusive force giving a direction and meaning to the socio-cultural edifice of Puritan society where

Hawthorne maintains a studiedly ambivalent attitude towards the main stream of stream of sin, redemption and salvation translated in terms of psycho-spiritual and social interplay and interaction among the major characters in relation to one another when pitted against the rigid and repressive Puritan society which makes the present novel a powerful piece of social documentation As B. Rajan and A.G. George say “ *The Scarlet Letter* assumes a greater importance than has been assigned to it in the history of American letters”³

REFERENCES

- 1 Herbert Gorman, *Hawthorne: A Study of Solitude*,(New York: Prentice Hall, 1927),p.85
- 2 John Gerber, *Twentieth Century Interpretation of The Scarlet Letter*(New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968)p. 23
- 3 Rajan B. and A.G. George, *The Scarlet Letter*(Bombay: Asia Publishing House,1963)p.98