



PROJECTION OF 'SIN' AND 'GUILT' AS COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCES IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper neatly analyses the artistic skill of Nathaniel Hawthorne in projecting 'sin' and 'guilt' as common human experiences in life and how it gets beautifully reflected in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. It attempts to show how a sense of guilt is awakened either by the violation of a religious edict or some moral law and 'sin' is pictured as an offence against the will of God, an act which undermines the entire humanity at all levels possible, bringing home the point that the will of man is the cause of sin.

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INTRODUCTION

Being a descendant of the Puritans and an avid student of New England history, Nathaniel Hawthorne, born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, in an age that spoke of an inevitable progress is a fastidious observer of life. Getting fascinated by the problem of sin and salvation and by the question of right and wrong that had preoccupied his ancestors, Hawthorne wanted to use fiction as the medium for projecting them. His master works are romances by which he meant an imaginative fictional projection of moral life rather than detailed naturalism. His *The Scarlet Letter* takes the ancestral New England confrontation of witch and judge delineating it as a nineteenth century conflict of ideas and ways of living which include female emancipation, the nature of sexuality in marriage and adultery, the personal character of religious or philosophical vocation, and the ontology of psychological independence. In his other novels, he begins with the conflict between social inheritance and the needs of the present. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, two young people seek to be released from

an archaic New England family whose tradition of public Probity has become warped into criminal fraud and enfeebled amoral delicacy. *The Blithe dale Romance* (1852) is a critique of the Brook Farm experiment and superb analysis of the urge to utopia, the corrupting effects of unexamined desires for leadership, and the undetermined and tragic effects of feminist emancipations. For his last completed novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), he places his action in Italy: the Italian Count Donatello, the mysteriously European Miriam, and an American couple from a triangulation of his familiar themes. It is a romance of crime and punishment, a myth of the fortunate and necessary fall from innocence to maturity and the relative purity of New World youth in wicked old Europe. His career is at the centre of the American tradition of appreciation concerning the nature of permanent evil of society dedicated to and capable of infinite progress. Hawthorne was deeply preoccupied with the modern themes of alienation, isolation, guilt consciousness and modern spiritual problems. Not sin, but its consequence in human lives is Hawthorne's major theme. Considered as a classic interpreter of the spiritual history of New England, he is said to have written master pieces of romantic fiction with an emphasis on moral significance in *The Scarlet Letter* and his short fiction like *The House of the Seven Gables* and many of his short stories. He specialized in psychological topics, frequently dealing with the

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morbid states of mind. It is interesting to note that when Freud was frantically absorbed in his search of the psychological theories of dream and sex in his laboratory, Hawthorne was almost simultaneously busy voyaging in the uncharted territories of human mind in his library. Hawthorne in short was a theist, who thought of himself as a Christian, but he was skeptical of all claims, whether puritan or Roman Catholic, to know the details of the Divine will. Brought up a Unitarian, he associated himself with no church at all, yet preferred Bunyan to the religious liberals of his day and impressed family and friends as a religious man:

“Theologians distinguish two kinds of sin, ‘Original’ and ‘actual’ ‘original sin’, ‘that sin in which, according to the psalmist, our mothers conceived us, that propensity to sin which we inherited from our generations of forefathers, whose sins are visited upon us, follows as a consequence of the Fall of Adam, the archetypal man. Consciously and voluntarily including this hereditary propensity, we fall into actual sin” (Warren 16)

The seventeenth century Massachusetts was a puritan theocracy and transgressions against the law of God were considered crimes against the state. The Puritans felt strongly about their God and they detested sin and sinners. They saw life as a drama of salvation. God determined who should be saved, but even those God selected, could fall into Satan’s snares. Man’s task was hard because as a child of Adam, he was prone to sin. The struggle against the devil could end in salvation or eternal damnation. Hawthorne had thoroughly observed them, who were, indeed, people of a strange but vivid conscience. Being brought up in a puritan family, Hawthorne was prone to seclusion, which provided him with ample opportunity to ponder over the moral aspect of the Puritan faith, especially, in its approach to sin. The Puritan Age and its sure morality was an obsession in his life. His success lay on the ideas of Puritanism spiritual failures, moral failures were for him as for the Puritans, the great themes. In looking upon God as someone who keeps His hand in even the most minute affairs of His creatures, Hawthorne resembled the theologians of Puritanism. His belief in providence is that God’s ways are unintelligible to man and God’s ways are nevertheless good and wise. Hawthorne was not a Calvinist he was not even a church goer but the puritan in him was still his. The good man, according to the perfectionist doctrine, followed a definite mythic development. In order to get converted, he descended into the depths of his heart as the puritans had taught that he must. Like both puritans had taught that he must. Like both Puritan and perfectionist, Hawthorne believed that it was necessary for man to begin by making a journey into his foul heart. Hawthorne recognized the dark, forbidden mystery of the soul below, which had to be experienced and transcended in love, and the active, growing world of human relationships in which salvation would be achieved. In fact while New England Puritanism gave to Hawthorne an intense awareness of the objective existence of an inexorable moral law in this universe, the romantic idealism of the Transcendentalist movement enabled him to be sympathetic to the passionate yearnings of the individual and to accord a sanctity to his privacy. Truly speaking, a sense of guilt is awakened either by the violation of a religious edict or some moral law. ‘Sin’ is an offense against the will of God, an act which undermines our humanity. The punishment for sin may be legal as well as social. When it is social, then man may feel severed from the community. By this estrangement and

isolation, the sinner is likely to be filled with remorse and a sense of guilt. As a result, he suffers from self accusation and self-torment. This causes havoc on the psyche of the sinner and hence leads to drastic distortions of personality. The suffering caused by a sense of guilt may also lead to purification and maturity or salvation. Thus, sin and suffering become an important issue for those writers like Hawthorne who want to use their art as an instrument for criticism of life one important point of has to keep in mind in the case of Hawthorne that his more interested in the psychological of sin that in its theological or doctrinal aspect. Sin in Hawthorne’s writings takes different forms all of which serve to cut the individual to a greater or lesser degree away from the human race. Hawthorne takes sin seriously and explores the possibilities of liberation from its consequences. His intention in *The Scarlet Letter* was focused on guilt and suffering as a consequence of the sins committed by themselves. On the other hand, the novelist examines guilt and suffering as a consequence of the sins committed by the forefathers in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Hawthorne, by nature an allegorist, and a man with a strong moral instinct, finds in the early history of Puritanism the perfect material for a masterpiece. The idea of the story of *The Scarlet Letter* was entered by Hawthorne in his note book in 1844 as; “The life of woman, by the old colony law, was condemned always to wear the letter ‘A’, sewed on her garment in token of her having committed adultery” (Doren 130). *The Scarlet Letter* is concerned less with puritanism as a force in history than with the effect of the puritan society upon its four major characters. The main theme is not sin of illicit love but the consequent sins of hypocrisy and revenge, and their effect on the soul as the story moves from public punishment to personal punishment. In being faithful to what he calls the truth of the human heart, Hawthorne has to see that the most interesting battle is not between the heart and the intellect but within the heart itself. He is primarily interested, not in adventure or action but in moral and psychological questions, that is, in sin and its consequences, in the effect of the awareness and the concealment of guilt and in the pride of intellect leading to estrangement and isolation.

The main characters in *The Scarlet Letter* are Roger Chillingworth, the villain who takes revenge but is finally humanized. His wife, Hester Prynne, whom he has sacrificed to his learning, is the woman who commits adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale, the minister, and she is ostracized by the society, Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester’s lover and Roger Chillingworth’s victim is tortured by keeping the crime a secret and finally confesses it before his death and pearl is the living emblem of adultery. Hester is Hawthorne’s fair Puritan and a female example of acknowledged sin in Puritan New England. Dimmesdale is the male exemplar of hidden sin and Chillingworth assumes for himself the role of the black puritan due to his revenge attitude. The guilt is to some extent to be recognized in Hester, hidden in Dimmesdale and compounded in Roger Chillingworth. In puritan New England, Hester’s sin is a crime against God and the state. The magistrates who order her to wear the “A” believe that they are protecting the very foundations of their society and transgressions against the law of God have to be punished for sinners have to be made examples, to keep members of the community in the path of righteousness. Hester’s sin in that of excessive passion and a natural transgression, for the red letter which she wears on her bosom represents not only her adultery but also as the first letter of the alphabet, it stands for the original sin of Adam, which

the puritans believe all men to have part taken. From a timid erring wife who shrinks before her husband, she becomes a dreamer of a new moral order, a free spirit almost disdainful of the feverish obsessions of Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. She is stronger than either of them, but she is a complex figure and Hawthorne sees that her natural vigor also leads her into further that her trouble. She compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride, for she embroiders *The Scarlet Letter* as an elaborate expression of ambiguous defiance and guilt, and she dresses her daughter in equally flamboyant colours. Hester's passion, then, has only been damned for she does not seem to be penitent. It is also seen that she silently permits the revenge of Chillingworth and perceives Dimmesdale's torture. Hester Prynne, though more obviously isolated from society than either Dimmesdale or Chillingworth has a closer emotional relationship to humanity than either of them can establish, and is, therefore, less seriously damaged. Hester chooses to bear in silence the public ignominy of her shame, supporting herself and Pearl by her own efforts and wins at last by her good works, the respect of the town's people she has defied. On the contrary, Arthur Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are both guilty of self-deception; Dimmesdale tries to believe that he will do more harm than good to the community if he confesses his complicity, and Chillingworth chooses for himself the conventional role of the wronged husband who must be revenged. Love and Concern for Pearl saves Hester from wandering too far in the intellectual and moral wilderness, to which her own pride and her isolation from society tempts her. And the love which she feels for Dimmesdale and Pearl enables her not only to endure, but eventually to mature into a stronger and more productive member of society. Moreover, it is only after Dimmesdale's death that she recognizes the enormity of her sin and leads a life of repentance and explanation. Only then, does she return to New England without a selfish motive. She leaves the community but returns for penance after her daughter was grown up. After her return to the place of her ignominy to take of the letter humble at her own free will, her acts of charity grow from love rather than from concern for her own salvation:

“And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her a mighty trouble” (TSL 275)

In short, despite her inescapable gloom, she comes to possess those qualities which a human being should have. Thus, her sin is expiated and the reward is awaited. Hester is like a puritan Eve, a fore shadow of a new age for women when knowledge should bring woman a deeper and richer character. Hester's co-sinner Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is twisted by his inner conflict and tormented by the relentless Roger Chillingworth, a man who plays God. Dimmesdale's sin gets complicated with his concealment of it. His sin separates him from the magnetic chain of humanity and makes him a prisoner of his own haunted and morbid imagination. To Arthur Dimmesdale whose sin is far greater than Hester's sin, there is an agonizing reproach constantly reminding him of his guilt. He is a minister of God, a leader of the community, looked up to by his congregation, respected by his fellow ministers and by the magistrates. To many, his voice is the voice of an angel reminding them of their duty, and his saintly life is an example to all. For Arthur Dimmesdale to confess his guilt would be to demolish himself. Thus, his career is a torture as well as a

penance to him. He sears his soul by publicly confessing his guilt to the whole village. Only through confession does he atone for his even worse sin, the sin of passion. which, reprehensible though it is, not the worst of offences. They have not, as Hawthorne notes, “violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of the human heart” (*The Scarlet Letter* 205). Redemption is possible for them but is not so for Chillingworth, whose sin is vengeful pride. By which sin the angels fell. It is Chillingworth's hidden persecution of Dimmesdale and his relentless pursuit with a single aim that twists his nature and warps his soul, which has wrought evil in him. It is read how,

“Roger Chillingworth – the man of skill, the kind and friendly physician – strove to go deep into his patient bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his recollections and probing everything with a cautious touch, like a treasure – seeker is a dark cavern” (TSL 127)

The evil effects of revenge, which result in making a devil out of the cruel and vengeful man, foretell Chillingworth. The vengeance of Chillingworth against Dimmesdale is diabolical because it is based on the witness of his secret life. This is conceived as the most cruel punishment since it is a humiliation of the soul. Roger Chillingworth continues his secret torture and makes the pursuit of revenge the object of life, “a formed old figure, with a face that haunted men's memories longer than they liked” (*The Scarlet Letter* 183). His very physical appearance is transformed to sin and he becomes an embodiment of evil... in assuming the role of God, seeking into men's heart without God's great compassion for the weakness of man king, chillingworth turns himself into a tool of Satan. He becomes striking evidence to man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil. When Arthur Dimmesdale dies, Chillingworth no longer has a purpose in life. He has lost his quarry and within a year, he too is dead. The fact that Chillingworth's sin is the passion for revenge is significant only to the extent that is perhaps that one passion which most completely isolates man from normal human sympathies and makes him lose his humanity. Chillingworth, who has renounced his name in pursuit of revenge, has no life left:

“Hawthorne, fascinated by the problem of guilt and forgiveness, had once asked in his note books what might constitute the unpardonable sin, and his answer had come in language that was appropriate to Christian and romantic terminology: the violation of another soul, another heart, simple for the purpose of finding out how it would react” (Levin 22)

From the beginning, he voluntarily isolates himself. Having married a passionate woman much younger than himself, he has sent her alone to the New World; and when he discovers her disgrace, he denies his very identity presumable in order to avoid being known for a cuckold, but also to seek revenge. He thus abandons almost all his human claims on society. He is motivated solely by cruelty and revenge. His very existence depends of Dimmesdale: curiosity and revenge constitute the obsession that consumes his life. He is guilty of the unpardonable sin for which he pays the terrible price of complete physical and spiritual. Degradation for him, there is no redemption. In the public of evil, Chillingworth loses his humanity. Little Pearl is the emblem of the two guilty lovers. To her mother and to all puritan characters, she is a living emblem of the mother's sin. She serves as the agent of fate. The development and wickedness which are hers is the

heritage of a natural child that makes her the announcer of destiny and the voice of accusing conscience. Being the product of sin, she has uncommon understanding of guilt and its consequence. Her redemption occurs at Dimmesdale's moment of confession, expiation and fulfillment. The suffering of the parents is sufficient finally to set their child free from the course. Her kiss on Dimmesdale's lips breaks the evil spell, and he is redeemed. Thus, Pearl represents God's mercy and functions as a means of grace. Hawthorne's imagination turns the red letter into more than an obsolete colonial punishment. It becomes a symbol of the aspect of Puritanism that most repels, yet most fascinates him. In describing the reactions of characters to *The Scarlet Letter* and its wearer, Hawthorne describes a whole society. Thus, he fascinates us by his clinic in which three superior minds exhibit the deep strains of guilt. A man must act according to the voice of his conscience, for "Conscience is, as the theologians express it, 'the herald or ambassador of God to each individual, making known to him and applying the eternal law of God to the conduct of life'" (Fick 75). The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he becomes sick of it. To conclude, it may be stated that Hawthorne could conceive evil in the world, but not an evil world, for the will of man is the cause of sin. And that mere consent of the will even though not realized in any physical act is in itself and of itself a sin. The sense of sin is awakened either by the violation of religious law or moral laws. And a religious minded person believes that only Divine Grace can save the guilty man from the hellish torment. A proud person is, according to Hawthorne, the ugliest of sinners and pardon cannot be held out to him, for pride is the root cause of sin.

The moral of *The Scarlet Letter* can be seen in Pearl's rebuke of Dimmesdale as they meet in the silence of the woods, "though was not bold! Though man not true! (TSL 162). The moral is also that adultery is sinful and that those who sinned must be fused with penitence. Dimmesdale's pride, his egotism, his fear of social ostracism rendered his suffering fruitless because he concealed his sin and shrank from joining Hester in her disgrace. Hester grew spiritually while the Minister declined in spirituality. Thus, the basic of *The Scarlet Letter* seems to be man's moral strength directed towards transcending human limitations. It is the recovery of affections or the assertion of the basic principle of being.

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