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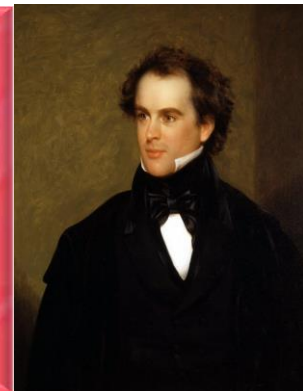
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## The Woman is the Victim

Azmi Azam

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### Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne has viewed the harsh consequences of the Witch Act and has been deeply regretful of the brutality of manhood toward womanhood during the Puritan age.

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The Woman Is the Victim

He has written *The Scarlet Letter* in order to depict the patriarchy dominance and male chauvinist impulses of Puritan society of Europe. The female protagonist is the pivotal victim of anti-feminist activities and her subjective torments are a matter of higher feminist concerns. This article sets out to explore the representation of the female protagonist Hester Prynne from feminist point of views. The story will be explained in an encapsulated form to highlight the anti-feminist issues in the novel. Examples and statements of other critics will also be given to illustrate arguments.

**Key words:** feminism, womanhood, male chauvinism, illegitimacy, guilty, conscience, society, recognition, justice.

## **Analysis**

### **Nathaniel Hawthorne**

Distinguished American novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts to Nathaniel Hathorne and the former Elizabeth Clarke Manning. His ancestors include John Hathorne, the only judge involved in the Salem witch trials who never repented of his actions and this made Nathaniel ashamed of his family. Therefore, he added a "w" to his name "Hawthorne" in order to hide this relation. He studied Bowdoin College in 1821, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1824, and graduated in 1825. Hawthorne published his first work, a novel titled *Fanshawe* (1828). He published several short stories in various periodicals which he collected in 1837 as *Twice-Told Tales*. The next year, he became engaged to Sophia Peabody. He worked at a Custom House and joined Brook Farm, a transcendentalist community, before marriage in 1842. He passed away in May 19, 1864.

### **Hawthorne's Writing – Moral Allegories**

Much of Hawthorne's writing centers on New England marking moral allegories with a Puritan inspiration. His fictions are highlighted as part of the Romantic movement and, more specifically, Dark romanticism. His themes describe the implied evil and sin of humanity, and his works often have moral messages and deep psychological complexity. His published works include novels, short stories, and a biography of his friend Franklin Pierce. Amongst all his novels, *The Scarlet Letter* is considered to be his masterpiece. The novel is a

work of his imaginary dexterity but it is highly influenced by his own observation of the Puritan brutality. He used to keep note-books in which he has written his opinions that served him as a raw material of resources. In this regard, critic Henry James says: ‘The Note-Books, as I have said, deal chiefly with the superficial aspect of English life, and the material objects with which the author was surrounded.’ (1999, p. 123)

### ***The Scarlet Letter***

*The Scarlet Letter*, known as Hawthorne’s magnum opus, is an 1850 romantic fictional work in a historical setting of Puritan England. Set in 17th-century Puritan Boston, Massachusetts (1642–1649), represents the story of Hester Prynne, who conceives a daughter through an adulterous affair with a clergyman (publicly undiscovered and intentionally concealed by Hester) and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity exploring diverse dimensions of legalism, sin, and guilt. The word "Puritan" emerges for the first time in 1540 and more effectively in 1964. The Puritans are Calvinists, legalists, and name-callers. They are very serious, and contradict most things that are sources of entertainment for the general public. They want:

- a skilled, educated preaching ministry, based on *the Bible*
- as few ceremonies in church as Biblically possible (no surplice, no signing of the cross)
- abolition of the traditional role of bishop, and replacement of the episcopate by a Presbyterian system
- one legal government church, controlled by Puritans. (Contrast the Separatists.)
- Strictness to virginity, loyalty, matrimonial bonds and opposes separation from the husband at any cause.



Courtesy: [www.apuritansmind.com](http://www.apuritansmind.com)

The Puritans of that age were strictly religious and orthodox toward human lifestyle and forcefully pressurized the general public to live according to the rules of *The Bible* only. They were highly anti-feminist and considered women as the roots of all ill and failures. They believed that the purity of woman only exists in keeping their virginity unstained before marriage and loyalty flawless after marriage. Prostitution was totally banished and if any woman was found not following the commandments, she was brutally punished and insulted in public. Hawthorne highlights these issues in his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. C. D. Johnson says:

Hawthorne's portrait of the Puritan leaders is consistent with the transformation that Puritanism actually underwent in history. The course of Puritanism can be compared to the stereotypical transformation that occurs so often in the lives of fractious individuals who, rebellious against authority in youth, gradually become staid, strict and authoritarian in old age. (1995, p.37)

### **The Story**

The story starts in June 1642, in the Puritan town of Boston, depicting a crowd ready to witness an official punishment of a young woman, Hester Prynne, who has been found guilty of adultery. She is punished to wear a scarlet "A" ("A" is a symbol of adultery and affair) on her dress as a sign of shame. She is ordered to stand on the scaffold for three hours as to bear public humiliation. As Hester approaches the scaffold, many of the women in the crowd are angered by her beauty and when she refuses to name the father of the illegitimate child, the women abuses her verbally.



Courtesy: en.wikipedia.org

The feminist concern comes to the fact that a society blames the woman for sexual intercourse whereas the male partner is equally punishable. Public humiliation for a woman is worse than death and such a deathlike punishment is given to a lady who is trying to protect the reputation of the male, the actual sinner, by not telling his identity. As Hester looks out over the crowd, she notices a small, misshapen man and recognizes him as her long-lost husband, who has been presumed lost at sea. He angrily shouts that the child's father, the partner in the adulterous act, should also be punished and vows to find the man. He disguises as Roger Chillingworth – to aid him in his plan. The word metaphorically represent the meaning of adultery, later, marking Hester's charitable acts it is highlighted as able, accomplished and angel. It can also hints toward Arthur Dimmesdale, as the actual sinner, and authority, the Puritan stubbornness, too. The reason Dimmesdale's name can be metaphorically highlighted 'A' is that:

The very fact that it is the pious Mr. Dimmesdale who has committed one of the worst of sins, according to the Puritans, underscores their tenet that every human being, whether pious or humanitarian, is depraved and corrupt. He himself struggles with the irony that he is considered to be a man of God, yet hides from them the fact that he is human, which is to say sinful. (Johnson, 1997, p.53)

Reverend John Wilson and the minister of her church, Arthur Dimmesdale, question Hester, but she refuses to name her lover. It makes the readers think that why she is trying to hide and protect the honor of a man who made sexual intercourse with her and then let her suffer shame. It is the dignity of woman that she is the ultimate protector. A man should be the protector of his beloved but in this case, it is the woman who is bearing the intolerable load of insults to protect the honor of a man. After she returns to her prison cell, the jailer brings in Roger Chillingworth, a physician, to calm Hester and her child with his roots and herbs and then demands to know the name of the child's father. When Hester refuses, he insists that she never reveal that he is her husband. If she ever does so, he warns her, he will destroy the child's father. Hester agrees to Chillingworth's terms even though she suspects she will regret it. Hester, the poor helpless woman, not only bears the shame of adultery but also carries the repulsion of her husband. The harsh verbal assaults intensify her subjective pain as well as make the conditions worst for her to face.

Following her release from prison, Hester settles in a cottage at the edge of town and living with her needlework. She lives an unobtrusive, somber life with her daughter, Pearl. She is troubled by her daughter's unusual character. Pearl's attitude turns aggressive with the passage of time and thus the church members suggest Pearl be taken away from Hester. This is another, even much bigger, punishment that anyone could ever give to a mother by taking the child away from her. Hester is living only because of Pearl and Pearl means the world to her. The Puritan legislatures have already punished her unjustly, and now taking away Pearl would be death sentence for her. So, hearing the rumors that she may lose Pearl, she goes to speak to Governor Bellingham and appeals to Reverend Dimmesdale in desperation, and the minister persuades the governor to let Pearl remain in Hester's care.



Courtesy: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

Tormented by guilty conscience, Dimmesdale, the father of Pearl, goes to the square where Hester was punished years earlier. Climbing the scaffold, he sees Hester and Pearl and calls to them to join him. He admits his guilt to them but cannot find the courage to do so publicly. Suddenly Dimmesdale sees a meteor forming what appears to be a gigantic A in the sky; simultaneously, Pearl points toward the shadowy figure of Roger Chillingworth. Hester, shocked by Dimmesdale's deterioration, decides to obtain a release from her vow of silence to her husband. In her discussion of this with Chillingworth, she tells him his obsession with revenge must be stopped in order to save his own soul. Several days later, Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest, where she removes the scarlet letter from her dress and identifies her husband and his desire for revenge. In this conversation, she convinces Dimmesdale to leave Boston in secret on a ship to Europe where they can start life anew. Renewed by this plan, the minister seems to gain new energy. Pearl, however, refuses to acknowledge either of them until Hester replaces her symbol of shame on her dress.

Returning to town, Dimmesdale loses heart in their plan: He has become a changed man and knows he is dying. Meanwhile, Hester is informed by the captain of the ship on which she arranged passage that Roger Chillingworth will also be a passenger.



Courtesy: [www.photographersdirect.com](http://www.photographersdirect.com)

On Election Day, Dimmesdale gives what is declared to be one of his most inspired sermons. But as the procession leaves the church, he sees Hester and Pearl in the crowd watching the parade and he climbs upon the scaffold to confess his sin, dying in Hester's arms. Later, witnesses swear that they saw a stigma in the form of a scarlet "A" upon his chest. Chillingworth, losing his will for revenge, dies shortly thereafter and leaves Pearl a great deal of money. It is hinted that Pearl uses this money to travel to Europe, and possibly gets married. The reader gets a conclusion of Pearl's future but hardly knows what happens to Hester. The hellish condition which she faces must have given her immense pain and suffering and she deserves justice at the end. Readers are informed that several years later, Hester returns to her cottage, resumes wearing the scarlet letter, and offers solace to women in similar positions. When she dies, she is buried near the grave of Dimmesdale, and they share a simple slate tombstone with a scarlet "A". Showing Hester's suffering, Hawthorne highlights the extraordinary strength and courage of womanhood:

Hester Prynne, like Anne Hutchinson, is a woman of strength and independence, uncommon for her time, is depicted by Hawthorne in a number

of ways after her ordeal on the scaffold. First is her decision to remain in Boston to suffer whatever humiliations the community has in store for her. Her strength is seen in her rearing of her child alone, without family or friends, and her move to work out her penance by becoming a sister of charity for the very community that scorns her. (Johnson, 1997, p. 90)

### **Feminist Concern**

The feminist concern is that why she has to bear the letter “A” after death as well. When she was married, she was a young teenage girl who was left alone by her husband for several years. She even didn’t know whether her husband is alive or not. Therefore, it is her right to move one. She fell in love with another man and that man, Dimmesdale, also loved her but socially failed to recognize his love for her. As a result, the woman is blamed to take the burden of shame of giving birth to an illegitimate child. Though the question is, is only the woman guilty? Or is the child guilty? Guilty is the system of the old Puritans that condemns two helpless female characters suffer. The gloomy picture of the Puritan practice in the novel provided immense popularity to Hawthorne:

The weird and ghostly legends of the Puritan history present a singularly congenial field for the exercise of Mr. Hawthorne’s peculiar genius...He never appears so much in his element as when threading out some dim,, shadowy tradition of the twilight age of New England, peering into the faded records of our dark-visaged forefathers for lingering traces of the preternatural, and weaving into his gorgeous web of enchantment the slender filaments which he has drawn from the distaff of some muttering witch on Gallows-Hill. (Crowley, 1970, p.158)

### **The Guilt**

Complementing Hawthorne’s philosophical views, Waggoner says: ‘In writing *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne let his genius take its course, and death and sin turned out to be more convincing than life and goodness.’(1963, p.129)

The guilt is solely of the man who avoids giving a surname to the child and avoids marrying the woman of his love after making her pregnant. The guilty is the man only who



valued the social reputation more than a woman's honor. The guilty is the man who viewed the unbearable torture and subjective torment of the helpless woman and still remained silent in order to protect his social status. Guilty is the man who fears to face the society in order to stand for his child's security and respect. Though, readers feel consolation for him as he ultimately declares his mistake of hiding the truth and thus make two helpless female individuals suffer. At the end, the scarlet letter 'A' on Dimmesdale's chest is hyperbolic and superficial. It suggests the Nature's punishment to the sinners.

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