Conservative And Antirevolutionary Ideology In *The Scarlet Letter*: A New Historicist Analysis

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Abstract

This essay presents a New Historicist analysis of Hawthorne's most acclaimed novel, *The Scarlet Letter*.[1] The analysis focuses on the interplay between Hawthorne's nineteenth-century ideology and the novel's seventeenth-century cultural setting. The inclusion of "The Custom House," an authorial introduction to the novel, is treated as highly significant as it presents a form of historical and ideological juxtaposition of Hawthorne's nineteenth-century ideology with the novel's seventeenth-century cultural setting. Biographical narratives on Hawthorne and historical narratives on nineteenth-century America are used extensively in this analysis as they offer valuable insights into the fictional formation of *The Scarlet Letter*. By historically establishing Hawthorne's conservative attitudes towards forms of revolutionary activities, this essay explicates how the structure, characterizations and themes of *The Scarlet Letter* are carefully formed to serve those very conservative attitudes.

Keywords: Hawthorne, the Scarlet Letter, new historicism, ideology.

Introduction

One of the reasons that make *The Scarlet Letter* inviting to new historicist analysis is Hawthorne's conscious act of fusing two historical settings within the novel - the nineteenth- century authorial setting and the seventeenth-century fictional setting. Hawthorne's inclusion of "The Custom House" sketch, an authorial introduction to the novel, provides the reader with a peek into the author's nineteenth-century cultural setting. In the sketch Hawthorne informs his readers how he had lost his position as surveyor at the Salem Custom-House, a personal experience that led him back to his writing table. Hawthorne further explains that his recent ouster from the office and the shaping of the novel share a similar inspiration. In Hawthorne's words that inspiration is "the period of hardly accomplished revolution and still seething turmoil" (*TSL*, 51-52).

Therefore though set in seventeenth-century Puritan New England, *The Scarlet Letter* reflects the concerns and biases of Hawthorne's nineteenth-century culture. These

[1] The text used in this essay is from *Nathaniel Hawthorne – The Scarlet Letter*, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series, edited by Ross C. Murfin. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin Press, 1991. It includes the complete, authoritative text with biographical background and critical history plus essays from five contemporary critical perspectives with introductions and bibliographies. All references to this text will henceforth be indicated as *TSL* in parenthesis.
The Scarlet Letter was originally published in 1845 by the Boston-based Ticknor, Reed and Fields.

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concerns and biases provide the political context of the novel, and shaped the structure, characterizations, and themes of the novel.

Revolutions versus Providence

Hawthorne started writing the novel in 1849 and had it published the very next year. He wrote this most acclaimed novel of his during "the age of revolutions." Bercovitch (1993: 222) described the nineteenth century as a period where "the political and social fabric is crumbling to pieces; and changes which far exceeded the wildest dreams of the enthusiastic Utopians of the last generation, are now pursued with ardor and perseverance".

Revolutions were underway in France, Austria and Italy just a year before Hawthorne started writing the novel. Even though the revolutionary activity there was short-lived, Americans at large were generated by the excitement and interest the revolution provided. Unlike his fellow writers and his wife, Hawthorne had been less than supportive of European revolutionary activity (Reynolds, 1985: 57). These attempts at reformations were viewed by Hawthorne with great scepticism. Hawthorne wrote that "there is no instance, in all history, of the human will and intellect having perfected any great moral reform by methods which it adapted to that end" (*TSL,* 7). To him, those who tried to do good often achieved evil, as he demonstrated in "The Custom House" how his ancestors had done wrong when they persecuted witches and Quakers. Hawthorne strongly believes in Providence. Any attempt at interfering with natural law is, in his belief, an attempt to interfere Providence from taking its course. He believes than man is not wise enough to do God's work.

Hawthorne's political ideology can be traced in his relationship to Franklin Pierce. In 1852 Hawthorne wrote Pierce's campaign biography, *Life of Franklin Pierce.* In it Hawthorne describes Pierce as an "imaginary mediating figure who combines the future with stability" (cited in Arac, 1986: 259). He approves and supports Pierce's indifferent attitude towards all the political disputes going on at the time - for Pierce did not undertake to do anything if elected (Arac, 1986: 254). Hawthorne praises Pierce's political stand in "(loving) his country *as it is*, and evolves good from things *as they exist*" (cited in Bercovitch, 1993: 224).

The failure of the European Revolution has made Hawthorne even more convinced that attempts at any kind of revolution will not only end in failure but will also produce worsening situations. In "The Custom House," Hawthorne implicitly compares the victory of the Whigs over the Democrats to revolution gone wrong in Europe when he at one point refers to the sketch as "POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR"(*TSL,* 52). The imagery is drawn from the French Revolution of 1789 where the guillotine was largely used by the revolutionary forces. Reynolds (1985) in his essay "The Scarlet Letter and Revolution Abroad" discusses extensively on how the revolutions in Europe provided Hawthorne the framework for his novel.

Revolutionary Thought in 19th Century America

Though it is no doubt true that the European revolution was very much on Hawthorne's mind when he was writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's main concerns were those "revolutions" at home, his nineteenth-century America. To Hawthorne, the end of European Revolution only gave birth to revolutionary thought in America. Hawthorne merely uses the image of revolutions abroad to compare to the rise of radical thought in America. Due to the nature of what he calls "hardly accomplished revolutions" abroad, Hawthorne is actually inserting his sceptical view of the purpose of any revolutionary activities in America. Inner space is always more important than outer space to a man like Hawthorne, and it is inner space that he must primarily keep on terms with (Wagenknecht, 1961: 114). And in *The Scarlet Letter* that inner space is Hawthorne's nineteenth-century America.

A number of social and political questions were being raised in America during the nineteenth-century. This was the period that gave rise to questions on slavery, the industrial revolution, the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, and the 1850 Compromise. Nineteenth century America witnessed political instability like never before. America's political vulnerability is captured in the many titles of books published on that period. Craven (1959) titled his book *Civil War in the Making* in capturing the political direction of the period between 1815 to 1860 while Freehling (1965) described early nineteenth-century in his book title as a *Prelude to Civil War*.

According to Craven (1959), nineteenth-century America could be divided into two stages. The first stage is "the era of revival; a spirit, that of a crusade against sin". It marked the rise of somewhat religious awareness among Americans "to rid the world of sin, and to usher in the millennium" (Craven, 1959: 19). The concept of America as a New World and Americans as a new species of man grew out of the conviction that America was a sacred nation with a divine purpose. The rise of such theological awareness in America consequently magnified a number of America's social ills. Issues of slavery and women's rights were among those stressed. Resulting from this, reformation took over as the second stage of that period. Awareness about the nation's sins is transformed into actions.

The Antislavery Movement as Revolutionary

The practice of slavery in the South was viciously attacked. The Anti-Slavery Society denounced slavery as "a crime, a damning crime," while the Free-Soil party condemned the sins of slavery and its extension (Craven, 1959: 38). Two years before Hawthorne started writing his novel, at a time when he was comfortably a surveyor at the Salem Custom-House, Charles Sumner called for the need for Free-Soil Whigs to become abolitionist and not merely proclaiming slavery to be wrong and pledge against its extension. The rise of the reformation process is accurately summarized by Silby (1967: 17) in *The Transformations of American Politics: 1840-1860*;

> "One of the central tenets of (the anti-slavery movement) faith was a belief

> in a slaveholder's conspiracy to control the American government and to use it for the promotion of slavery extension. In the aftermath of America's move westward in the middle 1840s, a series of legislative and executive defeats for non-slaveholding interests, and the belief that southern leaders had played a prominent role in reverses, pumped life into and gave a measure of reality to the accusation. We had acquired all of Texas with its large number of slaves and its potentially for future slave expansion there. We were about to go to war with Mexico, a conflict produced by our annexation of Texas. At the same time, the Tenessean President Polk compromised our Oregon boundary dispute with England, rather than run the risk of going to war with that power. We lost all of Oregon north of the 49th parallel despite the belief of many Westerners in out just claim to the area. Congress supported the southernborn President's compromising action as several Westerners walked out of the House chamber chanting "Fifty-four forty forever." Congress also sustained Polk in his veto of the western-sponsored internal improvements bill of 1846, another apparent victory for southern interested and defeat for non-southern needs. Such a series of events seemingly convinced some Northerners of the correctness of the earlier abolitionist charge, and they moved to the attack".

The election of General Zachary Taylor, a Whig, to the Presidency was largely influenced by the support it received through its anti-slavery campaign (Craven, 1959: 29). This presidential election which eventually led to Hawthorne's dismissal from his post at the Custom-House is much resented by him. His resentment of the Whig's victory over the Democrats is explicitly expressed in "The Custom-House":

> "It appears to me - who have been a calm and curious observer, as well as defeat - that this fierce and bitter spirit of malice and revenge has never the many triumphs of my party as it now did that of the Whigs. The Democrats take the offices, as a general rule, because they need them, and because the practice of years has made it the law of political warfare, which, unless a different system proclaimed, it were weakness and cowardice to murmur at. But the long habit of victory have made them generous. They know how to spare, when they see occasion and they strike, the axe may be sharp, indeed, but its edge is seldom poisoned with ill-will; nor is it their custom ignominiously to kick the head which they have just struck off" (*TSL*, 50).

What we get from "The Custom House" is a narrator who possesses instincts that are conservative and antirevolutionary. Hawthorne always wanted power in the hands of the local government, the direct representatives of the people (Wagenknecht, 1961: 113). Being a member of a toppled established order, he sees himself as a victim of revolutionary activity which he has no intention of approving. His resentment to the Whigs' victory may be seen strictly personal, especially with him being a direct victim of

that victory. However his resentment goes beyond the personal into the realms of political. The anti-slavery campaign that led to Taylor's election was against Hawthorne's principles. Hawthorne viewed the slavery question "with an awful squint". He wrote "I have not...the slightest sympathy for the slaves or at least, not half so much as for the laboring whites, who, I believe, as a general thing, are ten times worse off than the Southern Negroes" (cited in Wagenknecht, 1961: 119). He differed from his abolitionist contemporaries in his steadfast refusal to pluck the slavery evil out of its context. He viewed it as part of the warp of a fallen world and should not be interfered with. Franklin Pierce was also very much against the attempt of the abolitionists to end slavery. Because Pierce steadfastly rejected such approach that Hawthorne persisted in regarding him as a wise man (Wagenknecht, 1961: 120).

The Feminist Movement as Revolutionary

Early nineteenth-century also witnessed the rise of the feminist movement. Hawthorne personally witnessed the rise of this movement during his stay at Brook Farm in 1841. In 1848, a year before Hawthorne started writing the novel, the first American Women's Rights Convention was held at Seneca Falls. The convention was generally regarded as revolutionary and was associated to European radicalism;

> "By the intelligence, however, which we have lately received, the work of revolution is no longer confined to the Old World, nor to the masculine gender. The flag of independence has been hoisted, for the second time, on this side of the Atlantic; and a solemn league of covenant (as Cromwell termed the 1642 union of Scotland, Ireland, and England) has just been entered into by a Convention of Women at Seneca Falls" (cited in Bercovitch, 1993: 223)

Hawthorne disapproved the movement's attempt to correct and mend what he regarded as "natural law." Hawthorne's decision to have a woman as his revolutionary character might not be incidental after all. Critics have shown that Hawthorne might have created Hester with Margaret Fuller, the feminist founder of *The Dial,* in mind (*TSL,* 16). Hawthorne met her during his stay at Brook Farm and since then he always has mixed feelings toward her struggle for women's rights. His scepticism to the issue of women's rights is evident in the novel. Describing Hester's questioning of the nature of existence of "the whole race of womanhood," the narrator comments;

> "A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way" (*TSL,* 134).

Similar to his treatment of the slavery problem, he treats the struggle for women's rights as revolutionary. He insists that such problems are "natural" and should not be interfered. Hawthorne views the attempts for women's rights to be observed as "hopeless tasks" because

> "As a first step, the whole system of society has to be torn down, and built

> up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other 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" (*TSL,* 134).

Having both Hawthorne's treatment of the problems of slavery and women's rights in mind, it is however unjustifiably wrong to label him as a racist and a male chauvinist. He without doubt was aware that the problems do occur. The women's problem for instance can be heard in the novel when the narrator describes the women who sought Hester's advice as "with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought" (*TSL,* 201). What Hawthorne is personally against is the revolutionary context in which attempts to correct these problems are inevitably rooted in. He strongly believes that Providence will, in its own time, correct these problems. Again looking at the women's problem as an instance, we hear in the concluding chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne's assurance that;

> "...at some brighter period, when the world should have gone ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (*TSL,* 201).

Recreating Pre-Revolutionary America

Hawthorne's selection of the seventeenth-century Puritan New England as his fictional period was not unintentional. Donald E. Pease (1987) in his essay "Hawthorne's Discovery of a Pre-Revolutionary Past" provides Hawthorne's reasons for choosing antebellum America as the setting for *The Scarlet Letter*. Pease (1987: 51) states that Hawthorne's fear of revolution led him to write about the "*pre*-revolutionary" period, as if to comply with the wish of Puritan ancestors "to get the Revolutionary mythos out of the nation's history". The journey back to the very beginning of the New World somewhat represents a journey back to purity - away from the sins of the Modern. The seventeenth-century thus represents an alternative world to a man with conservative and antirevolutionary ideology like Hawthorne. However it must be noted that the Puritan past was not the Garden of Eden to Hawthorne. In the "Custom House" Hawthorne talks about the sins of his Puritan forefathers who, in maintaining their authority and belief, made others suffer. Hawthorne explicitly tells of his disapproval of their actions and takes shame upon himself for their cruelties (*TSL*, 27). Therefore his choice for an alternative world away from nineteenth century politics only led to personal conflict, with him having to confront the sins of his Puritan ancestors.

If he were to portray the Puritan past as they actually were, not only he will undermine his own ideology and belief, his supposed alternative world would also not be any better than

his own. Hawthorne deals with this conflict by instead portraying what Bercovitch calls "mythic Puritans" (*TSL,* 346) - an invention by Americans of a later historical period. They are designed to look different from their radical English contemporaries and portray higher human qualities. That is why in *The Scarlet Letter* what we have is not Hawthorne's Puritan ancestors who are "bitter prosecuter(s)" (*TSL*, 27) as the judge, but instead "merciful overmuch" (*TSL*, 56) magistrates who sentenced Hester to wear the scarlet "A" on her breast as a punishment for her act of adultery. Thus what Hawthorne does in the novel is not only to consciously return to "pre-revolutionary" America, but at the same time to recreate the past - to make new the New World. By doing this, Hawthorne is able to use antebellum America as the ideal alternative world to his nineteenth century America. Goethe once declared that history needs to be rewritten from time to time and Hawthorne was doing just that when he created the "mythic Puritan" as his fictional characters (Thomas, 1989: 189). He reassessed antebellum America through his nineteenth-century American culture. Consequently his conservative and antirevolutionary ideology influenced his portrayal of Puritan New England.

Hawthorne's recreation of history in the novel can be seen in the difference between Hester Prynne, the historical source, and Hester Prynne, the fictional character. In "The Custom House," Hawthorne describes the source for his main character as "a very old, but not decrepit woman, of a stately and solemn aspect" (*TSL,* 43). However in the novel, Hester became a "beautiful woman" (*TSL,* 59) whose face glows with "girlish beauty" (*TSL,* 61). The fictional Hester is no longer the Hester whose history Hawthorne accidentally stumbled across in the Custom House. This new Hester is a culturally-biased creation, created within the influence of nineteenth century culture and her author's ideological concerns.

Hawthorne's recreation of the past can also be seen in his treatment of adultery in the novel. Puritanical readers of his time were generally outraged by his treatment of adultery in *The Scarlet Letter* (*TSL,* 17). It would be difficult to imagine Hawthorne as not anticipating such criticism. In fact, he includes a similar tone of outrage with regard to the nature of Hester's punishment in the opening scenes of the novel. During the conversation between the Puritan women who are waiting for Hester's appearance on the scaffold, they insist that Hester should have been severely punished for her sin. To the general public, the punishment represents a mockery of their judicial system. A female spectator at the scene, in her disagreement to the punishment, remarks;

> "Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?" (*TSL,* 58).

Another minor character, the "townsman," also describes Hester's punishment as mild during his conversation with the "stranger" who happens to be Hester's long-lost husband:

> "Our Massachusetts magistracy, bethinking themselves that this woman youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall;- and

> that moreover, as is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea they have not been bold to put in force the extremity of our righteous against her. The penalty thereof is death. But, in their great mercy and of the heart, they have doomed Mistress Hester Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom" (*TSL,* 64).

Hawthorne's treatment of the opposing views about the nature of Hester's punishment proves that his portrayal of the "mythic Puritans" is not unconscious. What he does is implicitly making a comparison between his ancestor's Puritan culture and his nineteenth century creation. Hawthorne's creation reflects a past culture permeated by the concerns of the present. In other words, the Puritan society in the novel is a culturally biased society created to cater to the ideological needs of its nineteenth century author.

The Conservative and Antirevolutionary Author/Narrator

It must also be noted that the author of "The Custom House" *is* the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter.* Therefore the narrator's voice represents Hawthorne's nineteenth-century culturally-biased ideology - conservative and antirevolutionary. That is why when most of the Puritan public in the novel are against the magistrates' decision, the narrator on the other hand approves it. By making Hester wear the scarlet letter instead of undergoing the severe Puritan punishment of death for her sins, Hawthorne is implicitly shaping that form of punishment to serve his ideology. The office of the scarlet letter has already been set by Hawthorne even before Hester is led out of the prison door. And that office is for Hester to once again reconcile with her Puritan society. Hester, by committing one of the most damned sin in the Puritan culture, is undoubtedly an enemy to the society, its culture and the whole Puritan establishment. However Hawthorne's conservative ideology would require her to be brought back into that cultural system, hence the scarlet letter is applied as the punishment. It will serve as a means of reconciliation between Hester and the society.

However questions arise in relation to Hawthorne's treatment of Hester's character. From the moment she is publicly viewed by the readers and the Puritan community, the narrator seems to sympathize with her. She is described as a woman full of courage, humility, and grace. He calls her "Divine Maternity," (*TSL,* 59) and "Sister of Mercy" (*TSL,* 131). If Hawthorne disapproves revolutionary activity, why then he gives Hester his sympathy and respect when committing adultery in a society which juxtaposes culture and religion is not only revolutionary but sinful. If Hawthorne in "The Custom House" is a toppled member of an established order, Hester is a toppled rebel of the Puritan establishment. Thus she should not deserve any form of approval from Hawthorne.

However, it should be noted that the narrator does not sympathize Hester for being a victim of a harsh punishment, but instead sympathizes her for her struggle while serving her punishment. The narrator remarks midway through the novel why she deserves his

sympathy;

> "She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it, in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies" (*TSL*, 130).

It is Hester's conformity that the narrator praises. Such characteristic in Hester is looked upon by the narrator as the effectiveness of the scarlet letter to reconcile her back into the society. He compares its effect to that "of the cross on a nun's bosom" (*TSL,* 132). Therefore when the narrator describes the scarlet letter as having "the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself" (*TSL*, 58) early in the novel, it is to emphasize the suffering she has to bear for her mistake - one which she should not have committed in the first place. However when she moves towards reconciliation and conformity, the scarlet A loses its original signification. It is interpreted instead as Able by the society (*TSL,* 131) and moreover becomes a token of her good deeds. Hester is able to make the society which she once offended show "a more benign countenance than she cared to be favored with, or, perchance, than she deserved" (*TSL,* 132). The narrator gives the impression that the scarlet letter is doing its office when he describes how differently Hester is viewed then.

However, halfway through "Another View of Hester," the narrator warns us not to be deceived by what we are being told. He tells us that "the scarlet letter had not done its office"(*TSL*, 134). He gives us a different view of Hester - not what she seems to be but what she really is. The narrator tells us that

> "there seemed to be no longer any thing in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection" (*TSL*, 133).

He reveals Hester's revolutionary inclinations. She is portrayed as a radical thinker engaged in a revolutionary struggle against the established order. He tells how "the world's law was no law for her mind" (*TSL*, 133). As a result, Hester loses the narrator's sympathy and appraisal. She is shown as assuming "freedom of speculation" (*TSL*, 133).

Now that the scarlet letter seems to fail in its office, the narrator immediately provides an alternative to it. He tells us of another symbol of reconciliation and conformity for Hester. That symbol is no other than her own child, Pearl. He calls Pearl as the child "from the spiritual world;"

> "Providence, in the person of this little girl, had assigned to Hester's charge the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties" (*TSL*, 134).

Hawthorne's ideology of compromise provides the reason why characters such as Pearl in

the novel play a significant role. She represents the compromising force working between the pull of social norms and revolutionary intention. During the forest scene when Hester discards Hawthorne's other symbol of reconciliation and compromise, the scarlet A, Pearl comes to his rescue by making Hester put it back on her bosom. She is also the symbol that makes possible the reconciliation between herself, Hester and her father, Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl's office is fulfilled when, nearing the conclusion of the story, she kisses Arthur Dimmesdale after he proclaims his sins and reconciles with his family on the scaffold.

Pearl's compromising quality enables her to leave New England for Europe, "the land of revolutions." Hawthorne has somewhat given her the role of a "compromising ambassador" representing the ideology of Hawthorne's New World to the Old World. Hester meanwhile left New England with still revolutionary thought. During the last scaffold scene when Dimmesdale asks her "Is not this better...than what we dreamed of in the forest?," her reply was "I know not! I know not!" (*TSL*, 194). Thus that is why Hawthorne has to bring her back to New England, *for the scarlet letter has still to fulfil its office*. With Pearl no longer around, it is only through the scarlet letter that Hester can be brought back into the society. By having her resume the symbol by free will "for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it," (*TSL,* 200) Hawthorne closes down the possibility of her rebelling against the society thus conforming to Hawthorne's anti-revolutionary ideology.

Conclusion

This essay has shown how Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* are implicated in the socio-political situation of nineteenth-century America. Process of reformations taking place in America has influenced Hawthorne's shaping of this novel. He carefully structured the novel to project his conservative and antirevolutionary ideology. Hawthorne injects his scepticism of revolutionary activity in *The Scarlet Letter* and show revolutionary attempts as dangerous not only to the society at large but also to the individuals involved. The scarlet letter, and to a certain extent Pearl, have been structured to serve Hawthorne's ideology in the novel - for Hester, and other revolutionary characters, to reconcile with the society after their "freedom of speculation"(*TSL,* 133). Hawthorne’s work clearly reflects the concerns and biases of his nineteenth-century ideology. *The Scarlet Letter* is thus an artefact of history, the history of a complex nineteenth-century America, as well as a “mythical” representation of the history of a previous culture.

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Biodata

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