

**A STUDY OF THE CONFLICT
BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY IN
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S THE SCARLET LETTER**

Dr. M.B. Shahal, Ph.D.

Dept. of English

King Faisal University

Life, in general, is a continuous struggle between the individual and his society. Within this society, each human being finds himself in conflict with human or religious laws. Once the individual breaks these enforced laws whether intentionally or unintentionally, he has to face a very severe punishment. A penalty that is very oftenly incomprehensible to the individual and most of the time does not equal the adversity resulted from committing such an error. Thus, the individual either accepts the judgement of the society and surrenders to its norms or chooses to defy it and struggle to defend his own self, to attain his own individuality, and consequently to realize himself as a person. The intensity of the struggle is mainly determined by the degree of flexibility which characterizes the society. The more flexible the society, the more it allows the individual to satisfy his basic needs without the necessity of a direct confrontation between the two. The more rigid the society, the more it prevents the individual from doing anything that deviates even slightly from the accepted norms, thus pushing him into either losing his own identity or going through a continuous fight to attain greater personal freedom. In other words, the more the circle within which the individual is allowed to move narrows, the more intense the fight against social oppression is. But since social authority is overpowerful, any individual who tries to confront it without being aware of himself and his own abilities will be completely destroyed.

The puritan society of *The Scarlet Letter* is portrayed as a stern, dreary, dark and an imaginative one, which rules by imposing harsh laws, Mr. Ronald Ringe says that :

.... the puritan society is an evil one -- a society which collectively has committed the sins of Ego and Pride. Mistress Hibbins, the town witch, notes the evil that is present, and the egocentric self-Satisfaction of the old matrons at the scaffold scene substantiates this fact. If further proof is needed, One may consider the Puritan ministers, Whose intellectual development makes them incapable of sitting in honest Judgement on woman's heart. ⁽¹⁾

Every individual who lives in this puritan society has to submit to the limitation of his freedom, where the circle of human and natural behaviour is determined by the religious norms adopted by the society.

Hester prynne, the main character of *The Scar-Let Letter*, is a natural, young individual who happens to immigrate to New England where the Puritans were established.

Hester had committed a sin about a year before the novel began. The plot as well as the title of the book derive from this sin. Adultery, wich is prohibited by the seventh commandment, was so seriously regarded by the Puritans of seventeenth century Massachusetts that it was punished by death. The unwillingness of the Puritan society to inquire into the real motives behind the individual's behaviour always led to severe punishment. The Puritans did not attempt to understand or ask themselves why Hester committed this sin.

At the beginning of the novel, Hester is introduced as a young woman, who has a tall, beautiful, elegant figure, with abundant glossy dark hair, a rich complexion, and

deep-set black eyes. She comes of an impoverished but genteel English family, having lived

... a decayed house of grey stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of antique gentility.⁽²⁾

Even without that specific indication of her birth, she is a lady from her bearing and pride. This is especially in chapter Two when she bravely faces the humiliation of the scaffold:

And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison.⁽³⁾

It is her pride and rebellious spirit which sustain her. From the opening scene until she dies, she keeps wearing the scarlet letter.

Looking at Hester, one sees a complete portrait of a real young woman who was pushed to commit a sin by having her natural self yield to an intellectual priest. Dimmesdale is the first man who gives Hester a nice compliment and who really gives her love and tenderness. For this reason, Hester falls in love with him. Hester does not, with deliberate calculations, plan a sin, nor does she willfully do injury to others. That she deeply loves Dimmesdale is obvious throughout the book. Her fault was that her need for a loving companion and her vital passions, and other humane feelings such as love, are stronger than her respect for the moral code of the Puritan society as she says in chapter seventeen :

... What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! we said so to each other !⁽⁴⁾

Hester is in many ways a victim. First, she is a victim of her own immaturity which permitted Chillingworth to marry her. Second, she is a victim of Chillingworth's selfishness and pride which pushed him to marry a passionate young lady like Hester knowing that she did not return his love and that he was not suitable to be her husband. Third, she is a victim of Chillingworth's stupidity in sending his young and beautiful wife ahead to the colony while he remained in Europe. Fourth, she is a victim of fate which led to Chillingworth's capture by the Indians, leaving Hester without any word from him to indicate even that he was alive. All of these reasons which are the result of Chillingworth's lack of understanding of human nature, added to Dimmesdale's weakness in allowing the affair to develop when he was unprepared to marry Hester or at least help her in adhering to the circumstances. In addition, Hester's natural need for love, warmth and tenderness, which is intensified by her loneliness and isolation in the society of New England, caused Hester's sin.

Had the Puritan Society been able to take into consideration all the mitigating circumstances behind Hester's act, her punishment would surely have been less severe and less serious. Richard Fogle comments on the Puritan's inability to judge Hester :

The Puritan doctors are not fit judges of a woman's heart; nor, on the other hand, is Hester to be absolved.⁽⁵⁾

Marjorie J. Elder Further Comments :

As a society, the Puritan group identify law and religion as one; yet, their moral grasp is incomplete, for they excuse the rough sailors who are outside their society. Incompetent to judge Hester, those men

act with a sternness that shows too little heart, too little human sympathy : they need " the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike The holiest among us has but attained so far above his fellows as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down and repudiate more utterly the phantom of human merit, which would look aspiringly upward.⁽⁶⁾

The women of the Puritan society are not different from its men. They are very harsh, inhuman, and they do not have any sense of sisterhood or emotions toward their own sex. John Stubbs believes that :

The Puritan women of ' the marketplace ' are extensions of the prison. They are man-like in their aggressiveness and their severity. One woman -- called an 'autumnal matron' -- wants Hester branded on the forehead for adultery, and another, described as " the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of the self-construed judges, " calls out " this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there no law for it?⁽⁷⁾

The Puritan women say to each other in sarcasm :

Madam Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she -- the naughty baggage -- Little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! why look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or such like heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever.⁽⁸⁾

In contrast to these women is the softly feminine young wife, holding her child by the hand. She understands Hester's anguish and feels sympathy for her :

O peace, neighbors, peace! Don't let her hear you !

Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart.⁽⁹⁾

The young wife opposed to the other women illustrates that not all Puritan women approve the severe social laws of behaviour.

Hester walks discreet, as brave as ever. From this point, her rebellion and struggle begin. She fully acknowledges her sin and boldly displays it to the world. The elaborateness with which she embroiders her symbol, her dressing her child, Pearl, in scarlet as a second symbol, her wearing the "A" long after she could have removed it, all show that she is trying to hide nothing. Her salvation thus lies in truth. When apologizing for having concealed Chillingworth's identity, she tells Dimmesdale in chapter seventeen :

In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast and did hold fast, through all extremity A lie is never good, even though death threatens on the other side.⁽¹⁰⁾

Hester learns from her sin and grows stronger as a result of accepting her punishment. Hester's sin is an unknown experience discovered by her. Although the Journey is full of thorns and obstacles, Hester does not quit or stop in the middle of the road. Her faith and struggle to achieve self-respect and acceptance in the Puritan society do not have any sense of suspicion or deceptiveness. she is true to her own self, and she wants to teach the Puritan society through Dimmesdale how to face reality with hard will and self-reservation. But the job which Hester will pursue is not an easy one; Mr Robert Fossum says that :

Hester's job is made doubly difficult by the fact

that the letter, as a perceptible sign of past sin, has the effect of separating her from the ordinary life of the community, a community which would dehumanize her by regarding her as nothing more than an allegorical emblem, a static abstraction, incapable of change -- including redemptive change -- through time.⁽¹¹⁾

Hester cuts herself off from the society unwillingly and lives in a cottage at the edge of the town where she starts a trade of needlework and other crafts. She protects her child, Pearl, and teaches her how to enjoy the beauty of nature and to cope with the difficulties of living in this world. Hester establishes a very profound relationship with her child, who becomes a symbol of all living love and nature to her. Pearl grows up to be a very natural child, who is not to be blamed for the sin of her mother. Yet Pearl becomes so closely associated with the letter on her mother's breast that she becomes the embodiment of Hester's sin and of her conscience. She is a far stronger device for punishing Hester than is the piece of cloth on Hester's breast. John Stubbs believes that :

Pearl is a daughter on whom Hester can pour all her love and emotion, but Pearl is also a reminder of the sin Hester has committed.⁽¹²⁾

Pearl plays a very significant role in Hester's salvation. Hester's wish to secure an ordinary, natural life for her daughter in the Puritan society doubles Hester's struggle against society to uncover a very important point : that the result of an evil act is not necessarily an evil, but on the contrary may be good. Pearl is good, and Hester tries to bring her up to a good life.

Throughout the novel, Hester maintains her pride and dignity and continues her struggle. She plays a significant role in bringing Dimmesdale to an acceptance of his sin.

She urges him to leave the city. For Hester, a woman of independent mind and strong passions, who has never been a Puritan and who, for seven years, has not been a member of the society, the decision to leave Boston is not a difficult one. But for Dimmesdale, a minister whose entire life, except for his own sinful act of uncontrolled passion has been governed by the Puritan code, it is a different matter. Hester's strength and assurance finally convince him, however, that if she will accompany him, he will be able to start a new life. Having decided to go with her, he feels a sudden surge of joy. Hester, also feeling exhilarated by her decision, removes and throws her scarlet letter, which lands on the near bank of the brook. Then, removing her cap, she lets her rich, dark hair fall about her shoulders. Her youth, sexual attraction, and beauty seem to return as she stands there, radiant and alive. Here in the forest where Nature's principles operate, rather than the severe laws of the Puritans, Hester and Dimmesdale have yielded to natural impulses and Nature symbolically indicates its approval in the sudden burst of sunshine.

Although Hester puts her letter back on her breasts, she starts to behave as a free woman who is pure and genuine. Although she asks Dimmesdale to run away with her, her main motive is that of pity and mercy on a dying man, more than that of mere love. E. wagenknecht comments :

Of course she still loves him; of course she plans to live with him. But she knows too that what he needs now is less a mistress than a nurse, and she is prepared to pay any price to give him one, She knows that, if she stays where he is, he will die; if she takes him away, she may possibly save him. ⁽¹³⁾

Hester in this moment obtains an overall understanding of her sin and she starts to change herself physically and

intellectually. Donald Ringe believes that :

Through her sin, Hester rises to a greater height than she could ever have attained without her fall, remorse, and long penance. She no longer makes the mistake of believing egotistically that she could be the prophetess of a new relation between men and women. She understands her own sin and shame, and lives a selfless life which concerns itself not at all with personal profit and enjoyment. Her service becomes her victory, and she learns with Owen Warland (in ' The Artist of the Beautiful;) "that the reward of all high performances must be sought within itself, or sought in vain " . (14)

Hester starts to manifest the impact of her new character on the Puritan society by working on Dimmesdale. Her achievement in this regard is the most difficult. Dimmesdale lacks the rebellious quality which enables Hester to face and transcend the Puritan society. Richard Fogle comments on Hester's transformation to a living example :

After seven years of disgrace, Hester has won the unwilling respect of her fellow-townsmen by her good works and respectability of conduct. From one point of view she is clearly their moral superior. She has met rigorous cruelty with kindness, arrogance with humility. Furthermore, Living as she has in enforced isolation has greatly developed her mind. In her breadth of intellectual speculation, She has freed herself form any dependence upon the laws of Puritan society. (15)

Dimmesdale, who lacks Hester's courage, authenticity, love of life and emotinal spontaneity, is ultimately led to torture and eventually destroys himself. M. Elder comments that :

Dimmesdale's torture of the mind works by the bloody scourge, the fasts, the vigils in darkness and the viewing of his idea of his face in the glass by powerful light. He is unable to purify himself by his intense remorse, and his lack of courage prevents anything more than a mockery of confession, so that all his talk about his sinfulness is only interpreted to bring him greater veneration. Such a position with respect to the people makes the needed courage even greater and simultaneously increase his suffering as the distance between his true self and his reputation widens. Finally, he is too definite a thing to wish for, and he will be unable to take action without some outside intervention. (16)

Dimmesdale becomes a victim of his sin and society which dominated his reactions, mind, attitude and thinking. His strong Puritan conscience had struggled constantly with his weak will.

Hester's recollection of her tenderness in the forest with Dimmesdale and her depression when he ignores her on Election Day is a reminder of the impossibility of their finding happiness in Puritan New England so long as Dimmesdale's position is a false one, Pearl's desire for Dimmesdale's recognition and her reference to his hand over his heart, once more repeated, emphasize again the instinctive and unconscious feeling of Pearl towards Dimmesdale whom Pearl identifies with as a father.

In the third and final scaffold scene, Dimmesdale pushes himself slowly to the recognition of his sin and ascends the scaffold to stand between Hester and Pearl, where he kisses Pearl and repents. Although Dimmesdale has won a long-delayed victory over himself, he shows little elation or optimism. Unlike Hester, Dimmesdale is too much the Puritan to be optimistic about the future.

Thus one can say that although both Hester and Dimmesdale are facing the same society and for the same reason, the result of the confrontation is completely different. Whereas Hester was able to affirm her own identity and to succeed even in changing some of the attitudes prevailing in the Puritan society of the novel, Dimmesdale failed for a long period of time to bring himself to face his society and when he was able to achieve this step he immediately collapsed and died. The difference in the outcome is mainly because of the essential difference in their personalities. The vitality, steadfastness, courage, love and affirmation of life and the benevolent character of Hester in which the emotional, mental and spiritual elements coexist in harmony, although disturbed at the beginning of the novel, were retained throughout the novel. All of these qualities helped Hester to achieve her self-realization and to impose it on her society. Hesitation, cowardice, contempt of life, and the perplexed personality in which the spiritual element suppressed the emotional and even the mental element, all led to Dimmesdale's destruction by the unruly power of the Puritan society. Dimmesdale feels the heavy weight of defeat by evil which is imposed on him through the norms and laws of his Puritan teachings and false practices. Hence, this sense of defeat prevents him till the very end of the novel from taking a brave step forward and declaring his sin, in order to achieve Hester's respect for him and her love, and to achieve salvation as well. Once Dimmesdale becomes capable of doing this, we find him physically unfit to continue the pursuit of struggle and with no incentive for living within the boundaries of his society. Hence, death becomes a necessity at this time because of the sexual guilt that he has incurred and because of his inability to deceive himself and his Puritan society anymore.

On the other hand, Chillingworth faces the same dreary

fate as Dimmesdale for his sins of malice and revenge. Though he gives up all his fortune to Pearl, he has to pay for his sinful deeds and schemes a price that suits his violation of the religious laws of the Puritan society, and thus death here becomes unavoidable.

The resolution of this novel shows that life cannot be achieved by such harsh laws as those of the Puritan Priests, nor by the malice of Chillingworth, but by the affirmation of life through the acceptance of the individual's human nature and chance of committing sins or errors that can be corrected through his/her recognition of these mistakes as facts of life that necessitate authenticity, responsibility, affirmation of life, and goodness as well as hard work.

Endnotes

- 1- Critics on Hawthorne, ed. Thomas Rountree (Coral Gables Florida, University of Miami Press, 1972) p.89.
- 2- Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1961), pp.59-60.
- 3- Ibid. p.55.
- 4- Ibid. p.194.
- 5- Richard Fogle, Hawthorne Fiction (Norman, University of Oklahoma press, 1952), p.105.
- 6- Marjorie J. Elder, Nathaniel Hawthorne (Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1969) p.127.
- 7- John Stubbs, The Pursuit of Form (Urban Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1970), p.83.
- 8- The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne, p.53.
- 9- Ibid p.53.
- 10- Ibid. p.192.
- 11- Robert Fossum, Hawthorne's Inviolable circle (Florida, Everett Edwards, Inc., 1972), p.112.
- 12- John Stubbs, The Pursuit of Form, p.97.
- 13- Edward Wagenknecht, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, Oxford University Press, 1961) p.141.
- 14- Critics On Hawthorne, ed. Thomas Rountree, p.92.
- 15- R. Fogle, Hawthorne Fiction, p.117.
- 16- M.Elder, Nathaniel Hawthorne, p.140.