






Dual Identity and Self-assertion: A Study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*
INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com 
Indexed by	Scopus  Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)  DOAJ 
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2020: 0.2 SJR 2020: 0.162 SNIP 2020: 0.193 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 14, Number 3, 2022
Editor	Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay
Affiliation	Universidad de Guanajuato
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n3.php 

About the Article

Title	Dual Identity and Self-assertion: A Study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	
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ORCID IDs	0000-0003-4747-3852	
Funding	No funding received. Published for free.	
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3.20	Pages: 1-13
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v14n320 	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n3/v14n320.pdf 	
Article History	First Published: 24 October 2022	
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact 	
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services 	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 	

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Dual Identity and Self-assertion: A Study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

The Scarlet Letter serves as both a critique of society and a window into Hawthorne's thoughts. In opposition to a patriarchal depiction, he wants to allow women's individuality some room. He does not advocate setting rules and imposing them on the individual to be governed by them. Thus, he created the character of Hester Prynne who appears as commenting upon the situation of women in the 19th century of New England society. She struggles to win a place in society and she succeeds in winning it in her revolt against the very order that once humiliates and condemns her and honours and accepts her later. The article traces Hester's individual rebellion in an alien land against an artificially created corrupt religious and moral order which exploits her body and denies her humanity at first and ultimately bows down to her consistent individual morality and actions. In doing so, the article tries to show certain feminist approaches adopted by the author long before feminism would come to the mainstream of literary thoughts.

Keywords: 19th-century New England society, Feminism, puritan, badge of shame

Puritanism in New England

Originally, the Puritans came from Britain and landed in New England, a colony of the British Empire in America in the 17th century. In Britain, the Puritans were suffering from religious oppression and after their settlement in New England, they wanted to create their religious structure and order. That is to say, they came to establish a society organized according to what they believed to be God's commands. The Puritan elite made a lot of laws to enforce on the public but not on themselves. Moreover, in making such laws, this elite had been keen on manipulating them according to their standard of goodness and favouring themselves more than the rest of the society. Actually, the members of this elite had been more concerned with their social status than their relationship with God. They were self-satisfied people who lived in ivory towers where no one could challenge them. As Orestes Brownson puts it "Proud of their supposed virtue, free from all self-reproach, they pass through life without a cloud to mar their serenity, and die as gently and as sweetly as the infant falling asleep in their mother's arms". (Brownson 1850. 253)

As legislators and law enforcers, they came to stand for authority and power and would consider individuals to be members of the public. They would despise anything private because they would see it as an attempt to break the law. Because they saw covert actions as being outside the existing framework of institutions, laws, and regulations, they did not allow them.

In the Puritan society, the only requirements for a functioning community were outward submission and total compliance to the set laws. Only deeds, not thoughts, would be punished under the Puritan concept of justice. It was more interested in the community's overall fate than the fate of the individual members. The Puritans targeted those people who were breaking the rules because they wanted to purge the community as a whole. A guilty person was seen as a sinner, not as a human being. In this regard, Nina Baym points out:

The Puritans have no tolerance for secrets; they take people as purely public beings, they fear anything private. Their aim is to turn anything private into something public. For them, people are entirely and only subjects. They consider a sinful deed as equal to a broken law. (1986. 56)

The Puritans believed that by treating sinners harshly, no one would ever consider disobeying the law again. They did it with the assumption that what they were doing was in the interests of the general public. "People become the product of a society that manipulates everything to bind them and hide the truth, little by little, people lose the power to decide for themselves". (Ghasemi 2009.4) People's freedom to think, feel, choose, and do things was therefore gone. Here, the Puritan culture was powerful enough to mould the mind of the populace by removing any room for individuals to objectively distinguish between good and evil. In general, the system was doomed to fail since it deprived each person of the ability to select or make their own decisions.

In New England, Boston religion was used as a cover and a source of power. It is through religion that the authorities set the laws that controlled the public. In doing so, many deviations were added to this religion. Here, religion became a guise for whatever its men wanted to inflict in their endeavour to shape the lives of the public. Such men ceased to be honest to themselves, and they also ceased to be honest to each other about the reality of their situation as makers and enforcers of law. "In their unwillingness to "Be true" to the truth of their common nature lay the source of their inadequateness as "spectators". They saw the world in the simplistic terms on which the "repression of self-knowledge depends". (Railton 1993.487)

Hawthorne uses the example of a guy at the top of the order to emphasise how he feels about the Puritan laws. The Puritan elite as a whole is represented by this individual. Hawthorne demonstrates how this guy, who likes fame and a good reputation, is overly preoccupied with his place in society. His goal in retaining a high status in his community is more important to him than his relationship with God, and the question of divinity is of the least importance to him. Hawthorne sees that what they set as God's words is in fact "the reflection of their own social consensus. Their law is an expression of the social contract without any divine authorization". (Baym 1986 .91) Such people are accountable only for themselves. They think that life is a blessing in disguise and they project their sense of guilt onto others.

In Hawthorne's world of New England, in order to keep people from truth, religion is used as a cover that protects them from losing high statures. Accordingly, strict rules are imposed and tough laws are enforced on the public. Therefore, a difficulty arises in distinguishing between the outward things and their realities.

In the Puritan world, in order to keep people away from truth, respectability and religion are put forward as guises that protect people from losing a higher reality.

Accordingly, strict codes are imposed on people the outcome of which is the difficulty in distinguishing between what is right and what is wrong. (Ghasemi 2009.9)

***The Scarlet Letter* as a puritanical narrative**

The Scarlet Letter is a puritanical narrative that tells the story of a woman who has to undergo a traumatic encounter with a society that is apparently committed to religion and its values but, in reality, it is corrupt and deceptive. It is a society that manipulates religion and uses it as a guise for the authorities. Here, the very people who set the rules that govern this society are the same people who transgress and break these rules on their own terms. In this novel, a woman, as one of the members, suffers the restrictions and confinements of the community rules and is exposed to public shame due to transgressing one of God's Commands in New England. On the other hand, a man who is on top of society lives in disguise for the greatest part of the novel without committing himself to the same rules that he and his congregation have previously set. The woman has assimilated the existing culture. She has also internalized the rules of this society. In claiming a new identity, she finds a means to defy the existing order and to force the community to accept her not as evil but as a new being that would awaken the society to a sense of what it has come to. Henry James remarks

"*The Scarlet Letter* belongs to the soil, to the air, it came out of the very heart of New England.... Puritanism is there, not only objectively as Hawthorne tried to place it but subjectively as well in the very quality of his own vision." (qtd in Baym 1986 p. xxiv)

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and the feminist approach:

Hawthorne is one of the 19th-century male authors who left some space for feminist analysis in his novels. The question of women is crucial in his works and it seems that Hawthorne was so preoccupied with female psychology that he anticipated feminism in his time. Louise DeSalvo remarks that "Hawthorne portrayed with superb accuracy the condition of women in the 19th century and the psychological process of men who could not tolerate the notion of female equality". (DeSalvo1987.121) Hawthorne was influenced by his friend Margret Fuller and her feminist writings regarding the situation of women in the American society in general. As Ashley L. Cohen puts it "Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses the trials of his female protagonist as an entry point into mid-nineteenth century American's ongoing discourse about the women question. (Cohen 2006.4) Although Hawthorne's female characters do not always signify the same thing in his novels, they usually function in the same way. "They represent desirable and valuable qualities lacking in the male protagonists". (Baym 1987. 60) In many of Hawthorne's novels, men are obsessed with and controlled by women. Hawthorne makes his female characters his mouthpiece to convey some aspects of the roles of women in a given society.

The Scarlet Letter can be seen as a comment on society, as a reflection of Hawthorne's view of the time and society he lived in. In his portrayal of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne creates a character capable of manifesting feminist ideas. In the story of Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale, Hester appears as a strong and independent woman who "bitterly resents the oppression she has to suffer and sees it as bearing on the whole race of womanhood". (Herbert 1875 528) Hawthorne

introduces Hester as a self-dependent individual who sees freedom as something that exists beyond the social order. Michael T. Gilmore points out,

“Hester creates an alternative institution to patriarchal structure.... She endures as an independent being who separates herself from the prevailing social order. She finds fulfillment in the company of other females.” (Gilmore 2004. 60)

Hawthorne makes Hester a real woman in a variety of ways. As the story tells, she appears very keen on assembling women around her. She wants to urge other women in her community to stand in the face of masculine opposition. Yean Yells points out “*The Scarlet Letter* seriously considers the new feminist definition of womanhood and, rejecting them, replicates traditional imagery and endorses patriarchal notions”. (Baym 2004.546) Hester's concept of womanhood lies in her formidable strength to challenge the assumption of some masculine aspects in her conduct that sometimes she can be seen as a manly woman. Hester Prynne, apparently, conforms to the rules of the order while pursuing a path of her own in an attempt to change the way this society is looking at her. She manipulates the situation in which she is cast in a way that would make changes in the way society looks at her.

“There is something aboriginal about Hester's femininity which separates her from the Puritan Women around her. She is an alien with a touch of the exotic”. (Herzog 1983.7)

Hester Prynne: A sinner and an agent of her own redemption

In the world of Puritan New England, having an illicit relationship was a great transgression of the prevailing codes. Hester became a sinner because of having an illicit relationship with Dimmesdale. Again, this relationship resulted in pregnancy. The accomplice, on the other hand, remains unknown because Hester refuses to disclose his name out of her deep and sincere love for him. As a sinner, Hester had to live away from the rest of the community. She was taken “out of the ordinary relations with humanity and inclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Hawthorne 54).

At the start of her trial, the women of Hester's community show their contempt toward her. They reject her as a sister because they have already internalized the values of this community. “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die.” (Hawthorne p.39) In the opening scene, Hester appears while carrying the baby on her arm to stand on the most public site in the town. She faces the crowd with a lot of courage. She has to decide whether or not to obey the rules set by the lawmakers who are concerned with the fate of the community as a whole rather than with that of a guilty individual. Outward obedience is all that is required in the world of Puritan New England. That is to say Hester's behavior is confined and restricted but her thoughts remain free. “She has a puritanical conscience after all and cannot avoid the compelling hold of the community and the repressive urge of her natural instincts.” (Ghasemi 2009.10)

In her trial, Hester appears very strong and audacious. The very man who shares her sin comes to judge her. Here, Dimmesdale represents the Puritan authorities who make and enforce laws in a way that does not oppose their own interests or their desires. Of course, they are human beings who have a lot of desires to satisfy but the rules they set are not to restrict their own desires.

“Dimmesdale is so ineffectual an antinomian as not to be able to overcome the conscientious suspicion that his serious sin proves him a hypocrite. Neither his sexuality nor his doctrine can justify the life he has been leading.” (Colacurcio 1985.328)

Dimmesdale is a lawmaker as well as a lawbreaker. He should stand beside her on the pillory if he really were what he seemed to be to the public. He should enforce the law on himself before imposing it on others. He represents a deceptive and corrupt order whose reality is in opposition to its appearance.

In Hawthorne’s New England, every aspect of life is covered by laws haunting people’s imagination, putting on pious forces carving some sort of guilt at home. They remove the unreal cover to enjoy life on their own terms. In appearance, the Puritan culture stresses human nature common to all its members while in reality, each individual is a unique self with personal desires to be fulfilled. (Ghasemi 2009.3)

Hester’s concealment of her accomplice’s identity shows how she stands up courageously at the peak of her moment of humiliation. Such concealment is, of course, the result of selfless and sincere love. Dimmesdale keeps his secret and goes to preach to her. He urges her to reveal the identity of her partner and, meanwhile, he indirectly tells her that if she does not disclose this secret, he certainly will not as he does not have the courage to face the public.

“Dimmesdale is like the captive maiden and Hester the knight who will sally out to do battle for him. She wants to rescue Dimmesdale from his own despair from himself as well as from Chillingworth.” (Baym 2004.23)

Hester becomes a public figure on account of her sin and punishment. Though the community reacts with contempt toward her, she remains strong in the face of whatever this community wants to impose on her. The shameful stigma “A” comes first to signify something superficial to her. It can change neither her mind nor her strength in overcoming the situation in which she finds herself. In the course of the novel, the letter comes to signify something different from the purpose set for it in the beginning. “She has also declared her independence and honored her superiors”. (Bercovith 1990.585) Hester follows her heart in an act that she never denounces for it is a natural act of love. “Hester is judged as a guilty harlot even though she is actually a loyal loving woman”. (Cambell 1997.721) Hester stays proud but not repentant. She believes that as a human being, she needs to love and be loved. She thinks that she must be excused for having such love affairs with Dimmesdale. She goes to validate her own being on her own terms. She suffers neither from remorse nor from the consciousness that she has offended God. Her real suffering lies in a society that is confining her. She is condemned to wear the letter “A” which makes of her a shameful person as a result of committed adultery. Hester accepts, without complaint, isolation, scorn and indifference of the world in her endeavor to come to terms with what she has come to. She alienates herself from her community in an attempt to free herself from the different forms of restraints.

For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institution and whatever it presents or legislators had established, criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe. (Hawthorne 1990.199)

The Letter "A": Hester's badge of shame as a symbol of defiance

The letter "A" comes to have a relation to Hester's inner self. In the course of the novel, she comes to see this letter as a badge of honour rather than one of shame. Hester has a real battle to maintain self-respect. She wants to remain in the world and she has no other alternative but to accept her punishment.

Within the boundaries of the possible, Hester will strive to make her character felt, and since the purpose of the mark is to efface her character to make her subservient to the Puritan system, a struggle between Hester and the system is established." (Baym 2004.12)

She decides to accept the community's punishment with free will. She knows the boundaries of her community and struggles to maintain her character. Thus, Hester's sin isolates her from the rest of the community and takes her "out of the ordinary relations with humanity and inclosing her in a sphere by herself". (Hawthorne 1990.54) Here, a conflict between Hester and her community is established.

Again, the community wants to define the conditions of Hester's life, but she goes on to lead a life of her own. She accepts the letter "A" with the intention of struggling to change its meaning and what it stands for. She remains firm in opposition to the society's view of her. As Robert K. Martin remarks "Hester plays her own part refusing to speak the lines others have written for her. Her proud assertion of her "A" is an acknowledgement of the fact that even the actors or actress on the stage is always performing his or her own text". (Martine 2004.522) In her attempt to change what the letter signifies, Hester changes from an object of the law to an agent of the law. First, she considers herself a victim of her community for being forced to wear the letter. Thus, she develops a revolutionary commitment to the consequences of her sin. She is determined to change the society rather than change herself. As Azyze points out:

The scarlet letter becomes a token of her good deeds. Hester is able to make the society which she once offended show "a more benign countenance than she cared to be favored with, or, perchance, than she deserved. She is portrayed as a radical thinker engaged in a revolutionary struggle against the established order. (Azyze 2007: 9)

In her trial, Hester shows a lot of resentment toward the Puritan rule and what it represents. She rejects the beadle which represents the Puritan code of laws so as to assert her own free will. She sees freedom as something that does not exist in the social order. Michael T. Gilmore remarks "For Hawthorne, the individual is defined not as a member of some larger unit but primarily in opposition to community; he / she is self-made and owes allegiance to his own values and interests". (Gilmore 2004. 206). She believes that the world's law is no law for her mind. She sees the letter "A" as the marker of her new identity. In the passage of time, the letter comes to signify

"Hester's admirable qualities rather than her past behavior. The letter itself cannot change but its meaning can. The way the letter is read tracks her changing relations with the Puritan community". (Korobkin 2004.444)

Hester's condemnation by her society gives her strength and experience. She finds in penitence a way of coexisting with her situation as a sinner in a world that cares only for appearance. To

Hester's mind, there is some higher level of reality and truth that the Puritans do not know. She believes that what she has done is not evil. She thinks that her love affair with Dimmesdale is a human act that she should not regret or despise. Again, the aspect of Hester's character is strengthened by social isolation that caused her to "wander without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest". (199) Hester is free to go back to England yet, she decides to stay at the place of her shame to be close to her lover. She is possessed by:

A feeling of irresistible and inevitable that it had the force of doom....Her sin and her ignominy were the roots which stuck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilation than the first, had converted the forest land into Hester Prynne's wild and dreary but life-long Home. (187)

Dimmesdale's moral and personal dilemma

In the story of *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale stands for the Puritan elite. As a man of religion, he is supposed to be more concerned with his relation to God than with his relation to the world. He is considered by his community as a great preacher but, as a sinner, his relation to God is the least of his worries:

The minister had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws, although in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the most sacred of them. But this had been a sin of passion not of principle, nor even purpose. (290)

As a representative of the Puritan rule, Dimmesdale depends mainly on the good opinion of society more than on religious piety. He is quite sure that what he has done with Hester is evil but it is not acceptable to show this because it is against what he preaches. Confessing his sin means losing what he enjoys as a person on top of society. Gradually, he becomes more and more unreal to himself. He goes on to philosophize his inability and unwillingness to confess his deed publicly on his own terms. He thinks of himself as a good preacher whose service is greatly needed by his community and this is why he should keep this secret. Here, Nina Baym points out that "The very social dependency that makes him condemn himself also keeps him from confessing. He is doubly split between his outer and inner selves" (1986 p.69)

Of course, Dimmesdale's sin is of an overwhelming impact on his soul and mind. He suffers from the consciousness of not really being what he seems to be to the world. Also, he suffers from his inability to avow his being in society. An inner conflict arises between what he really is and what he seems to be to the world. It is a conflict between appearance and reality. Orestes Brownson remarks "Dimmesdale suffers not from remorse nor from the consciousness that he has offended God, but from the feeling that he has failed to maintain the integrity of his character". (1850 p.252)

Like Hester, Dimmesdale's secret sin has become a source of new existence or being for him. Inwardly, it has become a new fact in his life. It changes his outlook on the surrounding world. He is still a man of religion in the eyes of the public but he is no longer one in his own eyes. He believes that all humans are subject to fall but their fall differs depending on how they look upon themselves and how they are looked upon by others. Public confession means the end of

Dimmesdale's life. He feels at odds with the society because of his inability to confess publicly. Outwardly, he is an enforcing power of public discipline. He has sinned against a public law and refused to conform to the same discipline that encompasses the same law. Michael J. Colacurcio remarks:

In a number of related senses, Dimmesdale's problem is "hypocrisy". Most simply, he is not what he outwardly appears, he may or may not be "vile". He is not what the Puritan community takes him for.... If his adultery is really "idolatry" as in the common religious equivalence, of course, he is a "hypocrite" in the Puritan sense of all. (1972 p.322)

In the course of the novel, he shows rejection of the Puritan codes and what they represent. He rejects Hester's idea to escape for another place. He insists on revealing his true self by confessing his deed in public. He says "I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment seat." (1932) He decides to discard the cloak that used to confine his thoughts and acts as a human being.

I must stand up in my pulpit, and meet so many eyes turned upward to my face, as if the light of heaven were beaming from it.... And then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolize?.... Agony of heart at the contrast between what I seem and what I am. (191)

Dimmesdale does not welcome Hester's plan for a new life away from the place where they have committed their sin. He realizes how deceptive has been the order he has been representing. Having decided to confess his sin, Dimmesdale goes to the scaffold and, in the process; he rips open his shirt to show that he has his own badge of shame. He believes that he needs to confess his sin to himself before confessing it to the public. He wants to salve his conscience through open confession. He says "I must die here. There is at strength or courage left me to venture into the wide strange difficult world alone." (198)

Hester's alienation from and assimilation into the Puritan society

In her endeavour to maintain her individuality, Hester appears not in line with other women in her community. There is something unusual about her femininity. "Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were in desert places where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods." (199) She appears first as passionate, but in the course of the novel, Hester comes to display "a natural dignity and a force of character". (Hawthorne 1990.53) She could change her situation in her own ways. She is able to turn her shame into a triumph. "A combative energy in Hester's character enables her to turn the scene of her public ignominy into a kind of lured triumph." (Hawthorne 1990.78) The letter "A" which is mainly intended to be a badge of shame comes to signify a beginning of a new existence for Hester. "With her native energy of character, and rare capacity, it (the letter) could not entirely cast her off." (Hawthorne 1990.84)

The community wants to confine Hester's life to the codes of an order that she sees as deceptive. However, she goes to fashion a life of her own without showing rejection of these codes. She is free to return back to her birthplace but she remains in the same place that has been rejecting her. She is very determined to change her situation as well as the community around her. She creates

her own set of values and truths by which she is willing to live. She is no longer confined by what her community believes in. "The world law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect had taken a more active and wider range than for many before." (Hawthorne 1990.164)

Out of her keenness on raising her child peacefully, Hester finds in claiming a new identity a means to survive unharmed with her baby girl in the same community that still considers her evil. Outwardly, she intends to perform good deeds but, inwardly, she grows more alienated and indignant toward the society. The letter she wears shows how much she is committed to the Puritan conventions. However, she struggles to change its meaning. Here, Hester's endeavour to change the meaning of the letter can be seen as a struggle to keep herself. "Hester has become a radical thinker engaged in a revolutionary struggle against an established political religious order". (Reynolds 1985.627)

Hester: a miracle of wholeness and sanity

Having claimed a new identity, Hester tries first to regain the goodwill of the republic. She becomes more interested in her relation to society. She learns the art of embroidery and devotes most of her time to it. In this art, Hester finds an outlet for her imaginative energy.

Her art may be presented as transgressively criminal, but it is also a response to a crime. Indeed, Hester's artistry is to write her crime in a way that disguises it, that makes it no crime at all. Hester does this by embroidering her letter and hence disguising the univocal sense assigned to it by the letter of the law. (Martine 2004.520)

Hester finds in embroidery a new life. She embroiders a new letter "A" in an attempt to change its meaning. She considers embroidery a source of income for her and her daughter. Meanwhile, she submits to the scorn and indifference of the world. Amory Dwight Mayo remarks "Hester turns her face toward humanity, and begins the life-long task of beating up to virtue against the pitiless storm which overthrows so many an offender." (Dwight 1851. 268) Moreover, Hester goes to perform deeds that look like mercy but are in reality quite different. In fact, such deeds are charitable in appearance but of personal purposes in reality. She wants to restore herself to the community in her own way.

Hester begins in outward conformity, playing the game of sanctification. The single rule of which is that true self is the sum of all its outward works; indeed, by the time she has learned the game so well as to have covered her undestroyed inner pride with an external appearance. But all the while she is moving toward the moment when she announces a doctrine of personal freedom which every person sensed would lead directly to passionate license and judged a more serious threat to public order than adultery itself. (Colacurcio 1985.322)

Hester receives scorn and insults even from those she helps. Yet, she never stops helping them. Gradually, Hester comes to be known as our Hester by the people of her community. "She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result". (Hawthorne. 1990.155)

Hester is seen as an agent of change on account of her ability at transforming from the most despised person to a wanted and loved one by the same community. She succeeds in forcing the townspeople to look upon her as a good woman. Nina Baym points out "Hester appears almost a miracle of wholeness and sanity. She has a real battle to maintain herself-respect in a community that scorns her to stay sane in solitude. Though she has been cast out of society, Hester remains very much in the world." (Baym1986.73) Thus, Hester struggles against the order to win a place in society and the fact that she succeeds in winning one indicates that society has changed by her indeed. "Hester is the individual as the source and end of ideas, actions and meaning with whom new outlooks appear and become meaningful." (Harding 1990.79)

Conclusion

By and large, Hester shows conformity to what the order asks her to do. Yet, in reality she is obsessed with her own nature. Apparently, she practices what her community believes in but, in reality, she remains firm in her own concept of herself which is not in line with the Puritan made-rules. Her belief is not defined by reason but by feelings. She is inwardly guided by love and affection. "It is through her love affair that Hester claims a new identity, a real one different from what the public is acquainted with." (Ghasemi 2009.12) She proves that she is strong enough to fashion a life guided and controlled by a set of values and truths of her own. A life in which she sees a different reality and truth than that practised by the Puritans. Hester inflicts her resentment toward the order that judges her by her appearance but not by what she really is. Actually, it is a deceptive order that upholds duality between what appears to be and what really is. It is an order that cares only for appearance. Being a woman of affection, Hester is guided by her feelings. She makes her feelings and passions the only legitimating authorities that dictate her actions. Hence, she is engaged in a tirade against the very order that has condemned her once and welcomed her deeds in other times.

Bestowed with the power of law, Hester is able to change everything and show the reality of appearance. She is able to create a new identity, a real personal identity from the apparent social one. She becomes strong enough to change the implications of the scarlet letter she is doomed to wear. (Ghasemi 2009.12)

Hester is able to change the Puritans more than they could change her. She could successfully change the meaning of the letter "A" as a badge of shame and rejection into one of acceptance and honor.

Hester had had a painful effect on her society's system of meanings which means that she has been an agent of social change. At the end of the story, the community is different from what it was at the beginning and this difference is symbolized by the emergence of a new reading of the letter. (Baym 1982.91)

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

No funding has been received for the publication of this article. It is published free of any charge.

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