

# Analysis of the Hester Prynne's Characters from the Female Perspective in Hawthorne's Novel 'The Scarlet Letter'

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**Abstract:** This article mainly analyzes Hester Prynne's characters according to Hawthorne's Novel 'The Scarlet Letter' in terms of feminist consciousness. Nathaniel Hawthorne is regarded as a master of remarkable insight into human soul in the American literature. Influenced by his own life experiences and the feminist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hawthorne cultivates his own feminist consciousness. It is the feminist consciousness within his heart that encourages him to give birth to Hester in the book, the Scarlet. Through a very touching legendary story, the author established a beautiful and strong woman who dared to fight against social darkness, both her thoughts and concept expressed a desire for setting up a harmonious and equal society.

**Keywords:** Hawthorne; The Scarlet Letter; Hester Prynne; Feminist Consciousness

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## 1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne always keeps an intensely meditative mind and unceasing interest in the interior heart of human being. The Scarlet Letter introduced a sensitive topic of adultery by the female character Hester, and further explored the inner world and fate of her. <sup>[1]</sup>

## 2. Women in the Nineteenth Century

Throughout history, the root of women's subordinate image has long been embedded in the Christian classic the Bible. In America of that time, it was the cultural stereotype that people still considered women to be subordinate to men and men played the subjective roles in social and domestic life while women act as the objective ones. The Convention issued a document titled the Declaration of Sentiments, proclaiming that "all men and women were created equal". Thus it launched the woman's rights movement and changed the course of history. During the nineteenth century, feminist movements dealt with a wide range of legal, educational and labor issues of women. The right to control property, guardianship of children, the right to divorce, opportunity for education, and attainment of legal status came about as a result of hard-fought battles. Most of Hawthorne's works were finished during the time when the feminist movements up surged in America in the nineteenth century. <sup>[2]</sup>

Nathaniel Hawthorne was the descendent of a long line of Puritan ancestors. Throughout his life, Hawthorne was both fascinated and disturbed by his kinship with his religious background. Hawthorne is extensively influenced Calvinism and obsessed with the exploration of original sin. His father died when the young Hawthorne was only four, leaving nothing to Hawthorne's mother and three children, Hawthorne and his two sisters. From then on, the family fell into a hard life. Having grown up in the company of women without a strong male role, Hawthorne directly experienced the miserable and humble life of women in the man-dominated society, which definitely provided authentic materials for his works. <sup>[3]</sup>

Nathaniel Hawthorne lived in the period when the feminist movement flourished, In 1842 Hawthorne married Sophia Yeabody. He developed close relationship with the intellectual circle that included the principal literary figures and transcendentalist thinkers of the time. Among them, ElizaBeth and Margaret Fuller, the two famous feminists of that time, played an indispensable role in the formation of Hawthorne's feminist consciousness. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody was the first woman university teacher in American history. Her major works *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) has been considered to be one of the most important statements of feminist method and theory in history. Throughout the book, Fuller prepared the way for women to use their minds and talents in domains other than the home. "We would have," says Miss Fuller, "every arbitrary barrier thrown down" (Fuller 217). Through the

contact with these persons, Hawthorne learned about the most profound feminist ideas of the day and witnessed the efforts the women made in order to get their equal rights with men.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **3. Hawthorne's Feminist Consciousness Implied in The Scarlet Letter**

Through the description of the plot of the story and depiction of the female and male characters, especially the protagonist, Hester, Hawthorne's feminist consciousness can be fully detected in the book.

#### **3.1 Analysis of the image of Hester Prynne**

Hester Prynne, the protagonist of the book, is the wearer of the scarlet letter "A" that gives the book its title. During the story, the young woman endures the consequences of her sin of adultery and spends the rest of her life in atonement. And in this process, she changes the meaning of the scarlet letter "A" several times. The letter "A" begins as a symbol of sin, signifying that Hester is an "adulteress". It then becomes a symbol of an alienated life she lives in, and finally Hester turns the scarlet letter "A" to be a powerful symbol of identity-an able and admirable woman.<sup>[5]</sup>

##### **3.1.1 An adulteress**

In the beginning of the novel-Chapter 2 The Market, the scarlet letter appears in front of the readers. As the crowd watches, Hester Prynne, holding an infant, emerges from the prison door and makes her way to a scaffold. She is accused by others for the letter A on her chest. From the women's conversation and Hester's recall as she walks through the crowd, we can deduce that she has committed the sin of adultery and has borne an illegitimate child, and that the "A" on her dress stands for "Adulteress".

##### **3.1.2 An alienated woman**

The scarlet letter "A" also stands for Hester's lonely life in New England. After a few months prison life, Hester is released from prison and free to leave Boston, resuming a new life. But Hester chooses to stay, which shows a lot of courage and integrity. Hester's behavior is premised on her desire to determine her own identity rather than to allow others to determine it for her. In fact, Hester puts her own destiny in her hands, simply accepts the "sin" and its symbol as part of herself, and then she confronts her reality and is ready to discover a new self. Hester settles in an abandoned cabin on a patch of infertile land at the edge of town. She remains alienated from everyone, including the town fathers, respected women, beggars, children, and even strangers.

#### **3.2 Analysis of the Image of Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale**

The two major male characters Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale also play an important role in the book. When comparing the two men's condition and behavior with Hester, we can easily find the difference of social status between men and women in Puritan society and get deeper understanding of Hawthorne's feminist consciousness.

##### **3.2.1 Roger Chillingworth: an irresponsible husband**

Roger Chillingworth is a scholar much older than her, with a pale, thin scholar-like visage, and his left shoulder a trifle higher than the right. Actually, the real gap and distance between Hester and Chillingworth lies in lack of love the essence of marriage. During their marriage life, Chillingworth believes he is the center of the family and his wife should be absolutely in the subordination to him. He sends Hester ahead to America to live but never follows. When Hester stays alone in America for years, she must live in a hard and lonely life. Their ill-conceived marriage is still protected by the doctrine of Puritanism, and Hester is strongly requested to be faithful to her husband. So after Hester commits adultery, she is subject to severe legal sanctions. All the people in the town blame her and look down upon her, but no one shows any criticism to Hester's husband, the irresponsible man. There is "separate spheres" ideology in feminist theory, in which human activity areas are divided into two areas: public area and private area (Wang 62). So Hester's illicit love affair with other man is utterly unacceptable by the society. The arrangement of their unjust marriage reflects a woman's secondary position in the society, they are ignored and deprived of equal rights to marriage and marginalized by means of legal marriage<sup>[6]</sup>

##### **3.2.2 Arthur Dimmesdale: a cowardly guy**

Arthur Dimmesdale is another representative of male-dominated society and the arch-criminal of the crime. In the story, Dimmesdale and Hester commit the same sin but they suffer the different punishment. Since religion is such a key point of their lives, anyone who disobeys their god will be punished by the society. The reverend who had committed the same sin still own high reputation but Hester is condemned severely. Hester is forced to openly accept her shame and reveal her sinner's identity, but she refuses and seeks to protect her lover. She is sentenced to three hours on the scaffold and a lifetime of wearing the scarlet on her chest. In contrast to Hester's bravely taking all of the blame for their shamed sin in public, Dimmesdale dare only stand on the scaffold in a dark night. Instead of exposing the symbol of his shame to the community like Hester, he hides the red stigma-letter "A" on his breast under the cover of his clothes, finally tormenting him physically and psychologically to die. Obviously, he regarded his perilous pride and his reputation for sanctity much more precious than his love for Hester. Dimmesdale is a self-centered guy, rigidly sticking to Puritan doctrine; finally he escaped from the public sanctions, leaving Hester bearing all the guilt alone as a woman. This proves the

inequalities between men and women before the law in a patriarchal society. women could not reach the same sexual freedom as men. Hester is independent, thoughtful and full of courage, while Dimmesdale is s rather cowardly, irresolute and lack of will. So there is also inequality in love between men and women.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this novel, Hawthorne does not intend to tell a love story nor a story of sin, but focuses his attention on the development of the main characters, especially Hester Prynne, creating her to be the image of a rebellious woman and a pioneer feminist. She controls her own fate, changing the meaning of the scarlet letter “A” from “adulteress” to “able and admirable”. By constructing of the plot of his story and depicting his female characters Hester and the two male characters Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, Hawthorne condemns the unfair treatment of women in the male-dominated culture. At the end of the book, the writer presents us Hester’ s firm belief’. At some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’ s own time, a new truth would be revealed, into establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness”(Hawthorne 286). From this, Hawthorne’s remarkable feminist consciousness is fully displayed in his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. It is not only Hester’ s belief but also Hawthorne’s expectation that all men and women can innately live in a world of mutual happiness.

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