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Socio-Cultural Patterns of Privacy and Interconnections In Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter

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ABSTRACT:

Since the 1950s critics have been reading The Scarlet Letter, one of the finest and most perfect pieces of the American Literary Renaissance, as an expression of a number of important themes such as feminism, fortunate fall and the decline of the aristocratic Old World values and the emergence of a new Puritan-democratic consciousness (Chase 1957; Spiller 1955). They have found it to be full of elements of folklore, allegory, symbolism, and romance as well as those of a Christian tragedy (sin, Satanic violation, pride, resistance, expiation and salvation) and a Greek tragedy (defiance, destiny, character flaw, suffering, destruction, ennobling effect on and purification of the soul).

INTRODUCTION:

The Scarlett Letter continues to appeal to the modern reader is the way it interweaves the moments of isolation and interconnectedness among its principal characters—a simple but important aspect likely to be overlooked by readers who keep missing the tree for the forest. Such moments are highly illuminating in relation to not only the themes of the novel but also the author's story-telling art. All three sinners in the story, identified as the "publicly known, partially penitent" Hester Prynne, the "secret sinner" Arthur Dimmesdale, and the "unpardonable sinner" Roger Chillingworth, are isolated from humanity in a variety of forms and degrees as determined by the respective dictates of their heart and intellect (Levin 1979: 13). Hester's isolation result from her sin of adultery. Dimmesdale is the forbidden lover whose moral degeneration causes the disintegration of his being leading to his death. Chillingworth, the hidden husband, commits the worth of sins in violating the human heart.

However, one of the reasons, the rich and complex symbolic meaning suggested in the title amplified and elaborated throughout the novel is balanced by a density of other images and image patterns in the novel (Lawrence 1923; Waggoner 1955). Lawrence (1977:89-93) points out the split between American art and art-consciousness by saying that *The Scarlet Letter,* an untraditional romance, is a "sort of parable", an earthly story with hellish meaning, "goody-goody and lovey-dovey," "pretty-pretty sensation of love" on the surface with "inner diabolism of the symbolic meaning". Similarly, a recent critic points out the artistic as well as thematic tension in the novel between allegory used as a conservative defence mechanism and symbol functioning as an attacking device to tear away the existing system (Lombardo 1933).

The fact that its plot, which consists of the unfolding of consequences to a number of people following a sin committed by the central character before the story opens, was constructed out of a pile of old historical custom-house documents, leaving many questions unanswered, lends itself to a variety of interpretations in terms of modern critical theories and practices

(Hutchinson 1991: Smith 1978, 1981). As we are told in the autobiographical "Custom House" essay, introductory to the novel, Hawthorne discovered the scarlet letter amid the old piles of documents in the Custom House where he worked as Surveyor of the Customs. The Custom House itself is portrayed as having a double symbolic meaning in relation to the writer who likes and yet dislikes it. Similarly, the scarlet letter also has multiple symbolisms in relation to not only the various phases of Hester's life but other characters in the novel as well. Part of the modern appeal of Hester Prynne's story lies in its post-structuralist gender and class conflict, with Hester secretly seducing a saintly figure of power and prestige and being rebuked for her passion, strength, and vitality to withstand the humiliation of society.' Thus Hester seems to anticipate Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan in a curious way. (With the women's suffrage battles of the 1910s in his mind, Shaw reads Joan's story in terms of gender conflict. Although there is no such case as adultery in Joan's story, like Hester, Joan is put to trial, ridiculed for her male costume and unwomanly behaviour. Like Hester, she faces a strong opposition from the feudal medieval church and state combined, which stigmatize her as the first Protestant and the first nationalist and which she fights to destroy, getting herself destroyed instead).

The argument of this essay is that despite their sad loneliness, whether forced upon them or created because of their own limitations, they have significant moments of varying interconnectedness with each other, including Hester's daughter Pearl, the product of her illicit relationship with Dimmesdale. These moments only heighten their suspenseful estrangement and intensify their passionate need to stay connected not only with their loved ones but with the rest of the society as well by all means available to them. Of course, they have to work out those means morally and intellectually as they continue to suffer from despair, pride, and self-deception. Obviously more isolated but stronger than Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, Hester, the heroine of the novel, is a dark, complex, and voluptuous character, cut off from community because of her transgression by reason of youthful passion. She finds herself plunged in the seventeenth-century Puritan New England society in Boston—a society too rigid to sympathize with her emotional needs expressed through her act of adultery. Her failure is not to be attributed to the evil in universal human nature: she is rather a rebel against "an American morals which mistakes its own ego for an angel of God" (Sanford 1960:34). She certainly makes a great moral and intellectual gain through her suffering, and her regeneration is similar to the prototype of all regenerations since the creation of man: 'the regeneration of Adam (or Eve) is not brought about by the instantaneous, miraculous infusion of God's sprit in nature, but through the slow, tortuous path of sin, soul-suffering and redemption" (ibid: 38). As Levin also points out, apart from the obvious association of "a" of adultery, the red letter A that Hester is forced to wear on her bosom as a punishment may also stand for the original sin of Adam as it suggests the first letter of the alphabet. Levin (1979: 12) says, children in seventeenth-century Boston had learned their alphabet from a book that printed a little verse for each letter. The first letter was illustrated by this verse: In Adam's fall / We sinned all." A more recent critic agrees that Hester and Dimmesdale, " a New World Adam and Eve, have re-enacted the original sin" (Hutchinson 1991:38). However, it is Lawrence (1977:93-95), to my knowledge, who was the first to bring out all the possible associations of Hester's scarlet A, saying, "We fell into knowledge when Eve bit the apple," and "All beings with A"—adulteress, Adam, Abel, Angel, Apple, Able, Admirable, Alpha, and America.

Despite the process of her valuable realization of her gains and losses during the entire period of her ordeal, Hester remains a shadowy figure until the very end of her life, coming to terms with society in her own way only. Her quiet, ambitious defiance expresses itself when she elaborately embroiders the scarlet letter and dresses Pearl in equally flamboyant colours. As Levin notes, she "compounds the sin of passion with sin of pride." She is an anti-Platonic and anti-Europeanian character, portrayed with various shades of gray, white and black. Whatever characterizes Hawthorne as a major writer of tales and romances during American Literary Renaissance characterizes Hester too: "sin and guilt," "haunting retirement," "shadowy doubt," "reticence and ambiguity," "negative devastation" and "multiplicity," as opposed to the Emersonian innocence, affirmation, "resolute lecturing," "buoyant confidence," and "Hortatory rhetoric and assertion" (C0x 1969: 88). The tensions set in motion from the beginning of the novel may be reduced at its end only in an ironic sense but by no means are they finally resolved. The very theme of isolation and interconnectedness that Hawthorne artistically weaves in the novel leaves open the question of resolution leaves open the question of resolution to various speculations and interpretations of the readers.

Hester's consuming loneliness issues forth not so much from her private conflict with her own guilty conscience and her open conflict with the Puritan community around as from her inability to share and communicate with those who are closest to her one way or another – her lover the Rev. Dimmesdale, her husband Chillingworth, and her little daughter Pearl, each of whom is either perverse or malicious or selfish in his/her own way. The necessity of keeping their identities secret from each other, the lack of free flow of information among them and, above all, her knowledge of her sin kept painfully alive not only by insulting insignia of the scarlet letter but also Pearl and Chillingworth make Hester's estrangement total and absolute.

Hester begins by violating the Puritan code of conduct in her act of adultery. The description of the outside of the horrible "wooden jail" located not too far from a cemetery gives us an indication of Hester's dark loneliness inside the "ugly edifice." She is visible marked as someone segregated from the hostile crowd by not only her prison sentence and her daily hours of shameful punishment on the scaffold in the market-place, with the living result of her sin, her baby girl in her arms, but also by the living, "psychophysical" symbol of shame, the scarlet badge, to be worn on her bosom for life. The spectators watching her on the platform suggest that a brand of hot iron be put on her head or that mud be thrown at her or that she be put to death. Clearly, the cruelty of the Puritanical townspeople is so overwhelming for her that all she can do is to cling to what may be considered as her primary source of interconnectedness, her child, held firmly in her arms. As she is seen still standing on the platform, she reminisces about her growing up with the warmth of love in her native English village, her childhood memories providing another source of interconnectedness. The New England society may isolate and hurt her physically but it cannot take away her fond memories of her maiden years nor can it break the mother-child bond. She is, however, strong enough to endure the harsh humiliation she suffers and quietly scorn the unforgiving Puritan community from which she does not receive even the slightest tolerance and sympathy.

At the end of her prison sentence Hester willingly decides to move away from the community, retreating to a "lonesome dwelling" located on the "outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula." Hawthorne's description of this remote and abandoned cottage, as vivid as that of the prison at the beginning of the novel, serves only to reinforce Hester's

isolation. Her new occupation of sewing and embroidering to make a living is itself a lonely job. Whereas the clothing made by her is acceptable to the highly placed persons such as the Governor, the church ministers, and the military officers, she is not allowed to make clothing for a bride in spite of her fond wish to do so. Such a social rejection makes her feel totally outcast:

> Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of these with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by another organs and senses than the rest of human kind. She stood apart from moral interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside and can no longer make itself seen or felt; no more smile with the household joy, nor mourn with the kindred sorrow; or should it succeed in manifest ting its forbidden sympathy, awakening only terror and horrible repugnance (p.63)

The incessant criticism of Hester is such that the women of the community do not necessarily have to even say anything in words; the very expression on their face as they stare at the letter "A" is enough to cast her side. However, Hester is able to turn the situation around in her favour in "Another View of Hester" where, by virtue of her spiritual strength and professional skill, the symbolic meaning of "A" shifts from adultery to ability.

> Having withstood the ordeal of public reproof, Hester finds herself pressed hard, in "The Recognition" chapter, by the magistrates to reveal the name of her partner in sin. Again, she proves herself to be full of stubborn pride and intransigence, and scorn for the magistrates who only encounter stony silence from her. The Reverend John Wilson, spiritual head of the colony, urges her to relax obstinacy and hints at a compromise that if she names her lover, the authorities will consider a review of the sentence passed upon her, perhaps removal of the scarlet letter from her bosom. Hester is so strong that she now claims the letter for her own as if she has understood, better than anyone else, the meaning of that badge of shame. "Never!" she answers Wilson, "It (The letter) is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off"(p.53).

It is ironic that the man she is under pressure to name is her lover who happens to be sitting on the committee of judges himself. A respected member of the clergy and the community, Dimmesdale is a wonderful study in psychology anticipating the dark Dostoyevskian reflections. He is weak, hypocritical, and selfish in hiding his sin from the public for fear of losing his status and position as a reputed preacher. Despite his frequent sermons on the moral and spiritual consequences of good and bad deeds, he commits the sin of adultery which he does not have the moral courage to openly admit, thereby denying his natural and human connections with Pearl and Hester. Although he intensely suffers in his soul from his sense of guilt --- a suffering which takes a heavy toll on his life—and feels himself only privately a self-torturing isolated member in the community, the continues to spare himself the pain of public rejection. In concealing his sin he adds not only to the isolation of Hester but, worse for him, that of himself as well. His psycho-physical self-punishment reaches such a proportion that he shows.

> The symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over

> the whole expanse of nature until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate (p.113).

Inwardly, Dimmesdale turns to be a masochistic, pathological, and near-insane man. "A false and sin-stained creature of the dust," as Hawthorne calls him, Dimmesdale is frightfullu lonely at heart. Full of self-regard and "inverted spiritual pride," he is afraid of being discovered and losing his position and power. When the Hester disclose the name of her repentance and contrition, Dimmesdale asks her to confess, but his call is conditional, with a subtle shift in reasoning, leaving some freedom of choice to Hester:

> If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace.... I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow sinner... Take heed how thou deniest to him—who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself—the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips! (p.52).

Dimmesdale implies that he does not have the courage to expose himself to society; he is aware that he is living a lie in the eyes of God. The excruciating dilemma of his position and reputation, both moral and intellectual, leaves him absolutely helpless and alienated. His situation is fraught with ironies. As a church minister and a judge, he has an obligation to force Hester to disclose the name of her lover. But as a man of his position and prestige, his interest lies in Hester's continued resistance to authorities.

The next movement of interconnectedness between Hester and Dimmesdale comes in the Chapter, "The Elf-Child and the Minister." She single-handedly, but initially vanity, fights with the state and the church authorities combined over the custody of Pearl. She defiantly asserts her motherly right to her child against their attempt to take that right away on the argument that the child cannot be raised properly in the care and company of her sinful mother. It is highly ironic that she has to wage her protestations simply on her own in front of the Rev. Dimmesdale, one of the three-member bench judging on the wisdom of Pearl's upbringing with Hester. Frustrated by the magistates' turning down of her entreaties to keep her child, Hester is forced to enlist the aid of Dimmesdale, the child's father, the only one among the judges who she knows is the only possible source of help and will come forward in support of her cause. In desperation she makes the following "wild and singular" appeal to him:

> Speak thou for me... Thou knowest!—for thou hast sympathies which these men lack—thou knowest what is in my heart and what are a mother's rights and how much the stronger they are when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter. Look thou to it! I will nt lose the child! Look to it! (p.83).

It is obvious from Hester's address that a private exchange between the two lovers takesplace before an uncomprehending audience. By her silence she has so far protected Dimmesdale form being exposed; by now she seems to be ready to go to the extent of threatening him for the sake of Pearl. Partly out of being frightened by her implied threats and partly out of being honestly moved by her distress, Dimmesdale undertakes to intervene on her behalf and exercise the force of his moral authority. Despite Governor Billingham trying to isolate Hester from her child, Dimmesdale steps in arguing that Pearl is her only contact with humanity—a responsible link that will save her from the reckless actions to which she might resort as an outcast from society. He also views Pearl as a special gift from God which is meant for a blessing and a retribution that are more effective than the scarlet letter. All this

reasoning by Dimmesdale persuades Governor Billingham and the Reverend Wilson to drop their demand on Hester. Thus, the mother- child bond is reaffirmed and despite the frequent instances of isolation, Hester's connection to Pearl is strengthened.

The relationship between Hester and Pearl seems to be a complex one. In a sense, Pearl is the most problematic character in the novel. There is no childlike innocence in her. She is a strange little girl who shows some instances where she isolates himself from her mother by her unusual, sometimes devilish manner, punishing the letter's sense of loneliness deeper, and some instances where the mother – child bond is re-affirmed. Pearl is the product of Hester's sinful passionate love, her presence thereby constantly reminding Hester about her sin. While Pearl is a connecting link between the lovers, she is also a living symbol of their painful separation and their need to get reunited as well. As such she is a means of both "moral salvation" and "psychological rehabilitation." At the literal as well as the symbolic level, she is the human counterpart to the scarlet letter for which she shows uncanny fascination and she would not rest as long as the mystery of that "ignominious" letter, as it is continually referred to by the Rev. Wilson, is not resolved.

Pearl, as Hawthorne reiterstes at tiresome length, is the scarlet letter both physically and mentally. Her function in the book is more than to symbolize the union of Hester and Dimmesdale; she is actually a kind of commentary on the symbol itself. As "the scarlet letter in another form," she reveals what the letter is – the psychophysical presence of "adultery," whatever meaning that word may take (Fiedelson 1973:11).

Pearl may be "a born outcast of the infantile world," as Hawthorne calls her, but "in the action of the novel," as Levin (1979:15) observes, "Pearl represents the conscience of the community, and the evidence that the community is inevitably concerned in the actions of individuals who wish to escape it." A hot-tempered, unruly, impish-looking girl, Pearl is, according to Governor Billingham, something of a witch; yet according to others in the Puritan colony she is the devil's offspring. She makes matters worse for Hester by continuing to be a naughty little girl and furthering their seclusion from the community. She fights with other children, throws stones at them, and does not respond to their greetings. Instead of being friendly with others, she talks with trees and birds and streams and plays by herself. She throws flowers at her mother's scarlet letter about which she asks too many questions to reduce her loneliness even bit. As her own daughter and her only constant companion, Pearl could be expected to take away her mother's state of isolation but actually it is the reverse, causing much distress to Hester. "The sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself because it is afraid of something on your bosom," she says to Hester (p.132). (In chapter 19, "The Child at the Brook-Side") she would not even go near Hester because she (Hester) takes off the scarlet letter and let's loose her beautiful luxuriant hair. Once Hester puts the letter on and does her hair back up the way it was, Pearl gets normal and friendly with her. She would not listen to her mother's order that she make friends with Dimmesdale and she would continue to avoid him until and unless he publicly recognizes her as his daughter. Although in her wild and stubborn independence she is similar to her mother, Pearl seems to be a strange child, behaving childishly but in a symbolic way, which is hardly comprehended even by Hester who sometimes needs to reaffirm her bond with Pearl by wondering and literally questioning herself if she (Pearl) is indeed her daughter.

Hester suffers from still another side – her English husband Dr. Prynne. Much older than Hester, he has sent his young wife alone to the New World a few years ago. Shipwrecked and

rescued by Indians, he surfaces as an unknown individual watching his wife stand in disgrace on the scaffold (In "The Recognition" scene). Prynne, whom Hester of course recognizes in the crowd from her platform, is far from a loving or concerned husband. "A wise sentence! Is his cold answer to the penalties meted out to her. The cruel and vindictive Prynne, who disguises himself as Roger Chillingworth, promises to find out who his wife's lover is and promises vengeance on his soul, thereby isolating Hester further away from Dimmesdale and depriving her of any degree of inner peace whatsoever. Hester's punishment is not quite enough or fair to him:

> Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone. It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known!—he will be known—he will be known!" (p.49).

The hidden husband and the estranged wife are brought together for the first time when he visits her in prison in Chapter 4 ("The Interview") and offers her medical attention. He does not want to see her die because he has his own ulterior selfish reason — revenge on Dimmesdale. Despite hisevil intentions beneathhis kindly actions, Chillingworth offers Hester, though for one brief moment, a measure of understanding by taking on himself a share of theblame for her downfall:

> It was my folly, and thy weakness. I, -- a man of thought, -- the bookwarm of great libraries, -- a man already in decay, -- what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own" (p.56).

> This is a momentary glimpse of self-awareness of a man-turned-devil intent on damning the souls of other human beings. His sense of connection with Hester takes him to touch the scarlet letter on her bosom, perhaps indicating a bit of jealousy for not having himself the opportunity to become a father and at the same time deepening her sense of isolation. After her initial collapse when she most unexpectedly sees her husband visiting her in position in the guise of a physician. Hester gradually collects herself and senses the split in him who is no longer a human but a pure vindictive demon in human form: "Thy acts are like mercy,"... But thy words interpret thee as a terror!"(p.58).

> Chillingworth is asking her to save him the dishonour of public exposure of having been cuckolded. Partly out of exhaustion and fatigue, partly out of her own sense of guilt, but perhaps more because of her concern about her lover, Hester promises to keep concealed the identity of her husband: "I'll keep thy secret, as I've his" (p.58).

Ironically, such a promise on her part proves fatal for Dimmesdale. She is unwittingly trapped into signing a pact with the devil that ruins the souls of both lovers. What she thought would be in the interest of Dimmesdale turns out to be his damnation. Her promise of keeping her husband's identity secret allows him to go into hiding enabling him to dig into the interior of Dimmesdale's heart like a blood-sucking leech during what is certainly a very dirty and deadly game. (Hawthorne was perhaps influenced by Shakespeare in describing Chillingworth as a leech. The image occurs in Timon of Athens (Act V Scene IV 1.84) where Alcibiades, the saviour of Athens from corruption and usury, uses it to suggest physicians's prescription of bloodsucking and bloodletting as the only cure for Athens). It is only after a long time that she realizes that she has left Dimmesdale far too long under Chillingworth's

evil influence by her silence. However, she also feels guilty about her betrayal of Chillingworth and believes that his deterioration can, in part, be traced to herself, Her awareness of how far she is morally responsible for the tragic situation is expressed in their second confrontation (in Chapter "Hester and the Physician") when Chillingworth also unexpectedly reveals his true and evil intentions. He admits that Dimmesdale has suffered hideously, giving the reason why:

> Yea, indeed – he did not err – there was a fiend at his elbow! A mortal man, with once a human heart, has become a fiend for his especially torment!" (p. 124).

Semsing how hellish a creature Chillingworth has become, Hester is determined to reveal his secret to Dimmesdale, even at the cost of the worst:

> Do with him as thou wit! There is no good for him — no good for me – no good for thee!.... There is no path to guide us out of this dismal maze!" (p. 125).

Chillingworth turns down all her pleas to pardon Dimmesdale. Like Hester's deterministic or fatalistic thinking, he also refers to "dark necessity" that drives him too far to reverse his position. Having failed to persuade him to change his mind, Hester herself becomes unforgiving: "Be it sin or no... I hate the man!" Despite her sense of moral accountability which makes her wrestle with the thought of hating the man she has wronged, her bitter memories of him that come flooding in are too strong for the Christian doctrine of forgiveness.

In the Chapter "The Minister's vigil," we see that Hester is shocked to find her lover shrunken and diminished, for which she holds herself responsible because she thinks that she has left him a victim of Chillingworth's evil influence by her silence about the latter's identity. It is this scene that brings Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale physically together, for the first time in the novel, in the silence of the midnight on the same scaffold where Hester, stigmatized with the letter A, and Pearl stood seven years ago. How, as Hawthorne tells us, the same "embroidered" letter not only glimmers on her bosom but also shines above them in the clear sky. In such a romantically ideal situation Dimmesdale confesses his sin, but only in the middle of the night, which is at best yet another incomplete act of penance on his part. However, the scene shows how closer Dimmesdale has gotten to an open confession of his sin in broad daylight. But the most dramatic and heart-rendering moments between the lovers are given in the setting of the dark forest: " A Forest Walk" and the following three chapter. In "The Pastor and His Parishioner," DImmesdale, with his oratorical gift for the difference between his futile acts of contrition and lack of real change of heart: "Of penance, I have had enough! Of penitence, there has been none!" (p.138). Having come to know of Chillingworth's true identity and his real intentions from Hester, he passes a quiet judgment on themselves:

> We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart (p.140).

> The way Dimmesdale accuses Chillingworth is similar to Hester's earlier accusation of him in Chapter 15, Hester and Pearl," in which she believes that it was her serious fault to have agreed to a marriage of convenience with a man much older than her and that it was a serious crime on the part of Chillingworth to have

> cheated a young woman into thinking that she would be happy in her marriage with him. She says to her, "He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him! (p. 127).

Hester never accepts society's judgment on her love as a crime. She is a daring but intellectual renegade who feels free to take everything on her own and criticize anything she likes, from civilization to religion. She reminds Dimmesdale, "What we did had a consecration of its own. We fell it so! We said so to each other" (p. 140). In an ironic reversal of the roles of the pastor and the parishioner, Hester becomes the guide to Dimmesdale whose moral and physical disintegration makes him seek Hester's advice: "Be thou strong for me . . Advise me what to do" (p. 141). She succeeds in convincing the minister that they should together leave the Puritan settlement and seek their freedom somewhere else, perhaps in the new American frontier or across the Atlantic. Both feel greatly relieved of their repressed emotions, with one expressing his sense of exhilaration in religious terms and the other in dramatic gestures of rebelliousness. Hester takes off her scarlet letter and throws it away toward a nearby stream, (though, ironically, it will land on the ground and so will not be carried away by the stream). She also lets loose her dark hair down her back, the confinement of which under a tight cap symbolizes the artificial restraint of her natural passion. The weakened minister and the silenced woman become full of life and love again.

> Hawthorne, however, hints through Pearl and Ministress Hibbins ("The Chid at the Brook-Side" and "The Minister in a Maze"), at the irony of Dimmesdale running to his freedom in a cowardly fashion before making a public confession of his sin. There is another irony that Dimmesdale's planned escape will never take place, for not only will he die before he can make good on his plan but also he will revenge on that plan, asking when he will have achieved finally his freedom and peace through his public admission of guilt on the scaffold in public (in Chapter 23), "Is this not better ... than what we dreamed of in the forest?" (p. 179).

Dimmesdale makes that public confession ("The Revelation") after his long awaited and his best sermon in life – the Election Day sermon. The sermon took place, ironically, at the same market-place where Hester was forced to shamefully display herself. Ironically again, he made it, just before his last moment in life, on the same scaffold from which Hester's entire public ordeal had begun. He concludes his pathetic speech with a dramatic gesture—tearing away the cloth on his bosom and revealing to the crowd what Fiedelson calls the "Psychosomatic" A-shaped mark resulting from his intense inner suffering—as he makes in his last words a declaration of faith and integrity:

> The law was broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed! – let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! (p.181).

The active and energetic minister who has just finished giving a brilliant Election Sermon suddenly becomes a weak and tottering person helping himself onto the scaffold and getting ultimately reunited with Hester and Pearl in the same platform, though for a brief final moment. The isolation from which the two lovers and the child have been literally and symbolically suffering ends in one last significant moment of interconnectedness. Through his open declaration the soul-searching minister achieves an emotional purgation, religious redemption, and spiritual communication with his fellow human beings. He has been consumed by his sinfulness. Nevertheless, he remains until his last moment a Calvinist

puritan who turns back from his escape to freedom and who is frightened by the still audacious Hester asking him if they will at least share eternity together. Dimmesdale prefers to leave their fate to God.

Following her trip to Europe to see Pearl happily settled there, Hester willingly resumes her isolated life on the outskirts of the town, taking up the letter out of her own free choice. She does not throw it away into the sea as she once had a mind to do during her planned escape with Dimmesdale. That escape does never take place, but she makes the voyage, anyway, across the Atlantic in connection with Pearl's relocation in the continent. She could stay in Europe, if she wanted to, with Pearl, who got well-married to a titled member there. Pearl herself has become rich as a result of her having been nominated the heir by Chillingworth to the fortune he leaves after he dies following Dimmesdale as if his business in life is over with the death of the minister who has been his sole target. His act of favour to the daughter of Hester and Dimmesdale, certainly a redeeming gesture, raises questions for which there is hardly any final answer. Perhaps Hester does not want to associate herself in any way with his money or perhaps she wants to stay close to the place of her lasting memories or perhaps both or even something else; and that is why she chooses to come back home to Boston rather than stay in Europe. She comes back to place where her acts of clarity and generosity are not well received, in contrast with her previous attempts when they used to be received with little or no thanks. Hawthorne clearly states that those acts of Hester's grow from love rather than any concern for her own salvation.

> As Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrow and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble (p.185).

The conventional notion of "perfection" is far removed from the "dark vision" of Hawthorne and yet he measures his characters against the perfectionist possibility in the manner of the nineteenth century perfectionist doctrine which recognized the role of evil in man's struggle towards higher states of purification (Johnson 1973:591). Using a perfectionist metaphor, Johnson says that Hester's achievement of a higher humanity can be compared to he r growing up from "childlike dependency" to mature and responsible adulthood. Unlike Dimmesdale, who fails to emerge from " the closed circle of his own heart." Remaining an "unregenerate," "self-centered" and "unperfected man until his dying moment, Hester's love of him and affection for Pearl enable her to suffer and endure, to evolve upward and outward, and "eventually to mature into a stronger and more productive member of human society" (ibid: 592).

Again, the questions regarding what may be the reasons for the way Hester behaves in an apparently calm, subdues and self-restrained manner are not easy to answer. Years of suffering seem to have tamed her into accepting her fate and confirming to society. But her seeming submission is only superficial, though not hypocritical. Underneath her look of a chastised and repentant woman, there are secrets of her innermost soul, her fiery spirit constituted of an inflammable mixture of anger and resentment, passion and recklessness. The flickers of that inextinguishable spirit never quite die out under the burden of indignities heaped upon her. Society's high-handed humiliation, including its rejection of her attempt to atone for her sin through good works, turn her into a rebel, who questions the basis of every law of that society and creates a whole new rationale for her independent thinking in her continued but now self-chosen isolation. Her Once enforced and now elected alienation from

society encourages her intellectual speculations. From a woman of the heart – passionate and luxurious – Hester becomes a woman of the head, and in the process loses her feminity (Donohue 1985:50).

Hester joins Dimmesdale in death, which shows her indomitable spirit and attachment to him. She is buried beside him with the letter A engraved on their common tombstone and with its meaning having undergone a transformation from "adultery" to Adam's first disobedience to "ability," thus giving the symbol a "plurisignitive" importance.

It is possible that Hester, an outcast from society, living on the edge of the wilderness, may have recourse to a distorted view of life in her intellectual independence. Although freedom of speech and freedom of thought are one's fundamental rights, integration with society and identification with fellow beings are also basic to the growth and development of a civilized society. These needs require one to keep within limits. While to find something redemptive based on her Arminian belief in human perfectibility through good works only, Hester is at the same time withdrawing herself from society. An artistic conglomeration of various female stereotype—the sensual, the fallen, the criminal, the working, the wronged, the feminist, and the moral – Hester has been taught "much amiss" by shame, despair and alienation. Outwardly, the trials she has endured have disciplined her, but they have also strengthened her inward self which remains unschooled and untamed. Her example throws doubt on Emersonian idea of transcendence through freedom and institutional religion unnecessary, and social conformity counterproductive.

Although Hester at times points in the direction of Emersonian self-reliance (as when she says to Dimmesdale, "Exchange this false life of thine for a true one...Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die!. . .) the Emersonian trust in the inner voice of conscience, to the extent of excluding all formal structures of thought, does not hold true in her case. In the context of her biography the above assertion is her own individualized and rebellious independence from "ontological as well as epistemological uncertainities, [calling] into question not only the public mortality of an authoritarian and repressive Puritan society but the very idea of a solid, orderly universe existing independently of consciousness" (Smith 1981: 25). Hester is a powerful projection of Hawthorne's scepticism about the absolute morality of his contemporary Puritan community. "On the level of the higher and almost pagan morality which he [Hawthorne] seems instinctively to favour Hester by her public and constant confession gains a kind of purity and strong which is not otherwise found in this God-fearing people"(Spiller1955:63).

CONCLUSION:

Hawthorne interweaves the patterns of isolation and interconnectedness the way Shakespeare does in *Hamlet*. Hester may not be as philosophical or reflective as Hamlet, but both have a modern interrogative spirit which regards nothing as axiomatic or sacrosanct. With their thinking and questioning mind they try to impose a measure of sense and order on what they perceive as being rotten and senseless. Both are passive and lonely, yet tough and resilient. Hamlet's interconnections with his friend Horatio and the memory of his dead father, and his alienation from Claudius, Gerteude, Ophelia, and Polonius fairly compare with those of Hester's. While she experiences estrangement and rejection all the way through, she feels connected with Dimmesdale and Pearl. In both cases it is the moments of interconnectedness

which highlight their isolation and make them supremely alienated characters with modern appeal.

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