

A STUDY OF THE SCARLET LETTER

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Abstract:

In "The Scarlet Letter" we find out how Puritanism is powerful on both individual and society, and the controversy between the individual and the society is in the foreground. In spite of the fact that Hester confessed her sin standing against the accusations, punishments of both society and their institutions, her lover Dimmesdale and her ex-husband Chillingworth cannot find enough power to confess their guilt and faults in front of the public. Hester is the first and only heroine who converted unbearable life into a living one in American Literature.

Özet:

"Scarlet Letter"da Püritanizm'in birey ve toplum üzerinde ne kadar etkili olduğunu görüyoruz ve bireyle toplum arasındaki çelişki ön plandadır.

Hester'in hem toplumun hem de onun kurumlarının suçlamalarına ve cezalandırmalarına karşı durup, günahını itiraf etmesi gerçeğine rağmen onun sevgilisi Dimmesdale ve eski kocası Chillingworth toplum önünde hatalarını ve suçlarını itiraf etme gücü bulamazlar. Hester Amerikan Edebiyatı'nda dayanılmaz yaşamı, yaşanabilir bir hayata dönüştüren ilk ve tek kadın kahramandır.

1- Introduction:

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the five famous pre-civil-war writers who are responsible for the creation of "American Renaissance" in literature. Poe, Emerson, Thoreau Melville, Hawthorne; the works of all of them more or less sum up the literary culture of the period. Hawthorne shared with his contemporaries a kind of absorption in the enigmas of evil and of moral responsibility interwoven with man's fate in nature and in eternity.

First, I would like to give a brief knowledge about the author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was borne in Salem, Massachusetts on July 4, 1804, where originally he took the main theme of the Scarlet Letter after a story he heard. His ancestors had come and lived in the same town. One of them was involved in persecution of the "witches" in Salem. After they lost power and status in the community another "tension" was on the way to meet Hawthorne. His father who was a sea-captain died when he was four. With the lack of paternal authority he grew up with his mother and was privately educated to attend Bowdoin College where he became friends with famous people such

as; Longfellow and Franklin Pierce. Young Hawthorne was haunted by this ancestral guilt and in his other stories he deliberately discussed the same matter.

In the introductory essay to his Scarlet Letter he proclaimed that he took their shame upon himself, and hoped to dispel the curse on them.

After graduating from Bowdoin College, he devoted his life to writing stories. From time to time Hawthorne's stories began to appear in magazines, and in 1837 he collected a number of published pieces in a volume: Twice Told Tales. In addition to his masterpiece The Scarlet Letter (1850), Hawthorne wrote three remarkable novels: The House of the Seven Gables, an account of an ancestral curse, The Blithedale Romance, based on his experiences in the illfated experiment in the early 1840s, where he tried to experience the life and philosophy of the transcendental writers; The Marble Faun a tale of innocent Americans in Italy. Hawthorne served as a council, he got a chance to see Italy that influenced him a lot and enabled him to produce it (The Marble Faun).

Hawthorne's great grandfather was an Anglican but later he embraced Puritanism. He and one of his sons were magistrates in the town. Both of them conducted some serious trials against witches, and they were interested in the persecution of some of them. Thus, a deep family guilt had settled upon Hawthorne and this guilt undoubtedly forced him to critical attacks in his literary works on Puritanism.

"The Scarlet Letter", the skillful recreation of the Puritan past, was written with a forceful statement on the central issues of nineteenth-century romanticism. We may consider the book, not only as psychological romance but also an allegory and a historical romance based on that Puritan past.

The work of Nathaniel Hawthorne is the ripe literary fruit of the Puritan consciousness of New England which was one of the oldest established parts of America. By 1850's, it had its own graveyards, prisons, its own catalogue of witch trials and religious persecution. This mixture of innocence and evil provides a keynote to the work of Hawthorne. He felt like a man who re-enters the

Garden of Eden only to discover that a burden of sin and guilt remained.

Hawthorne was a confused Puritan. He has been called Puritan and a rebel against Puritanism, a realist and an idealist. One thing for sure is that the Puritan past weighed heavily upon him.

Past was not only where romance was but his relevant truth. He had a sense of reality of sin and evil. Combining this sense with the past history of New England, he explored the psychological effects of different kinds of sin on his characters and presented problems of moral and social responsibility.

2- The Plot

The story happens in Boston. Hester Prynne is punished and forced to wear the Scarlet Letter A that proclaims her an adulteress. In spite of the pleas of two clergymen, she refuses to give the name of her lover. Arthur Dimmesdale, a clergyman, is her lover. The triangle is completed by the arrival of the elderly physician with whom Hester had contracted a loveless marriage several years before. Roger Chillingworth, who was Hester's ex-husband, tries to find Hester's lover in order to revenge from him. Hester lives simply, supporting herself and her little daughter Pearl by needlework. Because of the simplicity of her outward life, the community tacitly accepts her as a member of the society. The Scarlet Letter becomes no more than a piece of background.

Hester's misdeed, namely her adultery, appears as a disturbance of the moral structure of the universe, and the society continues to insist on the honour of punishment. But if Hester has sinned, her sin is the source of life., that is, love is universal and need not be questioned. And at least, she has those rights of personality of being human.

Moreover, little Pearl who in a way symbolized Hester's sins of adultery and pride was at the same time the representation of God's mercy and grace. According to the romantic convention, Pearl also saves her mother Hester psychologically.

To tell the truth, Dimmesdale is suffering from the torments of unconfessed sin. This torment is satanically increased by Chillingworth who had guessed the secret earlier. At his first interview with Hester, Chillingworth had made her swear not to reveal his identity. So not until seven years have passed does she have the courage to tell Dimmesdale the reality. At the same time she expects him to confess their guilt. After long period of time, it becomes unbearable for Dimmesdale and he confesses his guilt in front of the public.

3- The Scarlet Letter

Obviously Hawthorne attacks the Puritan behaviour toward adultery, but he is more ruthless to the sinners in the novel than required. As soon as the story begins love has turned to a tragedy and wife, husband and lover have started to expiate their sins. Hester's ex-husband tries to take revenge cunningly and feels more guilty than anyone else in the novel. Her lover confines himself to his secrets and lives another agony. But only the woman succeeds in overcoming the tragedy in spite of all the pressures and restrictions of the society.

The main character in the Scarlet Letter is a woman, Hester who is the prototype of the American Women in American Literature. Because her behaviour conflicts with the rules of the society to have a child from the lover instead of the husband, Hester had to prove her innocence through another rule the validity and truth of which she believed. In the end she adopts this idea: If she had been happy with her husband, this was because she was too young to think of a better love. That's why the feelings that took her to the lover were both naive and sensible. She accepts her infamy without seeming regretful for committing the sin she was punished for. Hester is incapable of expanding her ideas on her fate to other women, she is only able to deal with her daughter enduring the results of her commitment. In real sense her story is both a biography and a criticism. She is one of the women who broke the established traditions of her age. In this novel Hawthorne deals with the psychology of the participants and with moral problems which are deeper than the worldly affairs. In general he gives importance to their consequence and effects on the individual. Nathaniel Hawthorne was interested in the conflict between the head and heart with respect to the varieties of the "sinner". In "The Scarlet Letter" we find out:

- The publicly known and partially contrite sinner (Hester)
- The secret sinner (Dimmesdale)
- The unpardonable sinner (Chillingworth)

Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are isolated from their fellows, but each in a different way affects the community.

Hawthorne, like the contemporary fiction writers, deals with the conflict between the sophisticated harmony of nature and the social efforts of humanity to discipline it. For him the concepts like purity, virginity, sterility were the human concepts which were wrongly attributed to that complex character of nature.

The interrelations of good and evil are important in his works as in the Scarlet Letter. We can reach this result without having any difficulty if we examine the main characters in this work.

Dimmesdale who seems to be a good man is not able to reveal the secret because of the clash between his worldly role and his inner side. Another character Chillingworth who is aware of his devoid of concern with his wife, cannot forgive being cuckolded. Hester who is a good woman in reality but considered to be the living monument of sin and her child who has no guiltes seen as an elfin child.

4- Hester Prynne

The writer admires the behaviour of Hester Prynne who is a fallen woman, but according to Nathaniel Hawthorne she is so different from the other fallen women. Taking her situation into consideration, he sets her the accused over against the accusers which makes the woman worthy of sympathy throughout the novel. She never regrets what she did in the past. Her daughter and the Scarlet Letter are both her realities and a part of her life. She had only one purpose: she wanted to make her daughter live despite the difficulties of life. Her love for her daughter was true. She lives such a simple life that the society accepts her without delaying.

Hester Prynne breaks the laws of human-beings but never the laws of nature. She is also compared to Virgin Mary.

“Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent, something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood whose infant was to redeem the world.” (1)

In New England she has really become the example of such a woman, who made way to the later generations.

The extracts which I have taken from the novel best explain her rise from the level of a fallen woman to an angel, fortunately enough to accord with the letter A.

“She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies. Then, also, the blameless purity of her life during all these years in which she had been set apart to infamy was reconed largely in her favor.” (2)

5- Arthur Dimmesdale

Arthur is the character who should be praised for his love but he was severely criticised for his lack of courage. He is a type of character that has neither the courage to reveal his guilt nor the capacity to stand it. In spite of the fact that Hester seems to be the victim in the novel, he is the one that suffers the most. Hester's guilt is physically seen on her bosom, but his is engraved in his heart.

Arthur submits to the creed and code against which his nature struggles. In this context he is weaker than Hester. Hester has paid for her guilt through human relationships, but he has given his soul to another person to be tortured forever. Arthur best describes himself as follows:

“None! – nothing but despair!” he answered. What else could I look for being what I am, and leading such a life as mine? Where I an atheist – a man devoid of conscience – a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts – I might have found peace, long ere now. Nay, I never should have lost it! But, as matters stand with my soul, whatever of good capacity there originally was in me, all of God's gifts that were the choicest have become the ministers of spiritual torment. Hester, I am most miserable!

I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast, between what I seem and What I am!”(3)

Arthur suffers because he thinks he doesn't deserve Hester's love and finally he suffers spiritually because of the unconfessed guilt. He even cannot find the courage to elope with her to other places.

Pearl also discovers Arthur's predicament:

“What a strange man is he” said the child as if speaking partly to herself. “In the dark nighttime he calls us to him, holds thy hand and mine, as when we stood with him on the scaffold yonder. And in the deep forest where only the trees can hear and the strip of sky see it, he talks with thee, sitting on a heap of moss. And he kisses my forehead, too, so that the little brook would hardly wash it off! But here in the sunny day, and among all the people, he knows us not; nor must we know him! A strange, sad man is he, with his hand always over his heart!” (4)

6- Roger Chillingworth

Chillingworth is the symbol of revenge in the novel. He is the guiltiest of the sinners. His

guilt, which is an unpardonable sin, seems to probe Dimmesdale's heart, because he invades the privacy of a person, and treats him as a specimen not as an individual. Dimmesdale says:

" I freely forgive you know. My god forgive us both! We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the Polluted priest. That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He was violated, in cold blood., th sanctity of human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!" (5)

He is determined to avenge himself at the very beginning.

"He bears no letter of infamy wrought into his garment, as thou dost; but I shall read it on his heart" (6) says he.

In the eyes of the folk he is an honest and merciful man but his actions and words are not the same as Hester declares in the following statements:

"Thy acts are like mercy, but thy words interpret thee as a terror. Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?"(7)

"Not thy soul," (8) he answered, with another smile. No, not thine!" (9) He believes that Hester is punished severely enough by the Scarlet Letter so he does not want to reveal himself and cast her off.

He is a wise man indeed, he knows and accepts that he is to blame for Hester's ignominy. He had neglected her after their marriage, and they had married without love against each other. But once he is inclined to do evil. When Hester asks him to stop this torture he says it is not in his hands to pardon.

7- Pearl

She is the living emblem of the sin, but she shows us the naturality of the sin. She is the Scarlet Letter in human form. Whenever she is seen by people, she reminds them of the ignominy her mother had caused. Because her mother is an outcast and she brings her up on her will and naturally, she is much different from the other children. Yet, this naturality is explained with the mother's position. So the child is called the elfishchild by the town people.

8- Symbolism

Hawthorne expressed his clearest convictions in the form of allegory, his dimmer

intimations, his hopes and fears, on the other hand often found expression in longer romances which are mythopoetic rather than allegorical, closer to modern symbolic fiction. Here, he approaches the liberty of tragic vision.

The Christian myth of Heaven and Hell was for Hawthorne a system of acknowledged symbols through which to describe the predicament of 19th century man. Behind all Christian tragedy is the theme of Fall and the consequent struggle for salvation, to discover the perfection in the very mystery of sin. Hawthorne shares this tradition with Milton and Melville.

Hawthorne acknowledged the dependence of the individual upon organized society.

That is why we have the frantic opposition between the village and forest, the city and country, for these are the symbols between which the choice must be made and the set of moral values be agreed upon. Hawthorne never suggested that the choice was an easy one. While he was responsive to the attractions of the open air, he also understood the Puritan distrust of the forest. He used that distrust as a part of the symbol. In the forest possibilities are immense thus the evil inclination is unchecked.

This novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, includes a lot of symbols and emblems throughout the story. It begins with the prison as an emblem whose symbol is guilt. We can find many other pairs in the novel. Let me mention some of them: Scaffold and punishment; either in Hester's case or in Dimmesdale's it is extremely important.

The Scarlet Letter and adultery stand for the physical and spiritual sides of the same thing. For the society it means ignominy and punishment, for Hester it is nothing more than a piece of cloth, and for Pearl it is the missing part of the family, it stands for Arthur.

There are also some contrastive elements which the author carefully handles. There are the evil-good, natural-man's conventions (prison and rose bush), Scarlet A-green A (which Pearl made), day-night, town-forest, Earthly father-Heavenly father, and finally the distinction between sin and guilt.

As to pairs we can see sunshine-love, night-revelation, natural-good, human-inclined to evil, paralelisms.

9- Style

Although the subject-matter enables us to make not more than a long story, Hawthorne has elaborately extended it to a novel form without

distorting the main concern. He adds a psychological dimension to the problem and threads it skillfully into a texture. Language used to tell such a subject is easily understood. Especially, the descriptions of the persons, their ideas and comparisons are highly successful.

As far as his technique is concerned Hawthorne was haunted by the allegorical symbolism, that is partly the gift of his puritan forefathers. However it was the further development of the Puritan attitude to life, and was an attempt to convey a certain idea by means of a literary work, which holds a meaning beyond the actual story. Yet he was too sophisticated in doing this. The meaning beyond the actual story or the ambiguousness of that meaning always strikes and charms his readers.

To tell the truth, conventional values are reversed: adulterers are treated sympathetically whereas the cuckolded husband has fallen to the level of a villain. To do this he uses the figures of speech artistically.

Meanwhile, I must mention that an important motif throughout the book is the shifting force of the letter "A". That which society would make into a stigma of shame Hester converts into a thing of beauty, a concept of beauty.

Hawthorne foreshadowed Henry James in his concern for "the deeper psychology". His main emphasis is not on sin, a theological phenomenon, but on guilt and secretiveness., psychological phenomena. Like Edgar Allen Poe, he was an explorer of the dark recesses of the human soul and motivation, and he used his art to reveal rather than resolve the dilemma of human destiny.

10- Conclusion

The central theme is the punishment of an adulteress, Hester Prynne, who breaks the rules of a Puritan Society. Others group around this main plot. The elements of sin and guilt, the effects of these upon the character of those who keep these secrets; criticism of vengeance; and the unaware child, Pearl, can be considered the other sub-plots. Broadly speaking, we can say that the novel is a criticism of Puritanism with all its institutions and ways to the people, and the results of these on the society and on the individual.

Hawthorne's world of "saints" and "sinners" prepares us an atmosphere in which individual human conduct typifies all human conduct in which every sin, as Hawthorne strongly puts forward in "The Scarlet Letter", affects the whole community and in every sin the community

as a whole takes part. However, he concentrated his dramatic attention on the effects of sin rather than on its causes.

Notes:

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, published by Harper and Row, publishers, New York, 1965, p.49
2. *Ibid*, p. 142
3. *Ibid*, pp. 169-170
4. *Ibid*, pp. 203-204
5. *Ibid*, p. 173
6. *Ibid*, p. 67
7. *Ibid*, p. 67
8. *Ibid*, pp. 67-68
9. *Ibid*, p. 68

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1. Miller, G. James, "Hayden, Rober, Medallion Edition", (1979), Illionis, United States in Literature
2. Cowley, Malcolm, (1948), U.S.A., "The Portable Hawthorne"
3. Arvin, Newton, (1946), New York, "Hawthorne's Short Stories", (Introduction by Arvin).