

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE DUALITY OF HESTER PRYNNE'S IMAGE: SUBVERSION AND SUBMISSION

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ABSTRACT

Hester Prynne is a young woman of *The Scarlet Letter*. She has borne a child out of wedlock and been sentenced to wear the scarlet letter A, a symbol of committing adultery for the rest of her life. She refuses to take the scarlet A as a token of outlaw. With her needlework, she struggles to subvert the original signification of the letter A and to build her new identity as an able, angelic and admirable woman. She transforms the letter A for herself outside the patriarchal signifier. However, her return to Boston, where she voluntarily wears the letter illustrates that Hester acknowledges the importance of the social order and her submission to the public. She has the rebellious spirit but it is not strong enough to overthrow the patriarchy. Hester's dual image of subversion to submission is attributed to Hawthornes' ambiguous attitude toward women.

KEYWORDS

Hester Prynne, The Scarlet Letter, Subversion, Submission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hester Prynne is a young woman of *The Scarlet Letter*. It is a work of historical fiction by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), published in 1850. Set in Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony during the years 1642 to 1649, the novel tells the story of Hester Prynne who has borne a child out of wedlock. She believes that she is a widow since her husband, Roger Chillingworth has been presumed lost at sea. She conceives a daughter named Pearl, through an affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, a saintly young minister. Then, under the law, she has committed adultery and she is sentenced to wear a scarlet "A" on her dress for the rest of her life. In the community the letter "A" is the symbol of adultery. However, instead of being humiliated by it, Hester embroiders it as beautiful as an art for decoration. With her deft needlework, she is not only able to be self-contained but also to help others in miserable conditions. Hester rebuilds her identity in the community from a hussy to an angel.

In the following of this article, the first part with some of Cixous' ideas of heroine, interprets Hester as a feminist who realizes herself. She writes with needle and challenges the patriarchal authority with her silence (Helena et al., 1976). In this way, she subverts the lawful meaning of the letter A. The second part analyzes Hester's another view, her submission to the letter A and to the patriarchal order. Even though she wants to undo the letter A and leave America, she finally stays Boston and wears the letter A. The reasons are unclear and can be explained in many ways. Among them is Hester's compromise between self and society. In the process of her socialization, she acknowledges the importance of social order. The third part explains the reason of Hester's duality from the background of

the author's growth and then history. Hawthorne's attitudes toward women are ambiguous and Hester, a figure of his shows her duality. She is a feminist with rebellious spirit and she also is a citizen who acknowledges the social order. The final part concludes Hester's subversion as well as submission and points out her submission is the balance between self and society.

2. HESTER'S SUBVERSION WITH SILENCE AND NEEDLEWORK

Within patriarchal language, women can rarely find the words to defend themselves. Unlike other women in the community, Hester doesn't "function within the discourse of man" (Helena et al., 1976). The scarlet letter "A" meaning adultery is the language of man, women must invent "the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse" (Helena et al., 1976). Hester subverts the intent of shame by transforming the scarlet letter "A", the object of law into an object of art, with its own semiotic system of meaning. Hester breaks out the snare of acceptance and silence. She says "no" to the patriarchal law and she writes her "sexts" with needle (Helena et al., 1976). In this sense, Hawthorne has portrayed Hester as a feminist heroine to subvert the patriarchal law.

At the market-place when Hester is asked the name of the child's father, she answers "I will not speak." (102). When her husband Roger Chillingworth requires the name of the child's father in prison, "Ask me not! ... That thou shalt never know!" (111) The name of the child's father has been questioned by Mr. Wilson, Governor Bellingham, Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth. They are the representatives of the patriarchal

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law and order. In the puritan patriarchy, perhaps, in all patriarchies, the father determines the issue of naming and inheritance, and that is why the question of the child's father must be asked. Besides, fathers "would guarantee knowledge of their sons by regulating the terms and conditions of female sexuality." (Budick 200) the interrogation about the child's father serves for further regulating terms to constrain female's desire (Budick and Miller, 1991). Hester's silence of her lover's name confound the leaders of the community, challenging the law of the patrilineal genealogy, the patriarchal authority. Her refusal to be bound to a "father," even if beyond the laws of marriage, gives Hester as well as her child new identity, while her old one "by means of laws, lies, blackmail, and marriage, her right to herself has been exhorting" (Helena et al., 1976). "Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first." (121) She belongs to no man in her community anymore. In the eyes of the townspeople, she is no man's wife, no one's daughter or sister but simply Hester Prynne, wearer of the scarlet letter. Her refusal to speak out the name of her child's father is a challenge to the authority and a beginning to have her individuality.

The Governor doesn't trust that Hester, a woman wearing the scarlet A, can teach the child well and wants to take Pearl away. "Woman, it is thy badge of shame! It is because of the stain which that letter indicates that we would transfer thy child to other hands." (162) For the governor, the letter A is a symbol of sin and it warns others to avoid behaving like Hester. However, Hester calmly says "this badge hath taught me--it daily teaches me--it is teaching me at this moment--lessons whereof my child may be the wiser and better." (162) Hester doesn't accept the signifier of the scarlet A signifying adultery, penance, outlaw. "SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself." (81) Hester has appropriated the supposed symbol of shame as a beautifully embroidered letter, which she wears without the slightest air of anguish or despair. Indeed, the fine stitch work around the A has reduced it to an ornament, a decorative and trivial accessory. It becomes an object of art for decoration rather than a badge of shame and humiliation. The letter A the law have sentenced her to wear attempts to define her as a transparent sign--as a transgressor of man's laws. The attempt, however, backfires--Hester's defense for the letter marks her attitudes towards it, indifference of the patriarchal signifier but devotion to inventing her one, "it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of." (Helena et al., 1976). The letter A is lawless, and can be interpreted positively in Hester's sphere.

Needle-work, is as what Hawthorne says "almost the only one within a woman's grasp" (120). Hester's needlework, shown in the fine way that she displays the scarlet letter, allows her to maintain a fairly stable lifestyle. Hester spends time working on projects which bring income, and she devotes the remainder of her working time to creating garments for the poor. She lives simply with the sole exception being that she creates amazing dresses of fine fabrics for Pearl. However, not until Hester sews for the government officials does the meaning of the needlework change. Soon, it becomes a kind of fashion in the puritan town. The demand of the inhabitants leads her needlework to appear on different occasions. For Hester, sewing is not only a handiwork but also an activity of art and of rebellion. She embroiders the letter with fancy and imagination and she embroiders to "write her rebellion in lace, outside the boundaries of patriarchal convention" (Last 362). Cixous assures us that, while it may be "impossible to define a feminine practice of writing...[It] doesn't mean that it does not exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system." (883) Needle is her pen to write her history. Needlework plays a role of language, with which Hester communicates with the townspeople. In silent way, she belongs to the community again with her new identity, sloughing the skin of a sinner nor a wife, transforming into an angel, an able and admirable woman.

As an art, needlework is an expression of Hester's spirit of freedom. For an imaginative work, she could pin whatever she wants to say, "needlework

is a pen in her hand to write her inner world." (Xu, 2016). Besides, needlework is Hester's creative way of rebellion. Sewing shows that Hester challenges the patriarchal authority from an economic perspective, breaks the stereotype of the female who depends on the male economically and reverses the female's position in society. Traditionally, economy is the field of men who make money to feed their families. What women are expected is to be a good wife, to generate children and keep household. While the practice of Hester's intruding into men's economic sphere through needlework manifests that she breaks the shackle upon the female and becomes a new woman. "The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people." (238) She demonstrates that except childbearing, women has many potentials and qualities, such as the heroic quality of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Sewing make sure Hester's economic independence, and shows her ability. Needlework also helps Hester to build her new identity as an angel to do charity. Goodness, selfless dedication and sacrifice and the idea of an equality win Hester the identity of an angel and an admirable woman. Her goodness is represented by her actions to help the poor, the sick and the afflicted. With embroidery, she earned her living, bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, and made garments for the poor for free. She help those who need help, acknowledging "her sisterhood with the race of man" (236). To some extent, she is not an outsider any longer but an insider of them. After helping the houses darkened by troubles, Hester leaves quietly, without any requests. Her selfless dedication and sacrifice are represented by her never asking for privilege or gratitude from the ones she has helped. The townspeople's attitude towards Hester alters from disgust to love and respect. When meeting the strangers who come to their village, they cannot help recommending and praising Hester, treating her as a label of their town. The token of the scarlet letter A has been lawless, "not of that one sin for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her, any good deeds." (239) She gives, with no assurance that she'll get back, "because she is a giver." (Helena et al., 1976). The "adulteress" is replaced by "angel".

Hester's idea of equality demonstrated by her rebellion and charity has influenced the women in the patriarchal community. They come to her with "their sorrows and perplexities," seeking her counsel and sympathy as someone who has been a public victim and as they are private victims. They realize their role as women rather than just "good wives" at the beginning. Hester assured them of her belief that at some brighter period, a new truth would be revealed, that the whole relation between man and woman on a ground of mutual happiness. As a militant, she must be farsighted, "she foresees that her liberation will do more than modify power relations...she will bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis." (Helena et al., 1976). In the section of Custom, Hawthorne tells us that in his ancestors' view, Hester Prynne appears to have been rather a noteworthy personage. She had flourished during the period between the early days of Massachusetts and the close of the seventeenth century. In the time of Mr. Surveyor Pue, according to the aged people's oral testimony, Mr Pue writes down to remember Hester "as a very old, but not decrepit woman, of a stately and solemn aspect." (51) She subvert the patriarchal symbol of punishment placed on her breast, as well as the patriarchal power placed over all women in the community.

3. HESTER'S SUBMISSION TO THE PATRIARCHY COMMUNITY

Hester, has subverted the scarlet letter A's original and judicial office, that is, judicial "function", as a badge of shame replaced by a token of Hester's good deeds, "not of that one sin for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her, any good deeds." (Millington and Richard, 2004). If readers only take Hester as a feminist, the A fulfills its office and Hester is a successful fighter. However, midway through the novel, the sentence "The scarlet letter had not done its office" (244) in the chapter "Another view of Hester Prynne" tells us its function has not yet done and Hester's identity as a feminist should be reconsidered. Even though her silence of the name of her child's father gives her a greater individuality, she knows inwardly the fact that her husband Roger Chillingworth is still alive and her lover is Dimmesdale. Although outwardly she is no man's wife, no one's daughter but only a wearer of the scarlet letter, she is clear that she

is not only as wife and lover, but as public employee making ceremonial garments, counselor and mother. The scarlet letter A has done its function for Hester herself, fulfilling her to be an able, angelic and admirable woman. "The scarlet letter had not done its office" relates to Hester's social office as wife, lover, mother and counselor. "Once, long before, she transformed the A into a symbol for 'able,' 'admirable.' Now she transforms herself, able and admirable as she is, into an agent of socialization." (Bercovitch and Savcan, 1988). In the process of socialization, Hester acknowledges the importance of the social order.

In the forest scene, Hester discards her A and urges Dimmesdale to live a new life. "Let us not look back ...The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now? See! With this symbol I undo it all and make it as if it had never been!" (300) Hester thinks that she has undone it all and would never be affected by it, but once the letter is cast off, "The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom!" (301) Outwardly, Hester is strong enough to endure the sin of hers as well as Dimmesdale's, and she has thought that she would be taught by the letter A to be better and wiser. However, her "sad transformation" caused by the letter is more obvious, "that her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine." (240) Hester has not cut off her hair, but she cuts off her "essential womanhood", her love, passion and affection. She ceases to be a woman. She denies her as a her-she, her sex, youth and beauty while she admits that being manly is being wiser. Her-she has been repressed by the letter A.

Hester is able to cover and subvert the letter A's original signification on her dress, but she can't conceal it in her heart. "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong but taught her much amiss." (297) The scarlet letter distinguishes Hester from others and makes it possible that Hester is the one to subvert the patriarchy. However, in this way it also misleads her much and once realizing this, she tries to remove it from her. Then there is no clear reason to abandon her heroic independence and acquiesces to the A after all. She returns voluntarily to the colony that had tried to make her a "life-long bond-slave," (338) and voluntarily Hester resumes the letter as a "woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame," (391) although "not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it" (390). Hester's wearing of the letter A illustrates her admittance of her moral sin which is defined by the patriarchal community.

Hester's subversion of the scarlet letter A does work to rebuild her new identity in the townspeople's eyes. However, considered the chapter title midway the novel, "Another View of Hester" means an inside view of her secret radicalism;... 'Another view' means a true sight of Hester, as she really is (rather than as she appears)." (Bercovitch and Savcan, 1988). In this chapter, "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." (236) Another view of Hester, compared with her rebellious spirit, is a subversive one. Despairing of any improvement short of tearing down "the whole system of society," (241), she turns her doubt first against "the world's law" (241) and then against her daughter and herself. Her heart, Hawthorne tells us, "had lost its regular and healthy throb, and she wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind; ... At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide." (244) Hester realizes how powerless she is when faced with the system of society. The alternatives left for her is to subvert and die or to submit and live. She finally gives way to the patriarchal order and hopes that in the future, equality can be reached. Hester's idea of equality attracts the women repressed by the patriarchy to seek her for counsel in her cottage. The cottage is a private space where it is not easy to convene collective identity, while in the marketplace sphere it is easy to stir more women's emotion and to reach consensus as what Hester herself has

experienced the goodwives consistent insult. The cottage is respectively safe to console one's sorrow, "to preserve the law and to repress the potential eruption of female antinomian energies." (Millington and Richard, 2004). Besides, Hester's fancy of the future mutual happiness, in life, is like a work of propaganda, a call "not to change your life". From this perspective, Hester's submission to the society is much obvious.

4. THE REASON OF HESTER'S SUBVERSION TO SUBMISSION

Hawthorne's view of females have been a controversial topic. His contradictory attitudes toward women is related to his family and the historical background. From the age of four, the fatherless Hawthorne is raised in an extended family that includes several generations of women in a town with powerful and many independent-minded, unmarried women. Indeed, Sophia Peabody, Hawthorne's wife is equally intelligent and independent-minded. Hawthorne more or less is influenced by them and in his works, his women protagonists can reflect some traits of the women living around him. His position, however, is distinct from women's. Authorship is one of the few kinds of work that brings men directly into competition with women. It might suggest that acquaintances had spotted in him something unconventional that had to be construed as "feminine" in the "dualistic gender culture" (Millington and Richard, 2004). His relationships with women are a confused mixture of the supportive and the competitive. Besides, Nathaniel Hawthorne had deep bonds with his Puritan ancestors. He condemns and repents for them because they have participated in the movement of prosecuting witches. But meantime, he also highlights his admiration for their strength.

It is undeniably tempting for twenty-first century critics to construct Hawthorne in our own image, but to read his works as simply feminist or misogynist as presently defined we would have to ignore a great deal. Critics fall into two distinct groups. One group holds that Hawthorne is a feminist and Hawthorne shows his sympathy for the heroines in his works. Just as Last said "the narrator subsumes his radical sympathy with Hester under a general guise of psychonarration--implying that he has been merely presenting Heater's thoughts all along." (Last and Suzan, 1997). Another group insists that Hawthorne is not a feminist. Some critics maintain that the tragic end of the heroines in his novels show that Hawthorne is not a feminist. Samuel Coalesce asserted that "Hester's wandering in the moral wilderness of her mind leads to her attempted flight with Dimmesdale, which leads to Dimmesdale's death and Chillingworth's eventually withering. Hester survives because of her fortitude and courage, but she survives to live on alone in the scene of her tragedy." (Coale and Samuel, 2007). Some critics even regard Hawthorne as a defender of patriarchy for the fact that he once complained to his publisher over the prominence of "D-d scribbling women" and their novelistic "trash" (Millington and Richard, 2004).

Accordingly, Hawthorne's view of females influences his characterization of the female characters in his works. In terms of what kind of woman Hester Prynne is, critics also have different opinions. Some hold that Hester is a dark lady and D.H.Lawrence is one representative of such content. He regarded her as a seducer: "The first thing she does is to seduce him...The greatest triumph a woman can have, especially an American woman, is the triumph of seducing a man: especially if he is pure." (Lawrence and Herbert, nd.) Some argue that Hester is the spokeswoman for women, "In representing 'woman,' Hester's sign does not simply brand women as 'other,' but condemns patriarchy and its system of language for its inability to express and conceive of women as anything more either transparent stereotypes or outlaws." (Last and Suzan, 1997). Nevertheless, "Feminist critics have taken the absence of a strong female presence in the 'Custom-House' to signify Hawthorne's unrelenting male bias." (Budick and Miller, 1991). That is to say, even though Hawthorne's work can be interpreted in feminine voice, the maleness of Hawthorne's concern is not to be easily discarded. Others think that Hester makes a compromise with the society. For example, Bercovitch holds that Hester "takes more courage to compromise."

Looking back at the previous studies, we can find that critics compete with one another on two questions: one is whether Hawthorne is a feminist or

anti-feminist, and the other is what kind of woman Hester Prynne is. To the first question, the answer is "yes" because Hester Prynne demonstrates many new traits different from the traditional women, such as strength, individuality and ability (Hawthorne and Nathaniel, 2008). As to the second question, Hester is a woman with rebellious spirit to publicly subvert the intent meaning of the scarlet letter A. Meanwhile inwardly Hester also submits to the letter's spell, no matter how she might decorate the letter on her dress, she will always know inside that she is a sinner. Hester's duality of the patriarchal femininity, subversion and submission turn out to be interconnected. That is to say, she is a feminist who has rebellious spirit but it is not strong enough to overthrow the patriarchy.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Within the patriarchal law, the scarlet letter A signifies adultery. Hester Prynne's first step is to refuse to accept the patriarchal authority with her silence of the name of her child's father. Her silence has challenged the leaders of the patriarchy and won her individuality, belonging to no one but being wearer of the scarlet letter. Contrasted with Dimmesdale's own silence of his identity as the child's father, Hester's silence to name him shows her generosity, as "a giver" in Cixous context. She refuses to accept the letter A as a moral stain as the Governor defines. With her deft writing with needle, she subverts the scarlet letter's signifying as adultery outlaw, penance. She creates new token of the letter as angel, ability and admiration. Her rebellion and charity has built her new identity and also influenced the women to recognize their inferior position in the patriarchal community.

If readers only take Hester as a feminist, the letter A fulfills its office and Hester is a successful fighter. Her silence of the name of her child's father gives her a greater individuality. Although outwardly she is no man's wife, no one's daughter but only a wearer of the scarlet letter, she is clear that she is not only as wife and lover, but as public employee making ceremonial garments, counselor and mother. The scarlet letter A has done its function for Hester herself, fulfilling her to be an able, angelic and admirable woman. Now she transforms herself, able and admirable as she

is, into an agent in the community. Her return to Boston, where she voluntarily wears the letter illustrates that Hester acknowledges the importance of the social order and submit to the public. Hester's submission is her balance between individuality and community. she now knows how to restrict herself. She has learned how freely to obviate the conflict between self and society, between utopian hope and things as they are.

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