

On Hawthorne's Self-contradiction and Self-redemption

-- A case study of *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: Nathaniel Hawthorne, an acclaimed figure in American literature, skillfully shapes the principal characters of *The Scarlet Letter*—Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth—drawing from historical contexts and his personal experiences. The complex tensions these characters represent somewhat mirror Hawthorne's own inner conflicts. Hawthorne infused his writings with his ideological struggles, actively seeking ways to reconcile these internal conflicts and achieve personal redemption. As a Romantic writer, his narratives deeply resonate with an understanding and empathy for human nature. Hawthorne believed in the intrinsic kindness and goodness of individuals, who, despite errors or societal judgment, could seek self-redemption through various ways. This belief forms the crux of Hawthorne's concept of redemption. This paper aims to collate and analyze existing research on Hawthorne, integrating it with details of his personal life and the historical backdrop of his era, to thoroughly examine the prominent themes of conflict and redemption in his works, and to explore how these themes manifest in his literary output.

Keywords: Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Puritanism, Self-contradiction, Self-redemption, Feminism.

1. Introduction

As a pivotal figure in 19th-century American literature, Hawthorne was heavily influenced by his Puritan family and Puritan traditions. Despite his inner resistance to this suppression of human nature, the imprint of Puritan ideology was deeply ingrained in his psyche. "Their strong nature has already entangled with my disposition." (Zhao Ningyu, 2017:18) *The Scarlet Letter*, one of Hawthorne's most celebrated works, epitomizes his ideological struggles and themes of self-redemption. Set in 17th-century New England, the novel details the complex emotional dynamics among the protagonist Hester, the physician Chillingworth, and the clergyman Dimmesdale. Hester is an independent-minded woman who endured public humiliation and societal contempt after being labeled with an "A" for adultery. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale embody contrasting figures: one symbolizes familial betrayal seeking reconciliation, while the other is a flawed man striving for virtue amidst sin. Through these characters, Hawthorne explores profound issues like sin, morality, religion, and redemption. While existing research on this novel often focuses on individual characters from feminist, Puritan, and symbolic perspectives, literary works are reflections of their historical contexts and the author's comprehensive ideological views. They explain the reasons behind these views and demonstrate the complex connections between the author and his characters. This paper adopts a holistic approach, synthesizing prior research to thoroughly analyze the portrayals of the three main characters, thus aims to uncover Hawthorne's conflicting attitudes towards Puritanism and feminism, and further explore his journey toward self-redemption.

2. Manifestations of Hawthorne's Self-Contradiction

Hawthorne is often considered by literary critics to be a complex and contradictory figure. "Hawthorne is less an ambiguous figure than a man full of irreconcilable contradictions... he is a gentle rebel." (Emory Elliott,

1991:336) This characterization underscores his multifaceted nature as a writer and suggests that the contradictions in his thinking stem from the specific historical backdrop, religious milieu, and family influences of his time. Living in an era marked by significant change and conflict under a pronounced Puritan influence, Hawthorne's family environment provided fertile ground for the development of his character and ideas. Thus, Hawthorne's contradictions are not just reflections of his personal traits but are also shaped by the interaction of the historical, religious, and familial contexts of his life.

2.1. The Self-Contradictions under the Influence of Puritan Thoughts

Hawthorne was born into a devout Puritan family with complex historical ties, including an ancestor who was a judge during the Salem witch trials. His views on Puritan moral values and societal norms were deeply impacted by this lineage. He even changed his surname to disassociate from their deeds. Hawthorne criticized the oppressive actions of the Puritans and their persecution of other religious beliefs, yet was influenced by Puritanical views, such as the inherent evil of human nature. He believed in redemption through rigorous adherence to Puritan doctrines.

The Scarlet Letter depicts internal conflicts within a Puritanical society. Set in Boston, the novel follows Hester Prynne, who defies Puritan rules and chooses love over societal pressures. Her forbidden love with Arthur Dimmesdale leads to the birth of their daughter, Pearl. However, their society views their relationship as a sin, forcing Hester to wear the scarlet letter "A" -- a symbol of her "perpetual sin and enduring agony". Despite the societal and divine disapproval, Hester remains steadfast: "The whole world frowned upon her, but she endured it all, never once turning away her resolute and sorrowful gaze. Heaven also frowned upon her, but she stood firm and did not die" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1980:139). Hester Prynne once aspired to break free from ecclesiastical control, dreaming of overthrowing Puritan rule, creating a new sect, and becoming

a prophetess like Anne Hutchinson. However, Hester did not become a prophet; she became a suffering martyr, overwhelmed by both external and internal pressures, emblematic of an ordinary person unable to attain redemption, deeply ensnared in her anguish (Liu Ruimin, 2016: 94). Ultimately, Hester chose to compromise, recognizing that her actions impacted not only herself but also her daughter, Pearl. As a mother, her primary concern was Pearl's future, aiming to ensure a healthy environment for her growth. She realized that persisting in her defiance would probably exacerbate the living environment for her daughter. Facing the immense social pressure and ethical constraints, she believed seeking reconciliation with the society was preferable to solitary defiance as it would provide a stable upbringing for her daughter Pearl. Through profound inner struggles and reflections, she recognized true redemption lay not in rebelling against the society, but in purifying and improving her inner self. By accepting the society's punishment and confronting her sins constructively, she could attain genuine redemption.

Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester's life in Boston is portrayed as precarious, akin to dancing on the edge of a knife. Subjected to universal scorn and ostracism, she endures a life that feels akin to hell under the Puritans' persecution. Despite her desires to resist and defy the currents, her internalized Puritan beliefs ultimately lead her to adopt a life of service-washing clothes and assisting the poor-seeking self-redemption through the ascetic practices espoused by Puritanism.

2.2. The Self-Contradiction under the Wave of Feminism

Since the political awakening of American women ignited the feminist movement, the United States has experienced three waves of feminism, with the first commencing in the late 1840s. This initial wave primarily focused on securing women's political rights, notably the right to vote. However, with the winning of the suffrage, American women's enthusiasm for political participation did not increase as anticipated, and their influence through the ballot remained limited. Often, women who voted found their choices influenced by the views and wishes of their fathers or husbands (Song Yanping, 2010:44). The first wave of feminism, despite facing patriarchal constraints, advocated for women's equal rights and encouraged them to think independently and participate in social activities. This movement profoundly influenced human thoughts, values, and behavior, and expanded people's understanding of the world. Feminist critiques focusing on female consciousness became markedly evident, especially in literature, where feminist criticism evolved into a robust and influential theory, serving as a significant force in feminist development. Not only does feminist criticism guide the critique against traditional male chauvinism, but it also plays a crucial role in shaping new female cultures (He Xiaoman, Wang Xiaojing, 2023:28). In the 19th century, as feminist literature burgeoned, numerous novelists influenced by feminism emerged, including Nathaniel Hawthorne. Recognized as one of the greatest American writers of his time, Hawthorne's works reflect the emergence of new female images in the American society during that era.

Hawthorne's views on feminism were heavily influenced by his upbringing, having lost his father at a young age and witnessing his mother struggle to raise three children in the

patriarchal society. He was acutely aware of women's marginalization and lack of rights, as well as their exclusion from self-sufficiency. In his works, he advocated for maternal love, extolled women's virtues, and reflected a progressive strand of feminist thoughts. After getting married, his appreciation for women's issues deepened through recognizing his wife's talents and independence. He admired her resilience and, through his writings, crafted images of new women who displayed strength and resilience despite societal oppression. However, Hawthorne's feminist views were not without their contradictions and limitations. Influenced by the patriarchal and Puritanical ethos of his time, he occasionally portrayed women in a negative light, condemning what he perceived as their moral failings or inherent wickedness. His reflections, therefore, were from a predominantly patriarchal perspective, leading to a portrayal of women in his works as either paragons of virtue or embodiments of vice, showcasing the contradictions in his views on feminism. On one hand, he sympathized with and respected women's experiences, advocating for their recognition and strength. On the other, his critique of women's supposed wickedness highlighted his self-contradictory feminist ideology.

Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies the complex and contradictory nature of the new women with independent thoughts during Hawthorne's era. Arranged to marry Chillingworth, a doctor devoid of affection for her, Hester was treated merely as an object for his unilateral emotional fulfillment and familial desires, disregarding her emotional needs—a reflection of patriarchal dominance. Puritan doctrine dictated that a woman should remain loyal to her husband regardless of her personal feelings, denying her the right to pursue true love. However, Hester defied such constraints. When her husband disappeared, she did not conform to the expectations of widowhood but courageously sought true love. Branded an adulteress, she became the focal point of public scorn, with the scarlet 'A' on her chest symbolizing her shame. Yet, Hester resisted succumbing to societal judgment, challenging conventional secular and religious norms with her resilience and independent thought, presenting a bold alternative model for women's existence. Despite her progressive views and bravery in confronting Puritan and male-dominated societal norms, she struggled to achieve complete economic independence and remained tethered by familial obligations, limiting her ability to fully engage in social activities. Hester, as a woman, was restricted by gender roles and familial responsibilities imposed by society. Despite striving for an independent life, she bore the burden of caring for her daughter and faced additional pressure and condemnation as a single mother. Her feminist struggle reflects the broader struggles of women in that era, unable to fully realize their rights or break free from societal constraints. This contradiction highlights the significant challenges and barriers women faced in their quest for autonomy and rights during Hawthorne's time.

3. Hawthorne's Self-Redemption

3.1. Puritan Redemption

Puritans held the belief that humanity was deeply mired in original sin due to the fall of Adam and Eve, which corrupted human nature and led to the pervasive spread of evil. This fall disrupted the once harmonious relationship between humanity and God, severing a sacred connection and plunging humanity into a state of sin and death. Consequently,

to achieve self-redemption, become God's chosen ones, and ascend to heaven post-mortem, Puritan adherents advocated for repentance and prayer, renunciation of worldly pleasures and material temptations, as well as engaging in service and charity. They believed these practices could help secure God's forgiveness and salvation (Wang Qiuyuan, 2011:33).

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne initially wants to escape Puritan doctrine after committing adultery, but ultimately reconciles with it, believing true redemption is only attainable through the Puritan path of salvation. She accepts harsh societal punishments, including social ostracism and moral/spiritual suffering. Her acceptance reflects acknowledgment and repentance of her sin, marking a pivotal step towards self-redemption. During isolation, Hester reflects deeply on her actions, becoming more resilient, independent, and wise. She recognizes repercussions of her sin and atones through acts of kindness and sincerity. Despite societal backlash, Hester uses exceptional needlework skills to produce fashionable garments while donning plain attire herself. She helps the poor despite occasional ingratitude, exhibiting fortitude. Hester's unyielding spirit earns respect and recognition from her community. She transforms the letter from a symbol of shame to love and kindness, becoming a source of spiritual solace for many. After her death, she's buried next to Dimmesdale, fulfilling her wish to be eternally united with her love. In her final acts, Hester demonstrates forgiveness and mercy towards Dimmesdale, despite his cowardice and secrecy, praying for his soul and exemplifying profound transformation and redemption achieved through enduring faith and charity. Hester Prynne can be seen as a reflection of Nathaniel Hawthorne himself, embodying his contemplations on redemption and using her character as a vessel for his own salvation. At the novel's conclusion, Hester leaves Boston but ultimately returns to the very place of her suffering, resuming the burden of the letter "A", a symbol of shame she had previously cast aside: "Hester Prynne had returned, and she resumed the symbol of shame she had long abandoned" (Hawthorne, 1980: 206). This return marks the completion of her redemption journey, achieving self-salvation.

Hester's decision to return perplexes many, yet when viewed through the lens of Hawthorne's Puritan background, her actions become understandable. Despite his critique of Puritanical repression of human nature, Hawthorne's core identity remains deeply rooted in Puritan values, which influence his reluctance to allow Hester-or himself-to fully reject his religious faith and familial ties. Her return symbolizes the enduring presence of the Puritan spirit within Hawthorne. Similarly, Hawthorne himself is bound to the familial legacy that brings him much conflict and distress; he cannot permit Hester to escape her "place of suffering" any more than he can escape his own. Thus, Hester's ultimate fate is not just a narrative decision but a symbolic manifestation of Hawthorne's struggle with his Puritan heritage. Just as Hawthorne is compelled to engage with the Puritan practices of asceticism and repentance, seeking God's forgiveness for his ancestors' roles in the witch trials, he intertwines his identity with Hester's. Their shared path of returning to their roots reflects Hawthorne's pursuit of self-liberation and redemption, illustrating a complex interplay of personal guilt, religious duty, and the quest for moral absolution.

3.2. Romantic Love

Hawthorne expertly portrays the complex emotions and

inner conflicts of his multifaceted characters, neither wholly good nor evil. He highlights the contradictions and ambiguities within them, even showing glimpses of kindness and beauty in the most villainous. This reflects his nuanced view of morality, where people are flawed yet capable of redemption through moral awakening, love, and personal growth. Hawthorne's customs often explore the redemptive power of love. In his short story "Egotism; or, The Bosom-Serpent," he proposes that the antidote to egocentrism is selflessness and caring for others-essentially, the essence of love. This type of love can manifest in various relationships, including between spouses, parents, friends, and neighbors, extending to a broader love for all humanity. Hawthorne's letters reveal his belief in love's transformative potential, crediting his wife with "purifying" his soul, "unlocking" the mystery of life, and guiding him to God. (Han Zheng, Ji Zheming, Huang Yuanpeng, 2013: 122).

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Roger Chillingworth evolves from a scholar to a vengeful and malevolent character, driven by jealousy towards Arthur Dimmesdale, the father of Pearl. However, as the narrative progresses, Chillingworth's feelings for Pearl outweigh his desire for vengeance. After his schemes against Dimmesdale and Hester fail, leading to feelings of emptiness and helplessness, Chillingworth shifts his focus. He leaves his love and wealth to Pearl, accepting her as his own child. This gesture marks the beginning of his redemption, as he recognizes his moral downfall and seeks salvation through love and self-reflection. Arthur Dimmesdale embodies profound internal struggle, tormented by guilt and despair over his affair with Hester, compounded by fear of Puritan judgments. His internal conflict and burden of sin take a severe toll on his health, leaving him emaciated and psychologically strained. However, in his interactions with Pearl, Dimmesdale experiences pure fatherly love and care, ultimately providing him with a path to redemption. Through his love for Pearl and eventual public confession of his sins, Dimmesdale finds spiritual relief and redemption, illustrating the transformative power of acceptance and love.

Nathaniel Hawthorne weaves his understanding of good and evil throughout his novels, conveying the message that despite humanity's inherent original sin, redemption is attainable through faith or love. Hawthorne's own life mirrored this quest for self-redemption. He oscillated between returning to orthodoxy-seeking repentance and God's forgiveness-and embracing the love and support of his family, particularly his wife. With her help, Hawthorne found a temporary escape from self-absorption, experiencing worldly love and thus, purifying his soul. Guided by love, Hawthorne resisted despair and continually sought to cleanse and redeem his spirit, reinforcing the theme that personal salvation can be achieved through both divine grace and human affection.

4. Conclusion

The Scarlet Letter showcases the complex nature of human conflicts and mirrors Nathaniel Hawthorne's ideological struggles. The novel delves into themes of sin and evil but also celebrates the resilience and beauty of human nature, underscores the significance of feminism, and extols the virtues of family. Trapped by the rigidity of Puritanism and haunted by the notion of original sin, Hawthorne sought self-redemption through his literary creations, portraying idealized visions of familial love and crafting scenarios he yearned to realize. This tension enriched his characters with complexity and depth. Hawthorne's exploration of human

nature, riddled with conflicts and subjected to varied moral judgments, poses the question: How does one navigate the path to self-redemption? This query reflects Hawthorne's enduring influence in probing the moral landscapes of human existence.

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