

# Looking for Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*

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**Abstract**—*The Scarlet Letter* is representative of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s works. When reading it, readers can not only search for his thoughts and writing skills, but can further look for Hawthorne himself, his personalities, his beliefs and even his experiences. A real Nathaniel Hawthorne is hidden and scattered in every sentence of the novel. Just like Hester Prynne, the protagonist of the novel, Hawthorne is also a contradictory figure. Sharp conflicts can be seen in his religious beliefs, in his hobbies, in his daily life and his writings.

**Keywords:** *Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, contradictory*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1828, Nathaniel Hawthorne anonymously published a short story Fanshawe. Disappointed at the meagre response, Hawthorne fired all he could get. Most of his short stories suffered similarly so that Hawthorne once mocked at himself as “the obscurest man of letters in America”. The situation did not change until the birth of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, which is considered to be his “magnum opus”, or masterwork (Seabrook, 2019) and is highly praised by D. H. Lawrence that “there could be no more perfect work of the American imagination than *The Scarlet Letter*.” (Miller, 1991: 284) Hester Prynne, the protagonist of the novel, is among the first and most important female protagonists in American literature. “She is the embodiment of deep contradictions: bad and beautiful, holy and sinful, conventional and radical.” (Seabrook, 2019)

## II. HAWTHORNE’S RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES

In fact, the word “contradictory” is not only suitable to describe Hester Prynne, but her creator Hawthorne as well, in particular, his contradictory attitudes and ideas.

In 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in the city of Salem, Massachusetts. The name “Salem” is also the name used for Jerusalem in Genesis 14:18. It revealed that the Massachusetts was then intended to be the Puritan New Israel in the New World. The original American Puritans, who arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s under the leadership of John Winthrop, were idealists, believing that the church should be restored to complete “purity”. They accepted the doctrine of predestination, original sin and total depravity, and limited atonement through a special infusion

of grace from God. As the fifth generation of the puritan settlers, Hawthorne respected and was proud of his ancestors on one hand. On the other hand, he changed his name to “Hawthorne”, adding a “w” to dissociate from relatives, including John Hathorne, a judge during the Salem Witch Trials. In addition, he liked to observe believers going to the church behind the curtain, but he himself never ever entered a church.

When he was four years old, Nathaniel Hawthorne lost his captain father and the whole family missed direction. Hawthorne, his mother and two sisters, confined themselves respectively in their own rooms. Meals on a tray were placed in the passage. Families turned more and more alienated since then. To some extent, “at four years old, Hawthorne lost his childhood, which most of us have, which Dmitri Shostakovich and H. W. Longfellow have and which is related to fields and streets, quarrels and fights, innocent and carefree”, (Yu, 2009: 68) and he began to stand aloof from the crowd. When he was nine, his foot hurt and he stayed at home reading for two years long. Although this premature teenager went out for college study in 1821, however, since graduated, he lived an isolated hermit-like life for totally 12 years. In what he called “owls nest”, the 3rd floor of his uncle’s house, he ate everything found in the local library, including newspapers, magazines, annuals and trial records. (Hu, 2000: 3) As a result, he nearly remembered all historical details of Salem and what’s more important, he got the inspiration of *The Scarlet Letter* from them, according to his narration.

He got married at 38 with Sophia Peabody, who loved and cared him and supported his writing all the time. But normal and happy family life was not strong enough to pull Hawthorne from more and more repressive moods lasting for more than 30 years. In *The Scarlet Letter*, dark clouds of suspicion still hung over, whereas there was a ray of sunshine pierced: “passages of beautiful language”, “sympathy and compassion”, “loyalty and tears”. “Sophia did not change Hawthorne. She just awakened another part of his heart, which had slept for more than 30 years.” (Yu, 2009: 31)

Hawthorne struggled in his whole life. He failed to forget religious doctrines, such as, original sin, atonement and predestination, while he felt guilty of his family’s cruelty and hated puritan’s tyranny; he was influenced by transcendental

ideas, while he was still interested in witchcraft and scientific inventions; he pinned all his hopes on the young republic, while he was disappointed by corruption and unfairness. He had to search for all the answers from love and hatred, the kind and the evil, which led to his obscurely mysterious writing style. (Hu, 2008: 25-28)

### III. HAWTHORNE'S SHORT STORIES

#### A. *New England legends*

His complicated attitudes towards the puritan, especially the beliefs of Calvinism, can also be traced in his works. Before the success of his long novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne engaged in writing short stories for almost 20 years. Critics classify these works into two main categories — the New England legends and the allegories.

The New England legends reflect the history and scenes of New England during the American colonial era. The 19th century is a prosperous period of America both in economy and ideology. An assortment of religious theories and branches boomed, such as the deism, the monotheism, the pantheism, the mormon and the like. In 1836, the Transcendental Club was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts by prominent New England intellectuals. "The world globes itself in a drop of dew"; "Believe your own thoughts, believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men." — The two proverbs of Ralph Waldo Emerson explored the core and essence of transcendentalism: "to 'transcend' the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions." Liberated by transcendental ideas, many writers, including Hawthorne, gathered and worked in Boston, later became the center of the American Renaissance or New England Renaissance. His "growing relationship with the intellectual circle that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller" (Martin, 2003: 25) was a challenge to his own beliefs of Calvinism, which trumpets total depravity (original sin), unconditional election (God's election), limited atonement (particular redemption), irresistible grace (effectual calling) and perseverance of the Saints. This transcendental idea, which "advocated a personalized, direct relationship with the divine in place of formalized, structured religion, is privileged in *The Scarlet Letter*." (Martin, 2003: 107) F. O. Matthiessen claimed that in American literature, there were no other books more imaginative than those in the period of American Renaissance and Nathaniel Hawthorne undoubtedly was a representative among them. (Matthiessen, 1968: 203)

#### B. *Allegories and symbols*

Even in daily life, Hawthorne was a paradox. He travelled through the New England, watched the Niagara Falls and visited young Detroit, however, in the journey, he listened and perceived, but scarcely talked, just the same as what he said:

"The most desirable mode of existence might be that of a spiritualized Paul Pry, hovering invisible round man and woman, witnessing their deeds, searching into their hearts, borrowing brightness from their felicity, and shade from their sorrow, and retaining no emotion peculiar to himself." (Hawthorne, 2001: 185)

Nevertheless, he lost himself in long-term isolation. He wrote to H. W. Longfellow:

"I have secluded myself from society; and yet I never meant any such thing, nor dreamed what sort of life I was going to lead. I have made a captive of myself, and put me into a dungeon and now I cannot find the key to let myself out, — and if the door were open, I should be almost afraid to come out.... For the last ten years, I have not lived, but only dreamed of living." (Hawthorne, 1987: 306)

Especially from 1842 to 1845, he wrote a series of allegories to discuss original sin and loneliness. He thought that loneliness, like the shadow following a man, was a kind of sin or even evil, because it repelled mutual love among humans. In order to be rescued, human should learn to share their feelings. Such opinions were shown in *the Scarlet Letter*, especially Hester's confession and redemption.

That he employed diversities of symbols is another feature of the allegories. He believed that all the objects were no more than symbols, inside which certain meanings were hidden. Moreover, he thought he was not so hospitable that he was willing to cook his own heart as a dish to the public, thus, symbols and allegories could be his veil. *The scarlet letter* "A", beyond his other symbols, such as, cloaks, mirrors, vipers, fire and ice, became the most classic and familiar one in literature.

Arwin pointed out that Nathaniel Hawthorne was neither an allegorist nor a symbolist, but a gifted writer, who smoothly shuttled between the two. (Arwin, 1946)

### IV. CONCLUSION

*The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850, when Hawthorne was 46 years old. For more than 20 years before, he stuck in writing short stories and formed his own writing styles and skills gradually, for example, utilization of symbols and Latin words, setting mysterious and repressive atmospheres. Moreover, at this time, his life has passed almost 5/6 (he died at 60). His mind was deep, complicated and self-contradict. He suffered a lot, but he still tasted the sweet and happiness, especially from the marriage with Sophia.

Then, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, a representative, reflecting his surroundings, reflecting his experiences, reflecting his ideology and reflecting his writing styles as well. Therefore, a real Nathaniel Hawthorne is hidden and scattered in every sentence of this novel. Through carefully reading, a jigsaw puzzle related to Hawthorne will be finished.

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