

The Exploration of the Image of Women in the Scarlet Letter and the Changing Status of Women in America: A Study Based on Selected Readings in American Literature in College English Course

Liu Xingyu

Department of KFLT, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Korea

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Abstract: This paper discusses the image of women in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, as presented in the widely-used college textbook *Selected Readings in American Literature*. Focusing on the character of Hester Prynne, the paper explores how the novel reflects the limited role of women in question in 17th-century Puritan society and how Hester challenges these norms through her strength, independence, and quiet resistance. Her transformation from a symbol of sin to one of dignity offers an early example of female empowerment. The paper also connects this literary portrayal to the real historical progress of women's status in America—from the early suffrage movement to modern achievements in law, politics, and society. By seeking connection between the classroom and the real-world social change, this study shows how *The Scarlet Letter* remains a powerful tool and context for students to get better understanding of gender roles and the ongoing pursuit of equality.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne, first published in 1850, is a cornerstone of American literary history, and it holds a prominent place in *Selected Readings in American Literature*, a textbook widely used for academic use over many universities. Published by Peking University Press in August 2006 as part of the 21st Century Foreign Literature Series, this textbook serves as an essential guide for students delving into American literary masterpieces.

This story, which is set in Puritan New England in the 17th century, focuses on themes of sin, shame, social condemnation, and individual redemption. The narrative centers on Hester Prynne, a woman sentenced to wear the scarlet letter "A" as penance for adultery—a transgression that leads to the birth of her daughter, Pearl. Initially enduring public humiliation and social ostracism, Hester progressively gains a degree of respect through her silent fortitude, empathy, and perseverance. Her evolution from a symbol of sin to a figure of dignity undermines the community's strict moral structure and questions dominant concepts of female identity.[1].

The depiction of Hester is not only her own portrait of perseverance, but also an example of the

pervasive social constraints imposed on women in Puritan times. Her decision to withhold the identity of her child's father and devotes herself to an independent life of service, all of which is a subtle but powerful critique of gender norms[2]. At this point, Hester had gone beyond mere literary roles; she evolves into a vantage point, which allows readers to examine in detail the historical limitations imposed on women and the ways in which they resisted.

Starting from Hester's character, this paper makes a reflection and criticism on the identity of women in the scarlet letter in the specific context of the times, and has a certain connection with the discussion of gender roles today, especially in those topics among students. This novel is of great significance in the field of literature and humanities.

2. Overview of the Scarlet Letter

The background of this story was set in the Puritan society of 17th-century New England, revolving around three central characters: Hester Prynne, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, and Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth. Hester, who gives birth to a daughter, Pearl, as a result of her incestuous relationship with Dimmesdale, is forced to wear the red letter "A" for her crime. At first, the symbol was only used to insult her, but when Hester's character and dignity were respected throughout society. This book explores from three aspects: "Sin", "Penitence", the contradiction between "Individual" and "Social morality", and "Women's identity".

Through her sufferings, the novel reveals the society's harsh expectation and discrimination against women, and highlights her independent character and moral endurance[3]. The description of Hester also tells Hawthorne's exploration of the tension between individual and society, tradition and modern thought, thus giving people a profound ethical and social insight.

3. Analysis of Hester Prynne's Image

Hester Prynne, the central figure in *The Scarlet Letter*, stands as one of the most complex and compelling female characters in American literature. A young woman who emigrates from England to the Puritan colony of New England, Hester is publicly condemned for committing adultery and is sentenced to wear a scarlet letter "A" (for "Adulteress") on her chest for the rest of her life. From the start, she faced harsh insults from the crowd, and she accepted the punishment peacefully. In one of the most iconic scenes in the book, Hester holds infant daughter Pearl in her arms on the gallows in the city, her head bowed in defiance of the jeers. From the beginning, this description made her a strong-willed and adaptable person.

There was a deep conflict in Hester, and it determined her character. Despite defying conventional ethics, she showed more integrity, courage and compassion than those who criticized her. Even under pressure from the government and local residents, she showed loyalty and moral steadfastness by not saying who Pearl's father was. Her decision to defend Dimmesdale was motivated not by fear but by a subjective will and moral conviction. She kept her mouth shut, which was a kind of rebellion, asserting control over her own story in a society intent on defining her.

Over time, Hester interpreted the meaning of the scarlet letter in terms of her own actions. She left the world no longer in anguish, but on the contrary was active. She earns her living by sewing, but she devotes all her energy to helping the sick, the poor and the marginalized. Society slowly interpreted the word "A", which meant "Adulteress", as "Able", thus confirming her resiliency and talent. With compassion and humility, she has managed to turn around the public's perception of her as a low-key but admirable character.

Hester's physical changes are also her spiritual and emotional development. At first she was described beautifully, but as the story progressed she became more and more serious, more and more restrained. This change was not a decline in her soul; it was a deeper understanding of herself.

Despite being outcast, she maintains a strong sense of self-awareness and independence, steadfastly resisting the fate of being accused of total devastation.

In many ways, Hester can be regarded as a pioneer of feminist ideas. She did not rebel openly against the patriarchal norms of the time, but with perseverance, moral insight, and artful rebellion. She has lived to see how women remain disciplined and resilient in the face of harsh social and religious norms.

Through the character of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne not only condemns the hypocrisy and severity of Puritan society but also offers a detailed and nuanced examination of womanhood, personal agency, and the potential for individual redemption.

4. The Scarlet Letter and the Modern Age: The Evolving Status of Women in America

Nathaniel Hawthorne's characterization of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* powerfully embodies the status of women in 17th-century Puritan society. At this time, the status of women by the traditional "Woman" by the constraints (as wives and mothers) of strict social and religious norms. As Hester broke the traditional customs, was insulted and ostracized by the public, which highlights the limitations and subordination of women at that time. Her punishment was an important symbol of women's autonomy and ethical norms in the patriarchal society.

However, since the late 19th century, American women have challenged the custom, gaining greater power and status. Women's suffrage was an important milestone in this process. To win votes, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Katie Stanton founded the national suffragette movement in eighteen sixty-nine. This movement culminated in 1920, when the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave American women the right to vote [4].

The mid-20th century brought additional advancements. In 1963, John F. Kennedy passed the Equal Pay Act, which legally abolished gender-based pay discrimination. In 1964, section 7 of the Civil Rights Act added gender discrimination at work [5]. The promulgation of the above-mentioned laws and regulations reflects the ever-expanding influence of the women's movement in the new wave.

In the 21st century, American women have made great progress in all aspects of social life, although full gender equality is still a constant goal. Today, they have a distinct advantage in politics, business, research and the fine arts. Nancy, for example. Nancy Pelosi was the first spokeswoman in 2007; Hillary Clinton. Clinton in 2016 was the first woman nominated by any major party in American history; Kamala Harris was the first American woman, the first black, and the first South Asian vice president, she crossing many historic divides and barriers [6].

These achievements highlight the high degree of change in the situation of women from the time of Hester Prynne's era to the present. It has gone from being denounced by the public to being able to play a leading role in the public arena, a path that shows the indomitable struggle of people to achieve gender equality, and the social changes that it has brought about. Hester, who was once on the edge of society and had to remain silent, has transcended her time and become a typical feminist symbol, a symbol of rebellion, independence, and strength. Her life course has constructed a solid theoretical basis for further exploring how women safeguard their own rights and interests, recognize their own identity, and make full use of their subjective initiative.

Through combing the background of Hester's life and the development process of contemporary American women, we can see the broader narrative connotation of gender justice, as well as the fact that the social role of women in this process is changing.

5. Influence of literature on perceptions of the status of women in the past

The *Scarlet Letter* is a typical example of a time when women's social and cultural expectations

were reflected and questioned. Hester Prynne's narrative is not only a history of individual struggle, but also an in-depth criticism of the social status and role of women in the 17th century. Through Hester's personal experience, Hawthorne exposes the harsh constraints and expectations on women and the criticism of unfair treatment of women in that era.

Throughout the ages, literature has played a significant role in the process of re-understanding women. Since the 19th century, feminist literature has played an important role in the public awareness of women-related issues. In Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, she represents the wisdom, wisdom and independence of women. Elizabeth represented by herself did not meet the standards of contemporary women, and questioned the traditional concept of marriage and women's status in society. *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece, is also a breakthrough in depicting the complexity and strength of the characters. *Jane Eyre* is both a single mother and a tutor, but her independence, strong personality and dedication to dignity are a brave query to the social status of women at that time. Her novel is not only a history of individual growth, but also a discussion of women's self-recognition and self-orientation.

From the 20th century to the 21st century, literature has been continuously exploring gender equality and women's rights. Many of the works of the 1970s and 1980s presented the various experiences and challenges faced by women around the world, and showed an increasingly diverse trend in terms of content and style, it is also becoming more international. In the case of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, it draws on the unique setting of a dystopian future, women's body autonomy and its status in society and other aspects of a more detailed study. Through this work, Atwood clearly shows a series of consequences caused by gender inequality, this in turn has stimulated a lively debate about women's rights at both the social and political levels.

In the field of modern literature, writers constantly use different schools and different narrative techniques to explore the diversity and complexity of women. They have different cultural backgrounds, different social strata and different life experiences, which impact the traditional social gender concept and show the multiple roles and functions of contemporary women.

6. Understanding Women's Status through Selected Readings in College English

The portrayal of women in *The Scarlet Letter* provides much material for classroom debate, particularly when given through selected sections from *Selected Readings in American Literature*, a textbook frequently used in college English classes. Although the extracts are brief, they are purposefully chosen to emphasize Hester Prynne's moral struggle, social isolation, and growing empowerment. These moments serve as starting points for pupils to consider bigger historical and social themes.

In the classroom, teachers can guide students in analyzing Hester's transformation—from a symbol of shame to a figure of moral strength and independence—by focusing on specific scenes selected in *Selected Readings in American Literature*. For example, Hester's moment on the scaffold with her child, or her silent refusal to reveal Dimmesdale's identity could be highlighted to give rise to the discussion about personal agency, societal pressure, and moral resilience. Students can be encouraged to compare these moments with women's historical struggles for recognition and autonomy, such as the early suffrage movement or the fight for equal rights in the 20th century.

Additionally, close reading activities, group discussions, and even role-play or reflective writing are conducive to better understand how Hester challenges traditional gender roles. Instructors may also provide historical information about Puritan society and 19th-century American gender expectations, and connect literature to its social roots. This is an integrated approach which can improve students' analytical skills and deepens their engagement with themes of gender, identity, and power.

7. Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is not only the novel itself, but the product of an era. The characters created by Hester Prynne embody the strict standards and ethics of men and women in the Puritan New England Society of the 17th century, at the same time, it has laid the foundation for the discussion of women's agency, autonomy, and resistance in the future. From a shame symbol, Hurston becomes a moral, calm and flexible character, showing us a multiple perspective of women's identity, who are new, with self-awareness, and full of vitality.

This paper traces the development of women's status from the Hester's era to the present, highlighting the women's suffrage movement, landmark legal changes (the Equal Pay Act, the Civil Rights Act, etc.) and the women's movement more generally, these are all landmark political, social, and economic advances made by American women. On the other hand, this story has been continuing to serve as a powerful tool in the college classroom to topicalize gender, power, and identity. Teachers can help them see how literature mirrors social change and encourages critical thinking about justice, autonomy, and cultural transformation.

Overall, the contrast between Hester's time environment and the real life of modern American women reflects the continuous renegotiation of gender dynamics. In spite of the great progress that has been made in this field, the full achievement of gender equality still remains a goal for us. Hawthorne's novel will retain its lasting value as it brings attention to the complexities of identity and the enduring challenges faced by women throughout history.

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