



# Redemption and Alienation—An Interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter* from the Perspective of Eco-Feminism

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**Abstract.** *The Scarlet Letter*, as a masterpiece of the American romantic novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, has galloped around the world for a hundred years. From the perspective of eco-feminism, this paper attempts to analyze the oppression of human nature and the destruction of nature by patriarchy and capital in *The Scarlet Letter*, deconstruct the traditional binary opposition, break free from the shackles of “anthropocentrism” and “androcentrism”, and finally come to the conclusion that returning to nature, and building a society where two sexes are equal and people live in harmony with nature are the optimal and ideal path to get rid of alienation and regain harmony of life, enlightening people in today’s modern society full of material desires.

**Keywords:** eco-feminism · patriarchy · female · nature · equality

## 1 Introduction

Published in 1850, the *Scarlet Letter*, written by the American romantic novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, is the first symbolist novel in the history of American literature. As a famous literary masterpiece both at home and abroad, *The Scarlet Letter* was first translated in China in 1934. This novel tells the story of Hester, who, in the early colonies of North America where puritanism is prevalent, is convicted of adultery and sentenced to wear the scarlet letter “A” for life. But she, brave and tenacious, tries to atone for her sins, eventually win people’s recognition and respect, and makes the significant meaning of scarlet letter “A” constantly sublimate from “adultery” to “ability” to “angel”. However, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, both also protagonists, gradually become alienated and end in tragedy in the patriarchal society which should have benefited their own development.

As soon as *The Scarlet Letter* was published, it immediately attracted wide attention. In short, the study of *The Scarlet Letter* at home and abroad has made progress in various fields, and the research perspective is multi-dimensional. Generally speaking, literary critics analyze this novel mainly from the perspective of psychological analysis, symbolism, feminism, and new historicism. Eco-feminism, as one of the main schools of feminism, also naturally enters the vision of many scholars.

Choosing “Hawthorne”, “The Scarlet Letter” and “Eco-feminism” as keywords to do a research in CNKI, we find that there are a total of 32 relevant academic journals and papers in which the analytical ideas of scholars are almost same from the perspective of eco-feminism: first, they analyze the oppression of women represented by Hester to verify the similarity between women and nature, and then they try to explore Hester’s resistance against the patriarchal society. Finally, they attempt to find the ecological female view of Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*: if new women want to break through the shackles of paternity, they must rebuild a harmonious society with gender balance and equality between man and nature. In addition, although some researches explore the relationship between two sexes and nature in *The Scarlet Letter*, but mostly only show the superficial connection among the four characters, in which the theory application is slightly derivative.

Therefore, this paper tries to analyze *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspective of eco-feminism. It will explore the interrelationship between female and male and man and nature to illuminate the reasons that cause different fates of them, and through a comparative study, it finally comes to a conclusion that the harmonious coexistence between man and nature and between men and women is an ideal way to get rid of the patriarchal society and capital alienation and realize self-redemption.

## 2 Women and Nature: Interconnected Closely

As Carolyn Merchant puts it: “Women’s connection to nature has a long history, and this alliance stubbornly persist through culture, language and history” (Carolyn Merchant, 1999:58). In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne highlights many natural scenes in describing Hester and Pearl, connecting women and nature closely. They, both as objects of coercion, are conquered and oppressed by men. But nature, in Hester’s and Pearl’s eyes, is the refuge of their souls, where they could cleanse themselves and return to the original self, from which we can see their feminist consciousness and resistant spirit.

### 2.1 Hester Prynne: A Wild Rose of Subversion and Rebellion

Hester Prynne, a beautiful young girl who did not savor the beauty of love, was forced to marry Roger Chillingworth. The former was young, beautiful, energetic and dreamy about the future; while the latter was “small in stature, with a furrowed visage, and one of this man’s shoulders rose higher than the other” (Hawthorne, 1992: 70). The union was not the crystallization of love, naturally there would be no good results. After the news of Chillingworth’s death came, Hester fell in love with Arthur Dimmesdale, a talented and respected young priest, and gave birth to their daughter Pearl, which were despised by the secular world. Unfortunately, Hester took the charge of “adultery”, and was forced to wear the scarlet letter “A” for whole life. However, after her release from prison, she did everything she could to atone for her sin. In the end, she won people’s recognition and respect, and became an “angel” in their eyes.

### 2.1.1 The Blooming Wild Rose—An Embodiment of Hester’s Freedom

In the scene of Hester’s trial, next to the prison door, there was “a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in” (Hawthorne, 1992: 56). Also, Hester was like the unyielding rose bush when facing the trial: “The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam” (Hawthorne, 1992: 63).

From these descriptions, it is not difficult to see that despite living in a patriarchal society dominated by strict Puritan teachings, Hester demonstrated her indomitable and brilliant character to the world. She was well aware of the consequences of not confessing her lover’s identity, but was willing to bear endless insults and insults from people alone, and resolutely fought for this sincere and passionate love. It can be said that Hester rebelled against narrow and hypocritical religious beliefs with a brave and fearless spirit of resistance, challenging political power and patriarchal rights. This brave woman, despite wearing the scarlet letter, showcases the unique calmness and dignity of women to people.

### 2.1.2 The Forest—The Refuge of Hester’s Soul

Warren believes that “women’s spiritual closeness to nature can provide a place for women and nature to heal the harm caused by patriarchal society, and female closeness to nature is an important strategy to overcome and survive in patriarchal society” (Warren, 1997:18). It is well known that in Hawthorne’s works, forests often appear as symbols of darkness and evil. In the novel, Chillingworth first appears in a gloomy forest. But for Hester, the forest is the paradise where her soul is reborn.

It can be imagined that when Hester was released from prison, wherever she went, she would always face contempt and insults from people. Only in the forest, she doesn’t have to face people’s ridicule and contempt, and her heart seems to be able to get a moment of peace. When she threw herself into the embrace of the forest, tried to persuade Dimmesdale to leave with her, and threw the scarlet letter pressed on her chest, her hidden vitality suddenly burst out: “She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom” (Hawthorne, 1992: 245).

It can be said that in the forest, Hester can take off her mask and showcase her most true and beautiful self. She shines as if she were originally an elf nurtured by the forest, freely wandering between heaven and earth. It seems that only in the forest can Hester feel accepted and inclusive, possess a sense of belonging, and her long wandering soul can obtain a moment of stability. The forest treats Hester, a sinner that is not allowed by the secular world, with its unique kindness, and comforts her injured soul with its tolerance and patience.

## 2.2 Pearl: A Passionate and Beautiful “Little Angel”

Pearl, as the daughter of Hester and Dimmesdale, is a contradictory combination of sin and sacred love. Hester meticulously dressed Pearl, making her adorable and unrestrained like a little angel, with every smile and gesture shining with a ray of hope, bringing people hope to break through the constraints of Puritanism and patriarchal society. Although

abandoned by this society at a very young age and subjected to discrimination along with her mother, Pearl was rebellious and full of vitality, capable of surpassing the constraints of any society or era. In Hawthorne's eyes, Pearl was a symbol of hope and ideals, and when describing Pearl, he focused on describing many beautiful scenery. From the connection between Pearl and nature, we can more deeply appreciate the beautiful qualities in Pearl.

### 2.2.1 A Vibrant Rose Bush

When Pearl followed her mother to the governor's mansion and saw the rose bushes in the garden, "began to cry for a red rose, and would not be pacified" (Hawthorne, 1992:125). In addition, like the bright rose bushes, Pearl was also dressed in the same dazzling red.

It can be said that the bright red rose bushes were blazing, and Pearl, like the rose bushes, was also full of enthusiasm and vitality. She is not afraid of the authority of the governor, nor is she afraid of her own identity, but rather boldly pursues everything she wants with wildness. She was dressed in red, standing like a rose in the wind and rain, bravely blooming. She is always passionate, symbolizing eternal hope, and thus ultimately has a beautiful and happy future.

### 2.2.2 Warm Sunshine

This novel depicts brilliant sunshine many times. When she went to the governor's mansion, "Pearl, looking at this bright wonder of a house began to caper and dance, and imperatively required that the whole breadth of sunshine should be stripped off its front, and given her to play with" (Hawthorne, 1992:121). When she was in the forest, did actually catch the sunshine, and stood laughing in the midst of it, all brightened by its splendour, and scintillating with the vivacity excited by rapid motion" (Hawthorne, 1992:221). Like sunshine, Pearl shone on Hester's life and warmed her. In addition, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl seems to be the character who is least bound by Puritan teachings. She grew up in nature, far away from the hustle and bustle, and can penetrate hypocritical society like sunlight.

In summary, from the perspective of eco-feminism, women naturally have a closer relationship with nature, and as both objects of male oppression, they seem to resonate more with each other. Moreover, when facing hardships, nature is often seen as a refuge for women's souls. Therefore, in the eyes of women, nature is often more beautiful, comforting, and also igniting the fire of hope in their hearts.

## 3 Male and Nature: Sharp Opposition

Unlike women and nature who are in a subordinate position, men have been cruel exploiters from ancient times to this day. The process of creating highly developed civilizations by human being comes at the cost of the alienation of the relationship between human and the environment. Because men always place themselves in a dominant position as conquerors over time, their minds gradually change. At the same time, mental distress, abnormality, and extreme oppression also follow. Honestly speaking, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* are true portrayals of this phenomenon.

### 3.1 Arthur Dimmesdale: A Hypocritical and Cowardly Exploiter

“There is an inherent relationship between the degradation of nature and women in Western culture, and the core of this relationship is the patriarchy” (Qin Xiqing et al., 1997:66). As a respected priest, Dimmesdale was definitely a representative of high civilization, forming a clear opposition to the rough nature. However, it was such a highly respected leader of civilization, in order to maintain his fame and status, that lacked the courage to admit his identity as Hester’s lover. Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy and cowardice pushed Hester into the abyss of fate. However, as a talented young person who had received elite education, Dimmesdale was deeply influenced by Puritanism, so he was always condemned by his conscience, making him increasingly depressed and even resorted to self-mutilation to alleviate his inner pain. Finally, after publicly confessing his sins, he fell to the ground and died, ending in tragedy.

For men, the natural scenery is mostly terrifying and desolate. As in the garden of the governor’s Hall, “Pearl accordingly ran to the bow-window, at the further end of the hall...carpeted with closely-shaven grass, and bordered with some rude and immature attempt at shrubbery” (Hawthorne, 1992:125). There were few flowers and trees here, replaced by pumpkin vines and cabbage, as if those natural decorations were just an unnecessary luxury for this land. Besides, in Dimmesdale’s opinion, on the night of his tour of the scaffold, “It showed the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light” (Hawthorne, 1992:184). On the zenith, the huge letter “A” was highlighted with a dark red light, which made him tremble and his guilt deepen. It can be said that the alienation of the relationship between men and nature caused Dimmesdale to be tortured, ultimately leading to tragedy of him.

### 3.2 Roger Chillingworth: The Avengers of Distorted Psychology

Chillingworth, as an intellectual nurtured by human wisdom and civilization, is a true portrayal of the pathological patriarchal system that suppresses human nature. However, upon learning that his wife had betrayed him, he gradually lost his rationality and instead used his proud wisdom to engage in sinister revenge. When he gave up his former identity and became a doctor, he also gave up himself and fell into the quagmire of revenge. Actually, the deliberate torture of Dimmesdale was a process of Chillingworth’s self-abuse. After Dimmesdale died of depression, he also fell to the ground due to losing his life goal. In summary, Chillingworth chose the most distorted way to seek revenge. It can be said that it was this extreme patriarchy that led Chillingworth to gradually lose himself and move towards alienation in revenge.

In a nutshell, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth naturally placed themselves in a dominant position, therefore, they destroyed Hester unscrupulously. At the same time, as colonizers who came to new colonies, they conquered and destroyed nature at all costs in order to develop capital. In this extreme patriarchal society, they were extremely distorted, ultimately leading to their downfall.

## 4 Conclusion

In *The Scarlet Letter*, through a comparative analysis of the causes of the different fates of these four characters, we find that it is due to the extreme patriarchy and the need for expanding capital that Dimmesdale and Chillingworth gradually move towards alienation. On the contrary, Hester and Pearl, as females of low status, had the courage to defend their dignity and rights, ultimately subverting themselves as marginalized “silent” others and realizing their self-worth.

Plumwood believes that “the utopian world of feminism should exist in solidarity with the surrounding natural world, that is, peaceful coexistence between humans and nature, people caring about nature and helping each other” (Val Plumwood, 2007:11). In today’s materialistic society, we find that due to the needs of capital development, people recklessly destroy nature, and the relationship between humans and nature is gradually moving towards alienation, especially the COVID-19 epidemic in recent years has sounded an alarm bell for us. At the same time, the concept of money-orientation is becoming increasingly common, and many people use money as the principle in their daily lives. In addition, despite the current promotion of gender equality by everyone, deep-rooted traditional beliefs still erode people’s thinking. We must acknowledge that people’s level of self-alienation is becoming deeper and deeper. Therefore, it is urgent for both sexes to work together to build a harmonious home for humans and nature to break free from patriarchy and capital alienation, and to achieve self-redemption.

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