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THE TRAGEDY OF GRAND PASSIONS: HAWTHORNE'S HEROINE A VICTIM OF THE  
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PURITANICAL BOSTON

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ABSTRACT

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, attempts to portray the seventeenth century puritanical Boston. The novel reveals the story of Hester Prynne a victim of Puritanism. The paper tries to justify the grand heroine. The adultery of Hester is in fact a question posed against the puritan society. Throughout the novel she carries the symbol of adultery with an unadulterated passion which she preserves as a trance. In her case, her "adultery" in a way helped her in purging herself, which might not have attained such recognition in the other way round. The honor which she attributes to the fussy letter which embraces her bosom, makes her towards the end, 'sister of mercy' and she attains a natural death. Hester considers her child "Pearl", as her life and happiness. Hester symbolizes Divine Motherhood to the end and we see people rushing to her for advices. Therefore Hester's sole burden, the scarlet letter, becomes her identity later on. Her silence makes up the base of the novel. The questions that the paper tries to raise are, who can judge Hester? Did she really err? Had she a generosity that pleads for passion? and isn't her doom 'a tragedy of Grand Passions'?

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Several years ago it would hardly have been necessary to discuss the meaning of "adultery". Virtually every educated person knew that "adultery" is a sexual relationship that somehow or another breaches a marriage relationship. In recent years, a new view of adultery has been espoused by a minority element within the church. It is the notion that "adultery" is merely the act of repudiating one's marriage vows (whether or not the covenant breaker ever enters a new marital union). Task here is to analyze the word as such when it intrudes the scenario of great novels in the literary genre. The novel which is subjected to analysis is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Anyways, to label Hester by such a crude word as "adulterous" would rather be insulting and so the paper tries to adhere to the term 'passion', which is the most gorgeous term in the dictionary. To make it clear, she had an unadulterated passion towards her "instincts". So this paper claims her as the "grand feminine", and her tragedy as the "Tragedy of Grand Passions".

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. His works reflect reality and romance, actuality and illusion, the real and fanciful, the natural and supernatural, the literal and the imagined. He was a natural moralist and a philosopher. Hawthorne usually treats Puritanism, not as central theme but as a dark background for the ideas and for experiences, which deeply concerns him. He is not a mystic. He cannot be considered as a transcendentalist, but he was attracted by its free inquiry, its radicalism and its contact with radical life. Some call him as a romancer of Puritanism. His biography makes it clear that he was an admirable man and in all ways fortunate.

Hawthorne is exploiting the ambiguity within Puritanism itself in order to move from a world which seems to be created according to puritan values...to one where those values are seen as only one possible interpretation of reality.(Josipovici 166)

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850) an expanded short story was written with the theme of sin and adultery and the consequences faded due to it."Hawthorne's imaginative energy seems to have been called out to the full here by the continual correspondences that his theme allowed him to make external events and inner significance" (Matthiessen 58). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he himself started a new tradition of writing. He constructed a very strong image of Puritanism in his writing. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne himself was looking back "not less than two centuries" into the history of the colonial past, which would place the beginning of his story roughly between 1640's and 1650's, the period of the first and extending into the second generation, the Pilgrim Fathers. He called *The Scarlet Letter*, a romance and not a novel.

Hawthorne called himself 'the most obscure man of letters in America'. *The Scarlet Letter* is his most celebrated and outstanding piece of work, both in its theme and in its style. It is one of the most amazing and disturbing novels in the American literary genre. The root conception of *The Scarlet Letter* had already been expressed in his tale of *Endicott and the Red Cross*. The setting of the novel is the Puritan society of the mid seventeenth century Boston.

Hawthorne is least interested in telling a story in his novel thus when the story begins we find action that has already been finished and the consequent results that doom and hover over each of the characters in the novel. As Herbert German says, "It is the triangle after the event". One thing to be noted in the novel is that there is no play of destiny and fate rather the characters reap what they sowed.

His interest lies more in showing how sin affects three different individuals. The sin of adultery is committed before the novel starts. The author's concern is not with the fact or the action of adultery...he depicts its consequences on three minds, altogether different from one another (Malhotra 230).

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, an attempt to portray the 17<sup>th</sup> century puritanical Boston reveals the story of a woman named Hester Prynne and her passion which made her wear the scarlet letter on her bosom. The author himself is very suggestive in avoiding the word 'adultery' just because there is no act of adultery committed in the novel and there is no act of adultery committed in the novel and there is not even any sex. Hawthorne called his novel a 'romance' by suggesting that life seen in the sunlight is the stuff of the novel and the familiar seen in the moonlight is the stuff of the romance. Story achieves a great artistic completeness by presenting the whole town in the first and the last scaffold scenes of the novel. She remains silent about both her lover's and her husband's identity. Hawthorne probes into the darkest reaches of Hester's mind, only to find the scarlet letter 'A' imprinted on her heart's very core with all its authority and sumptuousness. "The *Scarlet Letter* was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (Hawthorne 189).

Hester's only motive was selfless love which was denied to her first by her old and wrinkled husband and later by the society. Hester with the scarlet letter gleaming on her breast grabs the novel, and dominates it for her wild and insatiable passion felt towards Dimmesdale, the pastor. Hester has resumed the scarlet letter of her own will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it.

It lies not on pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge...were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into something that should speak a different purport (Hawthorne 159).

Hester's passion and splendor dominates and tint each event in the novel. Hester is described as a lady with dark and abundant hair "so glossy that it threw of the sunshine with a gleam". Her face had the regularity of feature and richness of complexion and the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes.

We know very little of Hester prior to her relation with Dimmesdale. She was forced to marry Chillingworth although she did not love him. Prior to her marriage itself she was a strong and impetuous young woman. Her parents were loving guides who frequently had to restrain her incautious behavior. Hester lived with Roger Chillingworth for many years. He was an old deformed and called intellectual. He loved his scholarship more than his young beautiful wife whom he married in a very old age in order to rejuvenate himself. Chillingworth himself acknowledges that he was wrong to marry the young and immature Hester.

"I betrayed thy budding youth in to a false and unnatural relationship with my decay". When Chillingworth married Hester, he was in no position to love her physically or to felicitate her emotionally. Hester too, was too young to realize the needs of her nature. Moreover, Chillingworth had been missing for about two years and was presumed dead at the time of the conception of Hester- Dimmesdale relationship. Chillingworth is presented as a man advanced in years, pale and sick, with eyes that are bleary, lost its luster, his left shoulder slightly higher than the right shoulder. Roger Chillingworth is a man of study and cloister, a misshapen scholar. Hawthorne was always interested in scholar figures. As his name suggests he is a very cold, inaccessible man, an old person.

Hester Prynne is a lady with a stunning sensibility. She is a woman with undoubting courage, who withstands the misfortune and shame that circumstances have brought up on her. Being still in wedlock she unlocks her heart to another person. Love and Hate at the bottom are the same. Each demands an intimate knowledge of the other.

It is sin that creates Hester and damns Dimmesdale. The failure of Dimmesdale is a failure of manhood. If he had revealed his identity he could have led a more peaceful life and Hester might not have suffered much humiliation. While we see her ascending to the virtuous pinnacles of sainthood, Dimmesdale is portrayed in dim light, as if his own name had betrayed him.

We see him a masochist, who punishes himself for his betrayal of Hester. Though we sympathies with him, we never forgive him for his belated revelation of him - as Hester's fellow sinner. He was a hypocrite. Though he had all human desires and passions at a secret corner of his heart, he wished to don the garb of a secret pastor, who can exorcise the evils in the minds of his parishioners.

The story opens with the community influencing the events. Mr. Wilson persuades Hester to reveal the name of the man who is her child's father and when his persuasion fails he reproaches her by saying; "shame lies in the commission of Sin and not in showing of it forth". Nothing can surmount Hester's stubbornness in remaining mum. Even the young and handsome pastor Dimmesdale, though personally wished for the same, failed in his attempt. It is really ironical enough and a shame on his part to ask Hester publically about the father of her child, while she stood there calmly accepting the spiteful and unjust looks of the beholders round the pillory. If he really wanted to announce himself as a sinner he might have said it by himself. Why should he force Hester to? She was no weak a woman. She was rather prepared to bear all the humiliations alone rather than revealing his identity. If Hester's guilty, she was courageous enough to expose it unlike Dimmesdale who was not capable of defying the society.

He is too much a Creature of Puritanism and the Scripture to be able to keep his spiritual integrity intact, and the same time adjust himself to the social law. He is conscious of double sin, of passion and the injustice that he had done to Hester. He is aware of the falsehood and hypocrisy towards his admirers ( Malhotra 233 ).

It is because of his despondency that he had to be the bearer of too unremorseful sin, one of passion and other of betrayal. " My child must seek a heavenly father; she shall never know an earthly one", these words of Hester sound too heavy both for the beholders and Dimmesdale, which can rather be interpreted as a blow on his spinelessness to accept his sin. She never considered her act sinful and there was no vileness in her

passion. She was in search of love. Wasn't it really an act of generosity on her part? Over and again she makes it clear to Dimmesdale, to relieve from his tawdry conscience that "what we have done had a consecration of its own".

The ubiquity of the scarlet letter, 'A' whether seen on Hester's bosom or a thought in the sky and on Dimmesdale's breast, pervades the landscape of this romance. According to puritan ethic, "Hester's guilt is complete and unredeemable". She has sinned against the Seventh of the Ten Commandments.

Hester carries none of the gloomy and morbid characteristics of the puritans, but is in a 'sphere by herself' she easily outshines the haggish puritan matrons in the market place by virtue of her elegance. (Kapoor 46)

The puritan law insisted that the woman should stick the letter 'A' in a colour different from that of her dress and they should be publically exposed. It also said that they should be given forty stripes for committing such a "crime".

In the 1640's a number of men and women were punished for the question of adultery. But we don't see any such corporal punishment or physical chastisement in *The Scarlett Letter*. Here the protagonist challenges the sanctity and viability of the puritan law and the orthodox authority. During 1640's there was a debate about the nature of punishment that should be given to those who violate the law and it was because of this, that Hawthorne eliminated the aspect of physical punishment or perhaps the punishment that is directed to the mind is far greater than those directed to the body.

The physical dimensions of the letter 'A' are given in the first chapter, but its connotations and significances multiply as the novel grows. The prison and the graveyard serve as the two central forces of the puritan community. They seem to be waiting in serious manner as if someone is going to be executed. Hawthorne is very critical of the puritan community. We are confronted with a rigid system of community that does not have an aorta of human nature.

Hester tries to question the freedom of choice. She is aware of the fact that as an individual she has all the right to follow her mind and instincts. The dark question that arose in her mind was of womanhood. "Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?" (Hawthorne 156). She feels the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Had Pearl not been with her, she might have come down to history hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the founders of a religious sect. Pearl is imagined as a 'lovely and immortal flower came out of a grand luxuriance of guilt and out load passion, a result of adultery. "The child was a law unto herself". She is imagined as unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment.

Hawthorne says that the impact of scarlet letter on Hester was powerful and peculiar. Some attributes that we consider essential of a woman disappears from her. She changes from a woman of passions to a woman of thought. She becomes the text of the discourse.

As the story progresses we see an element of benevolence in the attitude of puritans to Hester .Because of her estranged point of view she was able to look at the social institutions and she was able to look at the clerical band, the judicial robe, the idea of family, to look at it, without any reverence, shame, despair and solitude. Towards the end she becomes the sister of mercy, helping every soul in distress, so that people even say, 'A' means Able.

Hester's and Dimmesdale's decision to run away from Boston ends up with the death of Dimmesdale and his long-awaited confession, which is a psychological necessity. Dimmesdale's death is followed by Pearl's transformation into a normal child. It is the first occasion when Pearl cries for the first time and she will no longer fight against the world but be a woman in it.

Conclusion of the novel also has an inevitable presence of the letter 'A'. There were people who saw the letter 'A' on Dimmesdale's breast. And the letter appears as an ever-active truth of remorse. Again there appear different opinions about the occurrence of the letter. Some said it was because of the medicines given by Chillingworth and some others believed that Dimmesdale punished himself from the day Hester stood on the scaffold.

But inspite of all that has transformed in the minds of Puritans, the story ends suggesting the unbreakability of laws among puritans for, even after their death, their body, though they share the same tombstone, the soil is not allowed to mingle. The letter 'A' is placed on the tombstone of Hester- "On a field, sable, the letter 'A' gules." Even after her death, The letter 'A' seems to live as the never-drown symbol of her passion. Hester lives her death though she was never allowed to unite wither lover. She is an eternal victim of her passion and so her fall can be claimed as 'The Tragedy of Grand Passions'.

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