

HESTER PRYNNE'S FEMINIST STANDS IN HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER* (1850)



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Abstract

The present article tackles the different aspects that convey feminist stands which demonstrate Hester Prynne (The protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*) as a proto-feminist. *The Scarlet Letter* is an abundant source for contemporary feminist studies. Hawthorne –a nineteenth century male fiction writer-- has carefully chosen his female protagonist, Hester Prynne as a spokeswoman from the seventeenth century to pass on his feminist ideologies to his time-indefinite readers. His choice of the male foil, the delicate Arthur Dimmesdale as a reverend Puritan minister to play the role of her co-sinner, is no less skilful as well. As the androgynous Hester finds her personality on both genders' virtues, she represents a model for females to shape one's personality on.

Keywords: *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, Feminism, Proto-feminist, Masculine/Feminine Traits, Androgyny, Puritan Society.

1. Introduction

Literature has widely and hugely contributed to Feminists' tasks to create public –mainly female public-- awareness of the existence of gender inequalities and of the urgent necessity to fight them. Female characters have ever taken the responsibility of growing the rebellious spirit in women; Hester Prynne –Hawthorne's female protagonist— appears to be one of those resilient and brave female leads. The concern

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of the present paper is to discuss Hester Prynne's behaviour and attitude as they correspond to a feminist attitude.

2. Hester Prynne's Proto-Feminism

A feminist discourse displays from *The Scarlet Letter*. The very feminine characteristic of the novel rests in the attitude towards patriarchy and women's oppression while the protagonist Hester Prynne defies and overthrows traditional limitations imposed on her as a woman. One of Hester's notable traits is her distinct autonomy and public assertiveness; attributes that relegate her from the realm of womanhood; she hence occupies a too confined place in womanly character of the 17th century society. All what Hester says or does –as she opposes the normative existence of a woman-- in *The Scarlet Letter* have contemporary feminism references; her sin, her decisions, her mistakes, all reflect Hawthorne's notions of gender.

The story recounts detailed chronicle of a woman sinner who struggles to survive in a rigid puritan male-dominated social milieu, and who struggles against the feeling of guilt through the scarlet letter that she has been urged to wear—as victim to seventeenth century American religious and social mores and claims. The scarlet token serves as a reminder for Hester of her sin, it stands as a warning for the other villagers in order not to commit the same sin. It also stands as a badge of shame to be recognized as a sinner by strangers. The token, however, turns to signify additional meanings. Though it is painful, it teaches Hester courage; and turns, hence, to signify a badge of courage –as Hawthorne comes to declare while representing it as a symbol of Ability (as she becomes a needlework artist) and of Angelic attributes (as she becomes herself a symbol of charity and compassion).

The Scarlet Letter provides readers with a new frame of references that go beyond their authentic experiences. Hester's audacious character seems unprecedented in the realm of femininity prior to the twentieth century, the minute she transcends the traditional forms of social control that shape and confine women's sexual identities and experiences. By engaging in an extramarital sexual relation, she is judged as having broken the rules and challenged social norms and sexual ideology, and above all, as having failed to conform to community gender. She provides new horizons to women who would come after her; she offers them sparky hope for new order of gender relation, to establish a new type of relations between man and woman on “a surer ground of mutual happiness” (206). Thence, Hester helps redefine and reshape the female gender identity and increase the opportunities accessible to women.

However, what differentiates Hester from other gender-conscious women central characters is her being a seventeenth-century woman – seemingly belonging to a period of gender ignorance-- depicted by a nineteenth-century male writer. Emerging and belonging to an early period makes her pioneer, given that Feminism as a movement started to appear around the late nineteenth century, and as a concept has come to light a bit earlier. “Hawthorne raises the issue of gender in a way that anticipates the twentieth-century feminist gender” (Tassi, 1998: 30). In this respect, Hester is a proto-feminist, for her attitudes in *The Scarlet Letter* have theorized serious notions that were influential to Feminism.

The community’s response to Hester’s gender transgression is condemning. Notwithstanding, she succeeds to survive and cope with this public condemnation. She stands firm and reacts with determination in front of the continuous scorn –of the village people, the clergy and even the children. The scarlet letter enables her to boldly encounter those who humiliate her, with contemptuous eyes, with shameless soul, for she knows how foul their hearts are and how more dangerous their secret sins are than her own. She, at least, proves herself true to her soul’s desires and guidance, for the infraction she commits is willful but hurtful to none.

Her defiance against people’s gaze at her token of shame grows day by day; her being an object of scrutiny does not embarrass her in the extreme intensity that one may expect it to be. Though she actually feels repentance for her moral transgression, but she does her best to seem strong. The dignified and haughty manner she opts for while facing --and for the first time after her crime-- the village people, conveys her being self-confident, and above all rebellious. Her determination to hide her weakness is an exhibition of her strength; a trait traditionally defined as manly.

What is rather weird is that Hester’s women fellows do not show any support or sympathy to her when severely punished by the Puritan church ministers and Massachusetts Bay magistrates. Through this harsh punishment, they have meant to make her feel the pain of shame that her sin bears while they have created her pride, her very shamelessness; the badge of shame becomes that of shamelessness.

Femaleness, or rather social weakness and subordination, has been handed down from mother to daughter over generations. “for throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother had transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slightly physical frame, if not character of less force and solidity than her own ” (64). If any woman deviates –in any way—from

female gender standards or adopts one of the masculine gender traits, she is then evaluated as a man-like and considered in such a case as an outcast. This is how people regard the queen Elizabeth I “when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex” (64/65). In the same vein as Hawthorne grasps and tries to represent the concept of woman, in some sense, Hester Prynne can be viewed by many as a man-like. “She was *lady-like* ... characterized by a *certain state of dignity* rather than by the delicate evanescent and indescribable grace which is now recognized as its indication” (68) (my use of italic). Hawthorne, hence, defines new standards for being lady-like, for true womanhood. To be recognized as a ladylike, one has to match masculine virtues, to embrace the norms of a gentleman. “She repelled him [the prison officer], by any action marked with natural dignity and force of character and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will” (67). This is how Hawthorne portrays his female protagonist revealing her high and incomparable sense of dignity--a force of character that is rather natural-- and her sense of independence.

Hawthorne focuses on describing Hester as a lady-like (not a man-like); a lady-like with dignity, nevertheless; as a respectful woman who opposes delicacy. This strength of Hester, the author refers to, as “native energy of character and rare capacity” (105). This strength is a rare capacity among the so-called amiable fragile sex. Described as a gentlewoman, the reader is not supposed to regard her as a tomboy or gender-queer; on the contrary they are very likely to judge her as a woman-warrior. “So strong was Hester Prynne with a woman’s strength” (201). She demonstrates a woman’s strength; a psychological one that helps her cope with her new situation. It is a woman’s strength, for while treated as a sinner, as an adulterous, or even a social outcast, she exhibits an internal, a natural strength the minute she rebels for her rights; for women’s rights.

Hawthorne portrays Hester’s attitudes as much more androgynous than masculine. She perfectly switches between strength, calmness, resolution and endurance; she harmoniously combines masculine and feminine gender attributes to build up her own personality on both genders’ virtues. Hester is not a man-like woman but seems to be gender-neutral, because this strong and bold woman embodies nurturing tenderness, too, that is notably ascribed only to women according to the 17th century American gender system. If she has substituted unnatural masculinity for a part of her innate womanliness; it is because she has been urged to by the circumstances.

Androgyny may have been developed in Hester as she adopts both parents' roles/duties towards the fatherless daughter, Pearl (Matej, 2016: 24). Performing father-and-mother duties to Pearl taught her to embrace traits and roles from both gender groups. She is androgynous, for although she takes up new qualities that were originally not assigned for her as a woman, she never gives up her nurturing qualities –not only to her daughter, but to anybody who needs her compassion—that define her as feminine, too. Accordingly and to a considerable extent, Hester represents an archetype --utopian character. “Shame, despair, solitude. These had been her teachers –stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong” (249). This serves as too fitting pre-conclusive passage to the whole story; Hawthorne has perfectly evaluated Hester's condition.

She contradicts feminine traits of weakness –like crying. She always holds her head high (as when she walks out of the prison gate towards the village scaffold ready for public shaming without shedding a tear. She also refuses to keep victim of an ill-matched marriage to Chillingworth the minute her awareness of her being used by him increases. Her refusal of accomplishing her moral duties towards Chillingworth, her husband, is one of the breakout of her feminine role.

She, therefore, renounces part of her feminine character in order to appear strong, so as to wear the mask of strength. “If she be all tenderness, she will die. If she survive, the tenderness will either be crushed out of her, or ... crushed so deeply into her heart that it can never show itself more” (203). Hester feels urged to alter to this seeming strength to survive the hardship imposed on her. “Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her woman ... when the woman has encountered and lived through an experience of peculiar severity” (203). Switching gender roles has been essential for Hester, the only way to cope with oppression and tyranny of her society.

Hester succeeds to encompass some of the favorable virtues that are evaluated as masculine such as holding a revolutionary spirit to regain one's rights. “She felt she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to death” (140). Hester develops – and achieves—a state of androgyny by virtue of living in isolation; of “her long seclusion from society to measure her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself” (198). Living an independent life, she starts to make life-code of her own; feeling herself an outcast of society, she organizes her life via a new constitution of her own that she finds rather fair and just than what society prescribes for gender roles. Hester decides to do –and she does indeed—control and guide her life the

way she finds right and not in the way that social logic makes right. This is because “the world’s law was no law for her mind” (204). The logic she makes serves her and hurts none.

Hester reaches some degree of self-awareness; she achieves one form of autonomy while reassuming control of her own person. Living in solitude is one typical demonstration of Hester’s independency, of her ability to control herself and her life the way she pleases, free from the tyrant and unfair puritan society that perceive women as inferior, weak and as unable to control their own lives. Despite her living in solitude, with her full responsibility and guardianship of little Pearl, Hester creates for herself a generous atmosphere with larger horizons to live as a fully-developed human-being. Kreger (1999) argues that 19th century fiction depicted women as vulnerable and in need of male protection (316). The 17th century resilient and bold Hester, thus, represents a giant leap for womankind. What the 19th century writer, Hawthorne, did was hence uncommon practice in his time.

Her isolation has unexpectedly gained her inner strength as she becomes both emotionally and economically independent. Living a hard life has built her strength. Hester lacks the support of everybody she knows; she is cut off from any sort of help. Considered as an outlaw, Hester feels ostracized, the fact that --though it seems paradoxical, it-- makes her benefits from a rare opportunity to enjoy some freedom from the harsh rules imposed by society. She further escapes man’s control and domination, which she believes rather prejudiced than due. “For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indians would feel for the clerical band ... or the church” (249). Estranged and outlawed, she celebrates every single moment of this life scrutinizing and criticizing socio-religious laws that present torment, rather than redemption, for mankind. She challenges the established unfair rules of the puritan patriarchal community.

What counts much in *The Scarlet Letter* is not sin as it does woman revolutionarism. Hester fights against a socially determined female identity. By behaving in her own proper ways, she is then contributing to redefine social structure as far as gender is concerned.

It is the scarlet letter --the very token of shame that is supposed to restrict its holder’s sense of dignity and power, as Hester’s punishers intend it to be-- that becomes the very source of her energy. It functions in the opposite sense; “The scarlet letter had endowed her with new sense” (108). “I can teach my little Pearl what I have learned from this!

..., laying her finger on the red token” (137). Hester sees it a source of her maturity, knowledge and wisdom that she is ready to pass down to the younger female generation. From her suffering, Hester has learnt to be strong to defend her rights and to, therefore, teach this principle to her daughter, Pearl. Relatively, Hester sows the seeds of female gender rebellion in the coming posterity. The germ and blossom of womanhood are inherited by Pearl; how not and little Pearl has all along been learner to the best feminist teacher ever, to Hester Prynne, her mother. The author associates Hester and Pearl alike, with artistry, creativity and imagination, in addition to the rare courage and strength they both display among womankind.

Through the story of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne criticises the way women are treated under the tyranny and control of the puritan American patriarchal society. Hester, however represents hope for women to fight female oppression, she represents a typical feminist from the seventeenth century that does not differ much from 20th and 21st century's co-feminists. Her feminist stand clearly appears in her pondering on women's status and women's fate in a society. “Hester Prynne served as an example for other women that were afraid of rebelling” (Kilborne, 2005: 23). Hester's feminist consciousness appears mostly in her refusal of submission, of being controlled or manipulated, imposing –by that— her independency and autonomy. Hester resorts to overt rebellion through her usual deliberate smile of carelessness, never resigning, therefore, to the authorities' oppressive inquiries about the identity of her fellow sinner, never allowing them to fully control her and her thoughts and actions, never giving chance to full unjust penalty they intend to afflict her with. She strongly refuses to avow the name of her co-sinner because she actually refuses to be *urged* to do so. Her silence is one of her strategies for resistance against her oppressors who try to urge her to confess the identity of her daughter's father; the only source of rebellion available to her at that moment as a woman living in a puritan patriarchal society.

Her courage also stands in her in readiness to standing at the confession scaffold before the entire village –on the day of her trial, it also rests in continuing to live in the land of her own shame between the people who view her as an evil sinner, and who hence hold only contempt and disrespect towards her. Her courage and strength also stand in her attempts to reconstruct her life anew, never submitting to despair that would stop her from moving forward and proving her existence as a valuable citizen. Her strength is thus also viewed in her attempts to produce --out of her shame-- something of worth, turning –by so doing—

Adultery to Angle-like deeds. Her sin does not impede her of self-discovery and self-realisation, and she indeed proves herself in her community by excelling at the art of needlework --overcoming, thence, her misery-- and by being confirmed as an idol of charity among the villagers.

Her standing firm against Governor Bellingham who attempts to deprive her of the custody of her daughter Pearl reveals her challenging character. When fighting for keeping Pearl for her custody, she is confidently defending her rights against the male-dominant community. "God gave her into my keeping --I will not give her up" (169); she openly defies the governor's authority and power over her.

Concomitantly, she never fights the clergy --and the magistrates alike--for their hard punishment because she knows that what she had done deserved a punishment; she believes that had to pay for the crime she had committed as it is more religious than societal. The first law she disobeys is committing adultery while adultery was counted as one of the worst sins for the puritans; noting that they did not punish her for being a *sinner*, but for being a *female revolutionary*. It is important to mention here that gender roles are seen by many (like Haggard, et al. 2019) as divinely and naturally ordained (rather than social). Her proper decision to continuously wear the scarlet letter on her gown bosom conveys both her recognition of her sin, and her strength and commitment to rebellion against the *injustices of society* she lives in. she is revolutionary and rebellious.

This rebellious spirit, this bright incomparable consciousness in Hester is what the male dominant world tries to crush in woman, and to kill in femaleness. Nevertheless, "Hester imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation ... which our fathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter" (204). Hester seems to embarrass the springs of both spiritual and gender life. The Puritans --as patriarchal and rigid as they always have been--would probably forgive her for the adultery she has committed but could never forgive her the overt assertiveness and consciousness she displays. They want her to be always ignorant, subordinate and inferior.

What woman's life may offer to her; is life worth living for a woman while she guarantees the subordinate position in society? This is the question that keeps stubborn in Hester's mind in accordance with women's existence in a male-dominated world. "Indeed, the same dark question [of whether it were for ill or good that Pearl had been born at all] rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting even to the happiest among them

[women]?” (206). Hester, here, is questioning women’s status in society; the very instance that demonstrates her being a feminist. She puts into question the inequality existing between men and women; this inequality that creates the ultimate suffering of women –for their richest as well as their poorest, their happiest as well as their most miserable.

Hawthorne makes of Hester Prynne, as a subversive woman, a mouthpiece in *The Scarlet Letter* to denounce and defy the puritan patriarchal society and to declare, hence, the possibility of new prospects for feminism to achieve equality between the sexes which has ever been considered as utopian.

The whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change, in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish (206).

These are Hester Prynne’s beliefs and ideologies that she strives to say aloud, to make known to all women of the world; and this is again what reflects her feminist views and character. She foresees the potentiality of a brighter success for future feminists and for womankind; as a proto-feminist, her speech empowers women to carry on fighting for that brighter future and to never withdraw.

Hawthorne believes that if “society is to be changed for the better, such change will be initiated by women” (Guanghua, 2019: 1648). This is what Hester ultimately believes in, upholds and strives to do through taking on the initiative to change herself first.

As aforementioned, Pearl, on her part, assumes –and thus seems to have inherited-- a great deal of her mother’s sturdy character. Pearl seems to be the first to absorb “the steady fast principles of an unflinching courage –an uncontrollable will—sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect-and a bitter scorn of many things which, when examined might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them” (224). She, too, seems to assume unparalleled consciousness among her peers; she seems to have taken on her mother’s great readiness to stand against the injustices afflicting women in particular and society in

general. Courage and strength nest deep in Hester's and Pearl's minds; they both have "a mind of native courage and activity" (249). Seemingly wrong, for society presumes it to seem as so, Hester's principles grow in an attempt to righten the true wrongs caused by society.

The scarlet token of shame has helped accomplish these principles. Holding the badge of shame has estranged Hester from the female gender group; giving her larger opportunity to adopt certain traits that were previously not allowed to her, offering her a freer room to allow new attitudes that were formerly prohibited for her as a woman. Her sin provides her an avenue to escape the boundaries that other women both are prohibited and shy away to trespass. "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (249); acts and regions that reflect true manliness that even Arthur Dimmesdale –Pearl's biological father--, for example, does not dare to interfere.

What rather highlights Hester's courage and strength is the representation of Dimmesdale –a male character—as characterized by cowardice and weakness. He is, undoubtedly, used by Hawthorne as a *foil* to shed strong light over Hester's strength; this very specific and rare trait in her. Women are believed to be naturally delicate. Thus, Hester's strength as opposed to Arthur Dimmesdale's delicacy falsifies this doctrinal view. Hester adopts a masculine role that is originally, socially and culturally prohibited for her, and Dimmesdale a subordinate role that deems him as feminine. Hawthorne's juxtaposition of male and female mostly occurs in the way each Hester and Dimmesdale deal with the moral dilemma to overcome moral anxiety. For instance, while Hester could quickly –though not easily—cope with her amoral past, Dimmesdale could not. In other words, while Hester becomes more 'masculine', Dimmesdale becomes more 'feminine'" (Tassi, 1998: 27). The 17th century socio-cultural norms strictly contradict with Dimmesdale's being vulnerable and weak on the one hand, and with Hester's being resilient and strong, on the other hand. In this light, rearranging traditional gender traits or switching roles in *The Scarlet Letter* means to criticize and put Puritan moral issues under question.

Alone among his 19th century peer writers, Hawthorne succeeds to bring an innovation through a reversal at the level of gender binary roles while employing a male character (Arthur Dimmesdale) unable to redeem himself –and worse—implores a female character --Hester Prynne, to rescue him. She ironically becomes his rescuer, or rather his *protector*. "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve me!" (245), he entreats her protection. The feminisation of Dimmesdale serves to illuminate the character of Hester which gradually turns more and more

likeable. Hawthorne succeeds in “creating a character that is the embodiment of libertarian feminist ideal almost a century and a half before the same idea has been realized” (Matej, 2016: 25). By *The Scarlet Letter*, he has opted for telling a woman’s story, and reporting, therefore, women’s suffering and ability to protect themselves, and to protest for and even gain egalitarian and decent life.

At the meanwhile, one cannot put Hester and Dimmesdale in a judging balance as Hester displays virtual qualities of masculinity that are noticeably absent in Dimmesdale, for Arthur Dimmesdale’s lack of boldness and transgression are likely to be due to his being a Reverend. He cannot –thus—represent tough manhood. The choice of a minister/priest to play the role of the anonymous father to Hester’s illegitimate daughter is skillfully done by Hawthorne. Besides adding intricacy to the story’s mystery, it also discharges men from the ascribed weakness and unmanliness portrayed through this very specific male character. The strong female, weak male binary introduced by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* does not hence cause any harm to gender order as the male concerned here is a pious minister who has dedicated all his life to God’s and humankind’s service.

3. Conclusion

On the whole, Hester’s people think she has surpassed her ostensibly socially constructed gender role while she has usurps masculine attributes. Hester breaks the bounds of the subordinate female role, the very fact that makes her femininity indeed gradually recede. Through her intellectual wilderness, she violates the male-patriarchal order in an era when woman’s action had been seen and judged as a crime. She, then, opens new perspectives to the female group to engage into future convulsed resistance to institutionalized male power systems in early America. Conclusively, she can be referred to as a forerunner of an advancing type of feminist ideology (Tassi, 1998: 27). Although Hawthorne’s contribution has created a great deal of criticism and controversy (Matej, 2016: 33), Hester forcibly represents a prototype much more conforming to contemporary feminist theory, i.e. an androgynous ideal to assimilate positive traits originally belonging to both genders. She proves herself strong, resilient, and courageous while never giving up her warmth, altruism and compassion. These attitudes of the protagonist Hester Prynne paired with her assertiveness, boldness, courage, and strength are what convey feminist stands and thence depict her as a proto-feminist character.

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