

**Subjectivity in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet letter**

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Any literary work portrays the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in the society. The interpretations and applications of these norms which spring forth from an artist' inspiration, in far richness and variety thereby providing an opportunity to an artist to either decide upon the validity of his creation or its psychological utility. There are instances of co-relation between physical magnitude of a work and its ideational grandeur.

“A novel”, says Lord David Cecil,

“ is a work of art in so far as it introduces us into a living world, in some respects resembling the world we live in, but with an individuality of its own. Now this world owes its character to the fact that is begotten by the artist's creative faculty on his experience. His imagination apprehends reality in such a way as to present us with a new vision of it. The novelist brings forth his imagination to give a new form and shape to his experiences and his personal life in the work which he held dearer to his heart. He becomes one with his characters in a way in which he was not one with them in real life. In order that a work of fiction may have a deep and abiding popularity, it is necessary that the novelist should characters in the novel with whom he has been familiar in life and introduce experience which he might himself have undergone. A kind of subjectivity becomes an inevitable necessity for the novelist if he means to win applause and a permanent place in the heart of the readers. A purely objective attitude towards his art, wherein the novelist will present a detached picture of life without personal attachment, does not ultimately go forward with the readers.”

**Introduction:** The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) displays a deep psychological insight into the accumulation of details about various characters. The Scarlet Letter is identified as “a great book ever written in the Western Hemisphere”. The theme of alienation is well handled by Hawthorne to show how it can scorch the sensibilities and immobilize the will thereby concentrating his attention on the mental processes and tortures in the minds of different characters and not on their external activities ( John Lewis on Hawthorne). Hawthorne realized that, “We are not endowed with real life till the heart be touched”, yet alas! He “could endow nothing with such life or touch the heart”.

( Hawthorn on Scarlet Letter as Romance)He further observed, “if he thinks fit, also, he (the Romance) may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture”.

Subjectivity is the guiding motive of an author’s work and can never be taken from without himself. It is the inner need of urgency that chooses its subjects to express itself. “His own feeling of guilt, whether precipitated, as so often occurs by the incest, wish of infancy or not, hunted him, tortured him, nor did he ever quite achieved a creative liberation from it in some concrete of final objectified work.”

( Dr. S.C. Mundra)

“The Scarlet Letter is not a mere gloomy projection of an inner sense of guilt. Like all high literature it accepts life as tragic but simultaneously represents the human spirit as triumphing at some point over the evil rooted in the hearts and embodied in the institutions of men. It is the ultimate sense of reconciliation which tests the difference between the neurotic art structure and the fully project work of the poetic imagination. It is significant that the spirit of liberation and reconciliation in Hawthorne’s solitary masterpiece is a ‘Woman’ and that the tragic fable issues from such actions as is fundamental to creatures of moral flesh and blood. ( Dr. S.C. Mundra)

“ The writer”, says Robert Lidell, “living for the time in his characters divests himself of those parts of his own nature which are irrelevant and develops the relevant parts of his nature to mere than their normal size-his more successful characters are portraits of potential selves”. Hence, a subjective of what is actually happening in the story.

Self-seeking and self-revelation in fiction adds to the richness of experience. The reader is much influenced by the motives which impelled the author to express.

The subjective fiction has commanded greater appreciation in the present day world as it creates interest in studying the inner conflicts as motive of characters than in mere objective representation of adventures. The readers develop a feeling that any work of fiction is the element of author’s personality, since his personages are personifications of the author’s various impulses of emotions.

Hawthorne’s theory of literary experience, thus, includes as its counterparts, the past (Puritan past) and the present, the actual and the imaginary, i.e. the inner selves of Hester and Dimmesdale are more real than their outer life.”

**About the novel:**

The story, laid in the New England of 1642-1649 is about Hester Prynne and her illegitimate daughter, Pearl, whose father is Arthur Dimmesdale, the minister. Roger

Chillingworth, Hester's elderly and selfish husband in England has come to the colony in the guise of a doctor to torture Dimmesdale in to the shaming confession of his fatherhood. Only by public acknowledgement as confession Dimmesdale can find the peace that his silence denies as it is not until the end, when he speaks the truth in the same market place where Hester's punishment began. Hester herself, never privately admitting that her act was a sin, can find no such peace, yet for her, as in some degrees from that of Dimmesdale. Their sin(adultery) brings a sombre maturing of their souls and they find a modern equivalent of the more god-like future, foretold by the Archangel Michael in Milton's Paradise Lost, for man after the fall.

The Scarlet Letter turns upon two deep rooted, fundamental struggles that between natural impulse of conscience and of the restraints of society,

In the Scarlet Letter not only do the individuals of the world, the conduct of the institution measure each other but also, the measurement of its consequences are precisely the centre of the novel. The Scarlet Letter is a study of sin as well of the isolation which causes intense mental sufferings. The sinner feels isolated from his immediate environment, his own self and even from God. Hawthorne's three different individuals personify three different faculties, namely, the heart, the mind and the soul. For Hester, heart predominates, for Chillingworth mind predominates and for Dimmesdale, the soul predominates. Each commits an act which is in total violation of his or her own basic nature.

The superiority of Hester's penance over Dimmesdale's does not consist in its intensity; indeed the priest is plainly the greater sufferer of the two or perhaps most aware of the theological significance of their sin. But Hester's public shame, her very ostracism, establishes for her a sounder connection with the social whole than does Dimmesdale's secret self chastisement. The tragedy of their crime is that it is like the character of Pearl which in Hawthorne's own words, "Lacked reference of adaptation to the world into which she was born". Hawthorne's criticism of the introspective or seclusive nature in Dimmesdale is not unconnected with his suspicion of the intellectual who sets himself to lonely self contemplation, becoming fatally aloof from humanity.

The Scarlet Letter grows organically out of the interactions between the characters. Hester feels that what they did had a consecration of its own; he(Dimmesdale) knows that at least they have never violated in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. They are distinguished from the wronged husband(Chillingworth) in accordance with the theological doctrine. His excessive love for things takes a secondary place in the affections, though

leading to the sin of lust is less grave than love disaccorded, love turned from good and from his creatures; into self-consuming envy and vengeful pride.

**Author and Subjectivity:**

Puritanism, is a word, not only objectively as Hawthorne tried to place it there, but subjectively as well, not in his judgment of his characters in any harshness of prejudice or in the obtrusion of a moral lesson; but in the very quality of his own vision, in the love of the picture, in a certain coldness and exclusiveness of treatment.

The experiences and personal attitude of the novelist invariably count a lot in any work of fiction, though in digging all the matter out of one's own intimate shreds of experience, one might run the risk of not being recognized as a self expression is the imperative urge of the novelist and he cannot help keeping himself away from his work of art.

Joel P Fister calls, "Cultural innerselfing is about subjectivity formation of the novelist's insistence on the divided self and recognition of otherness.

According to John Locke, personal identity (the self) "depends on consciousness, not on substance or on the soul. We are the same person to the extent that we are conscious of our past and future thoughts and conscious of our present thoughts and actions in the same way as we are conscious of our present thoughts and actions".

The personality of an individual extends it self beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness where by it becomes concerned and accountable, to own and imputes to itself past actions just upon the same ground and for the same reason as it does the present. All which are founded in a concern for happiness, the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness that which is conscious of pleasure and pain, desiring that the self that is conscious should be happy.

Consciousness is the subjectivity without any relationship with any object as it is trans-empirical giving rise to a dichotomy between itself as the world of objects presented to it. When it becomes worldly, it loses its identity to the extent of making it impossible for an individual to segregate it. An object of consciousness where as consciousness which reveals whatever is presented to it is the subject. The naïve and natural mode of thinking and its resultant activity are due to our ignorance of the self, the pure consciousness, the transcendental subjectivity.

The ambiguity of the human conduct and the ambiguity of external action can be found in our understanding of the novel with its various interpretations.

**Transcendentalism and its influence:** Transcendentalism, (1815-1835), acted as a kind of repository of ideas from which American writers could borrow ideas for their self-imposed task of creating a new metaphysics for the American democracy.

Transcendentalism provided an almost perfect theoretical framework for Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman as all these five writers had a profound sense of the relation of these problems to man's defects and potentialities.

The transcendentalism believes that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self – realization. Self – realization, in turn, depends upon the harmonious reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies.

- (1) The expansive or self transcending impulse of the self, its desire to embrace the world and become one with the world (like Hester).
- (2) The contracting or self – asserting impulse of the individual, his desire to withdraw, to remain unique and separate and to be responsible only to himself (Arthur Dimmesdale).

In *Scarlet Letter* (ch.24) we find Hawthorne asserting that the world should wait for some brighter period when a new truth would be revealed and only in Heaven's own time would man and woman be able to find a surer ground of mutual happiness.

As Hester Prynne says in *The Scarlet Letter*, men are here “wandering in this gloomy maze of evil and stumbling, at every step, over the guilt, wherewith we have strewn path”.

How the principle of consciousness regulates our knowledge claims is formulated positively and negatively. What is affronted by consciousness through its intentional performance cannot be derived and what is derived by consciousness through its intentional performance cannot be affirmed consciousness by its very nature is revelatory. It reveals the mental states and the cogitations of the mind on its own; it also reveals the external objects through the mind and the senses.

The association of consciousness with the mind gives rise to the emergence of the 'I' or ego. Though the ego is transcendent to it and is, therefore, different from it, it nevertheless identifies itself and appears as 'I'. Once the transcendental; self puts on the mask of the 'I', then it begins to function through its intentional acts, taking advantage of the senses and the body.

Functioning through the mind-sense -body complex, the 'I' comes into relation with the objects of the external world, develop pragmatic attitude towards them through its intentional acts, considers those objects which are helpful to it as good and those which are

not helpful as bad and behaves as if it were helped or hindered by them. The transcendental subjectivity which provides meaning and validity to the objects is now thrown into the world as it embodies subjectivity as if it were an entity in need of sustenance from the very objects which are “constituted” or accomplished by it. Such is the entanglement of the self as the embodied subjectivity functioning as a being in the world the journey of the self is one of the progressive “fall”.

The phenomenological reflection through a rigorous regressive analysis helps it to remove the coverings of the self including the mask of ‘I’, which one is external to it and know the self as it is if the transcendental subjectivity is the real self the ‘I’, the empirical self which functions through the mind, body complex; is the false self since the ‘I’ brings together the self and the objects of the world, its role is crucial. So long as there is the ‘I’, there is the world; and when the I goes away there is no more the familiar world horizon.

**Delineation of Characters:**

David Levin in his essay on Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* makes this point quite clear. He says in that essay:

“She (i.e., Hester) is a complex figure and Hawthorne sees that her natural vigour must also lead her into further trouble. In being faithful to what he called the truth of the human heart, Hawthorne had to see that the most interesting battle was not between the hearts itself. Hester is not properly penitent. She compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride. She embroiders the scarlet letter as an elaborate expression of ambiguous defiance and guilt, and she dresses her daughter in equally flamboyant colours”.

Hester goes through her ordeal with a “serene deportment” because, as the author tells us, a sufferer never knows the intensity of his or her suffering by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it.

At no stage does she waver in her belief that her act of adultery regarded as a heinous sin by society, had “a consecration of its own”. That purpose was to force upon Hester a realization of the gravity of her sin, but Hester is unable at any stage to look upon herself as a sinner.

Shame, Despair, Solitude: these have been her teachers during the past several years. These teachers have made her strong, but they have failed to establish in her eyes the justice of the code of which she is the victim.

In his study of Hester, then, Hawthorne shows us the strong and resolute mind of a woman who refuses to surrender to a code of morality for which she feels an instinctive abhorrence. Not once does she, feel sorry for what she has done, because not once dose she

realize that there was any wrong in what she did. The manner in which she continues to wear the stigma shows that she is made of heroic stuff. Her penance, first imposed upon her by society, and then imposed by herself, serves not to give rise to any feeling of repentance in her mind, but only to strengthen her romantic belief that an individual should be free to seek his or her happiness wherever they can find it, untrammelled by any social restraints.

Hester's state of mind in relation to the 'scarlet letter', which she wears on her bosom, has been minutely studied. The letter developed a peculiar power of tolerance and quietude in her in due course of time. It also abated her inner tortures, for her sin was burning on her breast. It created a moral attitude after a shameful erring in the 'moral wilderness'. It corrects her in a larger degree, and makes her rise above petty thinking of the commonalty. It has the power of making her truly penitent of her sin and turning her into a Sister of Mercy.

When we make use of the ideal of a gradation of sin in 'The Scarlet Letter', we find that Roger Chillingworth is the worse sinner than Hester or Dimmesdale. He is made to represent Hawthorne's concept of the unpardonable sinner, Chillingworth's sin is the violation of another soul simply for the purpose of finding out how it would rest. The way in which he broods over revenge and marks down his victim, and drags him steadily to self-torture and self-destruction is made very creditable.

Roger Chillingworth personifies revenge. In delineating this man, Hawthorne's purpose was to show "the effects of revenge in diabolizing him who indulges in it."

"In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office." And Chillingworth himself is aware of the transformation. He calls himself a fiend—a mortal man, with once a human heart, turned into a fiend, for the special torment of the minister. Hester pities him "for the hatred that has transformed a wise and just, man to a fiend." When Hester appeals to him to relax his revenge and to pardon his victim, Chillingworth sternly replies, "Peace, Hester, peace! It is not granted me to pardon. I have no such power as thou tallest me of."

The continuous gratification of his passion for revenge has become so vital for Chillingworth that, once his victim is dead, Chillingworth finds nothing to interest him or to keep him alive. The author here makes an observation containing a deep psychological truth in the following words: "This unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge; and when by its complete triumph and consummation, that evil principle was left with no further material to support it, when, in short, there was no more Devil's work on earth for him to do, it only remained for the

unhumanised mortal to betake himself whither his Master would find him tasks enough, and pay him his wages duly.”

Hawthorne, therefore, rightly calls him a “remorseful hypocrite.” This man, Hawthorne tells us, could have climbed to the highest peak of sanctity, if he had not constantly been haunted by a deep sense of guilt. The public considers him to be a “miracle of holiness.” But public veneration serves merely to enhance his agony.

His excellent self-analysis: “I, a man of thought, the book-worm of great libraries, a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge, what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own; mishappen from my birth-hour, how could I delude myself with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in younger girl’s fantasy! Men call me wise. If sages were even wise in their own behoof, I might have foreseen all this”.

In the delineation of Dimmesdale, Hawthorne shows his deep psychological knowledge. He himself says in a cry of agony: “Of penance have had enough! Of penitence there has been none!

Dimmesdale is, thus, not only an external victim of passion in a given character and atmosphere, he is also a victim of too much introspection and remorse. In the first part of the novel he is coward, weak, infirm, indecisive, tormented, haunted, and hypocritical, but in the scored part (if the novel is to be divided into two equal parts) he becomes self-conscious, retributive, determined, brave, bold, unpretentious, and truly penitent. This mental development is to be traced along the psychological borders, as Hawthorne has explained in the quoted passage.

Hawthorne shows great skill in conveying to us the mixed feelings of the strife-torn Dimmesdale—the haunting sense of guilt, the anxiety to keep his public image intact, the impulse to shriek and thus attract attention.

The author, commenting on this situation, observes: Poor, miserable, man! What right had infirmity line is to burden itself with crime?” Crime says the author, is for persons of iron nerves who can either endure it or, if they feel troubled by it, can at once confess it. This minister is a feeble and most sensitive of spirits who finds himself unable either to endure his crime or to confess it. We find in this man’s character an ugly combination of hypocrisy and cowardice.

His confession marks the climax of pathos in the story. He reveals his breast to the astonished and half-comprehending crowd and then sinks upon the scaffold. He speaks to



Hester of the law he and she broke, and he dies with the praise of God on his lips. The end of this man is truly tragic and ennobling.

**Conclusion:**

According to Robert Spiller - "The ambiguity of his (Hawthorne) own position was completely revealed in this short and perfect work of art. He had fully accepted the terms of his material and had allowed his characters to state their own cases, exercising only an aesthetic control over their actions. His moral disinterestedness was much more nearly perfect than he imagined. In spite of himself, he had become in ethics the total spite who could view calmly the paradox of the human will working its own destruction; He had joined society and his inherited faith in condemning Hester at the same time that he revealed why not only he but all men must love her. Never again was he so detached from the life of one he wrote about, and never was he the master of so concentrated artistry."

Self, we know are conscious self and the self we do not know is the unconscious-self, together these constitute the entire human dimension of knowing feeling and experiencing. In essence, self is what means to be human.

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