

Sustainability in the Face of Adversity – In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

The extent to which the four main characters of *The Scarlet Letter* are capable of enduring hardships in the face of the rigid structure of the Puritan society is studied in this research paper. Endurance being a far-fetched meaning of sustainability; if said differently, this paper is a study of their sustainability. These characters are namely, Hester Prynne, her legal husband Roger Chillingworth, the pastor Arthur Dimmesdale, all of them caught up in a love triangle and Pearl, Hester Prynne's daughter, born out of wedlock. Using a qualitative research approach, a narrative analysis is conducted where initially the reader is given an insight into the story line of *The Scarlet Letter*. Ensuing, is a brief description of the Puritan period and its society, the significance of symbolism in the novel, and an examination of the transformation of the four characters throughout the duration of the novel. Hester Prynne, the bearer of the scarlet letter, faces extremely challenging times due to her behavior. A detailed observation of how she gradually and positively integrates into this environment of an unforgiving Bostonian Puritanical society through her fortitude to face up to it, is done in this paper. Finally, the power of endurance of the characters being evaluated, Hester Prynne turns out to be the victor. Thereby, proving that despite great adversity, a female is yet able to endure hardships and show her tenacity in male dominated societies.

Keywords: Adultery, Integration, Puritan society, Sustainability, Symbolism

Introduction

It is said that Mrs. Hawthorne was visibly disturbed after her husband Nathaniel Hawthorne, read his work *The Scarlet Letter* to her. Hawthorne says that 'it broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache – which I look upon as a triumphant success'¹ His wife's reaction indicates that his work was a success because he was able to portray the immense suffering of the character Hester

Prynne with so much skill, that it moved her. William Heath declares that Hawthorne himself admits that the novel is "a tale of human frailty and sorrow." As a descendant of Puritan ancestry, though he admired certain aspects of Puritanic conduct he was ashamed of his ancestors for certain acts committed by them. Especially of "William, notorious for his persecution of the Quakers, and son John Hathorne, a prominent figure in the late seventeenth-century witch hunts." It is said that the author changed the spelling of his name from Hathorne to Hawthorne to avoid

¹ Leverenz. D, (1983) Mrs Hawthorne's Headache: Reading *The Scarlet Letter*, 19th Century fiction Vol 37 No 4 University of California press

any embarrassment by being affiliated to his ancestors of ignoble conduct; notably their behaviour at the witch trials where women were burned at the stake. The sin of his ancestors laying heavily on the conscience of Nathaniel Hawthorne, he tried to make good the injustices of his forbearers by attacking their principles and ways of thinking, through his writings. The development of a strong female character could have been a counterattack to the treatment meted to females. *The Scarlet Letter* a masterpiece published in 1850, though written in the 19th century is set in the backdrop of the by gone Puritan era and lays bare the beliefs, norms and comportment of that society for perusal of the reader, thereby, inevitably creating more disgust than admiration for the Puritans. The purpose of this paper is to examine the stoicism of Hester Prynne, against that of the other male characters all of them caught up in various ways in a scandal of sexual misbehavior committed in the Puritan ruled town they lived in.

Materials and Methods

When doing research concerning the suitability and uniqueness of the topic of this paper, it was found that though many research papers have used various aspects of the novel, to name a few; love, adultery, Puritan society and its culture, symbolism etc. a paper discussing the strength and the level of endurance of Hester Prynne and the manner in which she managed to survive in the callous Bostonian Puritanical society was yet to be published. This encouraged qualitative research in the direction planned. In addition to the use of internet, notably Google, in order to collect knowledge of recent research, the reading of

journals and critical works on *The Scarlet Letter* helped in the gathering of qualitative data to write this paper. A narrative analysis done gives the reader an understanding of the story of the novel as well as its characters *The Scarlet Letter* is written from an omniscient third-person perspective in which the narrator describes the thoughts and feeling of the main characters as well as the general sentiments of the townspeople, which shows how the characters function in their larger community. Since the characters are often reserved and secretive, the narrator's commentary on what they experience internally at any given time is very important. The narrator also frequently adds commentaries about characters and their actions, which shapes the reader's perception. For example, he laments how Dimmesdale cannot overcome his fears and doubts, and this might make a reader more likely to see Dimmesdale as a weak and ineffective character. The narrator addresses the reader directly, calling attention to the fact that we are participating in an interpretation of a work of fiction.

After the initial framing device of the introduction, told from the point of view of two hundred years after the events, the entire story is told as a fictionalized re-creation of events the narrator has learned about, positioning the story as an embroidered version of true events. (In fact, Hawthorne invented the scrap of Hester's A the narrator finds, and the entire book is fiction.) The narrator maintains this "based on a true story" effect by referring to rumors and reports handed down through the years, such as when he describes the mark on Dimmesdale's chest, saying "according to these highly respectable witnesses." He explains several of the theories of how the

mark could have gotten there but does not identify any of them as being the correct answer.² The story of Hester Prynne too is presented using a third person omniscient narrator's point of view, as this facilitates in revealing her personal thoughts, her behavior and the opinions that all the other characters have formed about her, thus enabling us to reach our objective of illustrating her stoicism, and resilience in the adverse experiences she encounters in her life. The novel being a deep expression of the passion of the main characters caught in a love triangle, this mode of narration is very appropriate to show all facets of the characters. The author uses this tool to its fullest when according to Heath, "he speaks in several voices -Puritan, Victorian, Tragic, Subversive, etc." with the ultimate goal of revealing this emotionally laden story which commenced with the discovery of a package in the Custom house which contained a "...fine red cloth, much worn and faded. ...on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter 'A' (Hawthorne, 1994, p 27). According to Charlotte Noorda, the narrator acts even as a moral judge in the novel. He "has an opinion on the events that happen in the story; he is not impartial or unbiased. Not only does the narrator discuss the events of the moral tale, but comments on and gives opinions about them; in this way, he is also a subjective narrator. In the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator describes the novel's Puritan setting by giving details about a prison door and a nearby rosebush: 'It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.' As the omniscient narrator already knows Hester's story, he can

call our attention to the rosebush as a symbol for the moral blossom to be found in this dark tale. The subjective and omniscient narrator also comments on the character of Reverend Dimmesdale and provides us with a little piece of moral wisdom when he says: 'No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

The story in brief

The Scarlet Letter is the story of Hester Prynne, a very pretty, young European woman who enters an unsympathetic marriage with an elderly scholar, then crosses the Atlantic and lands in New England with the hope of having a decent family life in this new land when her husband arrives from Europe. After a long, futile wait for her him, she is attracted to a young pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester is accused of having committed adultery with him, and given birth to Pearl, a little girl child. Condemned and disgraced in public for her act, the novel evolves around the life story of Hester, who is obliged to perpetually wear the red-letter 'A' which is supposed to stand for adultery, on her bosom. This symbol being a constant reminder of her act of adultery, it makes her undergo unimaginable suffering, face terrible insults and isolation at the hands of the inhabitants of the Puritan town, Boston. It is the immense effort, and the strategy she adopts for her survival and that of her child in this unforgiving Bostonian society, her level of sustainability or endurance to face all the adversity she is confronted with, that we will be focus of this paper.

² <https://www.sparknotes.com> of view

Among the several themes of *The Scarlet Letter*, the principal one is the struggles faced by a supposed adulteress in the context of a straightjacketed Puritan society. Working on this theme of Hester's conflict with the society she lived in, requires an insight into the nature of the 17th century Puritanical society. The novel being authored by Hawthorne, who is a descendant of the Puritan lineage, gives more authenticity and veracity to the description. Now, the question is what is this Puritan society? Who are these Puritans who persecuted Hester Prynne?

The Puritans

The Puritans are believed to be the descendants of the 'Chosen People' to whom "all the land of Ca-na-an for an everlasting possession" was promised by God.³

In a Europe, troubled by famine and religious persecution, the Europeans who were anchored in the word of God believed that they should flee from Europe and find their promised land which was indicated in the Bible. Therefore, they crossed the Atlantic in the 17th century and landed in the area around Massachusetts Bay and settled there. Terri Beth Miller believes that this migration was in order "to create a new Christian society, one that would

³ Chapter 17, The Book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, is an account of the creation of the world, the early history of humanity, Israel's ancestors, and the origins of the Jewish people. ... Genesis ends with Israel in Egypt, ready for the coming of Moses and the Exodus. Genesis narrates the primeval history of the world (chapters 1–11) and the patriarchal history of the Israelite people (chapters 12–50) en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Book_of_Genesis

be a shining city upon a hill, purified of the secular and religious contamination they believed had contaminated society and the Church of England in particular."⁴ Those who arrived from Europe, considered themselves to be an untainted people and using the Latin word *Puritas* which means pure in English, they baptized themselves as The Puritans. For Hester who freshly arrived from England, fitting into this type of a societal framework would have been a challenge and to make things worse the act of begetting a child out of wedlock made her an unpardonable sinner in the eyes of this public.

The stereotypical image of the Puritans is that they are a group of individuals who considered hard work as a norm. Though the Puritans chose to be attired in black, red and blue had a special significance in their lives.⁵ This could be the reason for red being chosen for the letter 'A' which was to be affixed on Hester's bosom.

⁴ Miller, T.B. <https://www.britannica.com>

⁵ Refer to www.digitalhistory.uh.edu - the section on Puritans

The evolution of the scarlet letter "A" and its wearer

The scarlet⁶ letter 'A' which sees the light of day as a badge of civil punishment is both symbolic and allegorical and used to unravel the story line in *The Scarlet Letter*. Imposed on Hester Prynne by the Puritanical law, as a badge of dishonour for her inappropriate behavior, at the onset, the scarlet letter acts

⁶ The letter being scarlet in colour evokes the scarlet whore of Babylon seen in the wilderness (Book of Revelation, !7:3-4)

as a catalyst to rekindle the antagonism of the people towards Hester Prynne, for what they imagine is an utterly odious act committed by her. Hawthorne says, ‘on the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter ‘A’. (Hawthorne, 1994, p 45). The scarlet letter ‘A’ surround by gold embroidery could be considered as carrying twofold attributes; though an emblem of adultery and shame it is yet a gorgeous piece of art just like all the oppositions in the novel; civilization and wilderness, order and transgression, disgrace, and acceptance in society, etc. The customizing of the scarlet letter by Hester and making it her very own expresses the power of mind of the wearer. By nonchalantly flaunting this badge she shows her strength of character of being able to accept what may crop up on life’s journey without shying from it.

At the inception of the novel, one believes that this letter ‘A’ could stand only for adultery but the elegant and indifferent manner in which Hester exhibits the symbol makes one wonder whether she is defying the law? A disciple of Ann Hutchinson? An Antinomian?⁷ Therefore, ‘A’ for Antinomianism? Hawthorne alludes to the legend of Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) when saying that the rose bush “sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson” (Hawthorne, 1994, p 41) when she was being escorted to prison⁸. The very prison where Hester Prynne was held! Wonder if this suggests a possible connection between Hester Prynne’s and Anne Hutchinson’s personalities.

The physical image of the letter A has a triangular shape. When inversed it could take

the outline of a heart. Is it not possible that Hester yearns for the law of the heart –the law of the Antinomians- so that she would be able to get rid of her badge of ignominy which she would have to wear for the rest of her life? Couldn’t this Scarlet letter be a sort of a placard carried in protest of the law of the Puritans?

⁷ Antinomianism, (Greek anti, “against”; nomos, “law”), doctrine according to which Christians are freed by grace from the necessity of obeying the Mosaic Law. The antinomians rejected the very notion of obedience as legalistic; to them the good life flowed from the inner working of the Holy Spirit. In this circumstance they appealed not only to Martin Luther but also to Paul and Augustine.

The ideas of antinomianism had been present in the early church, and some Gnostic heretics believed that freedom from law meant freedom for license. The doctrine of antinomianism, however, grew out of the Protestant controversies on the law and the gospel and was first attributed to Luther’s collaborator, Johann Agricola. It also appeared in the Reformed branch of Protestantism. The left-wing Anabaptists were accused of antinomianism, both for theological reasons and also because they opposed the cooperation of church and state, which was considered necessary for law and order. For similar reasons, in the 17th century, Separatists, Familists, Ranters, and Independents in England were called antinomians by the established churches. In New England, Anne Hutchinson was accused of the doctrine when she said that the churches were preaching “the covenant of works.” The Evangelical movement at the end of the 18th century produced its own antinomians who claimed an inner experience and a “new life,” which they considered the true source of good works. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/antinomianism>

⁸ Terri Beth Miller explains that Anne Hutchinson fought the Puritan clergy in Massachusetts Bay Colony, arguing they were becoming too powerful. She feared that religious doctrine and its ministers were contaminating parishioners' relationship with God. The community, she argued, was all too often forced to submit to the clergy and not to the commandments of their own consciences. She was not swayed by the patriarchal (male-driven) models of her time, which held that men were to be the priests of the home and women were to submit to them in all matters, including - and especially - church matters. <https://www.britannica.com>

It is said that when sporting the scarlet letter 'A', "both men and women who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time – was that Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out with the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (Hawthorne, 1994, p 46). Julian Hawthorne, strengthening this idea states that, "the scarlet letter uplifts the theme from the material to the spiritual level. It serves as a formula for the conveyance of ideas otherwise too subtle for words, as well as to enhance the gloomy picturesqueness of the moral scenery. It burns upon its wearer's breast, it casts a lurid glow along her pathway, it isolates her among mankind, As the story develops, the scarlet letter becomes the dominant figure, everything is tinged with its sinister glare." Once the obligation of wearing the scarlet letter is implemented, differentiation from her town's folk occurs for Hester Prynne and she has to battle through their hostility projected towards her and demonstrate her power of endurance or sustainability in an uncanny,

antagonistic society. Hester and her daughter must face up to extreme public discrimination and much disgrace.

As time goes on, one observes the different way in which the characters, Chillingworth, Dimmesdale and Hester evolve. With the passing of time, one witnesses a gradual transformation taking place in the relationship between Hester and the villagers. Hester tries to integrate into the Bostonian society by sewing for the villagers, running errands for them and seeing to their well-being and even caring for those who are sick and dying. These actions, change their approach towards Hester very slowly but steadily. It is said that Hester's sewing skills adorned villagers of all walks of life except that of virgin brides. "Her needlework was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead. But it is not recorded that, in a single instance, her skill was called in aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride." (Hawthorne, 1994 p 70) The only prohibited place for her needle work to appear was on the veil which was symbolic of a bride's virginity. This clause makes one understand that the village folk had not totally forgotten the reason for her punishment and consider her touch as sacrilegious for garments meant to be worn to take the sacred marriage vows. Though with time it is said that "Individuals in private life, meanwhile, had quite forgiven Hester Prynne for her frailty; nay, more, they had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her many

good deeds since.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p138). Considering this change in outlook with a psychological point of view it demonstrates that humans forget with time and that time is a great healer of pain and suffering. The villagers had even begun to use the possessive pronoun ‘our’ on Hester Prynne and they even called her “-the town’s own Hester -” (Hawthorne, 1994, p138) It is also said that “the scarlet letter now had the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” (Hawthorne, 1994, p138) thus elevating Hester to the eminence of a Sister of Mercy in the eyes of the villagers. So much so, that Hester is raised from sinner to Sainthood among the townsfolk. Her strength to implement her strategy (if one may call it so) in order to regain her place in society relegates the original and obvious significance of the scarlet letter into oblivion in the minds of the inhabitants. Her helpfulness, kindness and courage are appreciated by the people “that many people refused to interpret the scarlet ‘A’ by its original signification. They said that it could mean ‘Angel’ because she was very sympathetic towards her neighbours. Some folk construed it as ‘Able’;” so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p137). The fact that Hester struggles to find her way out in life by voluntarily serving those who despise her, which I believe is a very bitter task, she thereby, shows her determination to overcome hostile incidents which pile up in her daily routine.

Another element which contributes to Hester’s acceptance in society, is her having dedicated her entire existence to her child, Pearl. Hester plays the role of both mother and father to her, supporting Pearl economically as well as spiritually. Being excommunicated from

the church, Hester guides her child morally without the help of the church or a husband, a Herculean task for a woman living in isolation in the Puritan world, where man rides on the crest of the wave in a household.

In addition to all this, she has to manage her former husband and keep the secret of never divulging the name of her paramour so as to safeguard his position in society. Wonder if this decision taken by her was wrong because during the confrontational meeting at the Governor’s residence, Reverend Dimmesdale in his capacity of church minister seems very sincere in his invitation to Hester to reveal the name of her child’s father. It seems a guilt laden request and a plea for putting an end to suffering. “I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness to him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him -yea, compel him, as it were to add hypocrisy to sin?” (Hawthorne, 1994, p 57). To this appeal, Hester responds “Never”. One wonders whether her acceptance of his request would have changed the lives of both Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale and perhaps even spared the life of the minister who died prematurely as a result of being gnawed by a guilty conscience? Hester understands this later on, and admits that she “was now fully sensible of the deep injury for which she was responsible to this unhappy man, in permitting him to lie for so many years...” (Hawthorne, 1994, p164). Hester had also the task of striking a fine equilibrium between the two men in her life so that her path to redemption

would not be marred by any clashes which could occur between them.

The complexities of Hester Prynne's life and how she had to bravely face up to obstacles to make her life meaningful are obvious now. On the contrary, the male characters, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth have a different technique of confronting life and moving forward in the situation they are placed in.

The Chillingworth and Dimmesdale relationship

Roger Chillingworth, a pseudonym taken by Hester's husband in order to hide his true identity so that he could implement his plan of revenge against the minister is very appropriate as he becomes very chillingly cold and malicious when executing his plan. He obliges Hester to keep silent about their marriage. Concerning Chillingworth, Julian Hawthorne states that "He is the complete type of the man of the world, the social ideal, — courteous, quiet, well informed, imperturbable. Nevertheless, his moral nature is a poisonous and irreclaimable wilderness, in which blooms not a single flower of heavenly parentage. For he has put his devilish lust of vengeance in the place of God, and day by day he worships it, and performs its bidding". Under normal circumstances, though the sympathy of the reader should have been on the side of the cuckolded Chillingworth, in *The Scarlet letter* it is displaced, and one feels more compassion for the church minister than for him. It happens so, because the minister sincerely pleads for exposure though he does not have the courage to own up at that moment and promises to do it at an appropriate time in the near future. Julian Hawthorne says that

"Dimmesdale is, artistically, a corollary of Hester; and yet the average writer would not be apt to hit upon him as a probable seducer. The community in which he abides certainly shows a commendable lack of suspicion towards him..." This again indicates how large Hester appears on the horizon as Dimmesdale is considered but a 'corollary' of hers.

Henry James is of opinion that *The Scarlet Letter* is not a love story. He sees it as a story of retribution. And the centre is the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth where the sinister husband's sole purpose is to keep the guilty lover's guilt alive.⁹ This idea of vengeance is interesting because at the beginning, the townsfolk too wanted seek revenge on Hester Prynne for the unacceptable act committed by her. Roger Chillingworth's stratagem to take revenge from the pastor was by inflicting a slow death on him. Ostensibly showing concern about the Church minister's health. Chillingworth, a physician by profession secretly approaches Arthur Dimmesdale under the guise of helping him out of his poor health condition. Chillingworth spies over the minister's movements and revels in his misfortunes very maliciously while tormenting and torturing his 'patient' in silence under the pretext of treating him. This approach pulls down Dimmesdale emotionally as he experiences excruciating mental pain in silence for his sin of fathering a child out of wedlock and for not accepting it. Additionally, the public punishment inflicted on Hester to wear the Scarlet Letter too affects Dimmesdale as he is partly the reason for it.

⁹ Person, L.S. (2007), *The Cambridge introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Cambridge University Press, Page 24,25

He is so disturbed by the situation and distressed by his guilt that; he even hallucinates. This is confirmed when it is said that “we impute it, therefore solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter -the letter “A”- marked out in lines of dull red light. Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil of cloud;” (Hawthorne, 1994, p132). In taking revenge from Dimmesdale, Chillingworth kills two birds with one stone: he slowly but surely is in the process of eliminating Dimmesdale and thus aiming at the point which hurts Hester most, her inordinate love for the reverend. Thereby, complicating further, her struggle for deliverance from her condition.

The *Scarlet Letter* considered a symbol of adultery, Arthur Dimmesdale believes that through self-mutilation, as Henry James says, “imprinted on his breast and eating into his flesh”¹⁰ he could pay penance for his part in the act of adultery. James analyzing the act of Dimmesdale believes that it is illustrative of his physical, moral and spiritual breakdown. Hester having seen Dimmesdale in this state claims that “she saw that he stood on the verge of lunacy if he had not already stepped across it. It was impossible to doubt, that, whatever painful efficacy there might be in the secret sting of remorse, a deadlier venom had been infused into it by the hand that proffered relief.” (Hawthorne, 1994, P 141) The guilt-ridden conscience of the

minister, the daily treatment and poisonous advice given by Doctor Chillingworth, brings about his untimely death. Overwhelmed Dimmesdale blurts out, “it is too mighty for me to struggle with!” (Hawthorne, 1994, P 167) The Reverend's lack of will and energy to withstand the seven-year psychological pressure he had been experiencing makes that of Hester stand out.

Obsessed by taking revenge from Dimmesdale, in the process of implementing his Machiavellian plan against the minister, Chillingworth gets so engrossed in it, that he seems to depend on his enemy for his existence. When the minister collapses on the scaffold, it is said that “Old Roger Chillingworth knelt down beside him’ with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed” (Hawthorne, 1994, p217). It is obvious here, that he too was on the path to departure. He is unscrupulous, seeing the minister dying, Chillingworth blurts out “Thou hast escaped me!” (Hawthorne, 1994, p217) several times. Roger Chillingworth has invested himself so thoroughly in his mission of revenge that he seems to see no future for himself once his ‘patient’ to whom he attends upon is no more. This indicates the intensity of his revenge which has sunk into all his nerves and sinews. Chillingworth intends to have his supposed patient live on, suffering agonizing pain so that he could fiendishly exult in his pain and execute his plan of revenge on the lovers. Which would mean both physical and mental pain on the Reverend and thereby a far-fetched shot of imposing mental pain on Hester in the process. It seems he is quite aware that the death of the minister would make him aimless in life and therefore hasten his death. William Heath states that D.H.

¹⁰ Chaney, S “A Hideous Torture on Himself”: Madness and Self-Mutilation in Victorian Literature <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10912-011-9152-6>

Lawrence commented that with the death of Dimmesdale, Chillingworth would feel 'doubly cuckolded' (p 147). As foreseen, within the space of one year of the minister's death, Roger Chillingworth passes away. Heath continues that it is "Chillingworth's compulsion to expose the inner workings of Dimmesdale's heart that enable Hawthorne to explore the deeper psychology of his key characters." This statement seems very true because the mental strength of the characters becomes more visible in the process. Both, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth are caught up in a process of transformation, but it does not happen for the better. They lose their grip on the situation and tragedy befalls the duo. This brings Hester's resilience to rid herself from the burden of carrying the letter 'A' to the forefront and makes us wonder as to whether females have a higher power of endurance than males when faced with adversity. Even more because a recent research done by three universities have revealed that 'women tend to cope with pressure better than men, who tend to buckle up during tense moments. (and) this is due to the fact that cortisol, the stress hormone tends to increase more rapidly in men than in women.'¹¹

¹¹ [www.healthshots.com.cdn.ampproject.org](http://www.healthshots.com/cdn.ampproject.org)
Are women stronger than men? Here are 8 scientific facts to put this debate to rest, 01/03/2020

Discussion

In *The Scarlet Letter* published in 1850, the protagonist is female, and she who is outlawed from society stands up for her convictions and battles her way back to be accepted in civil society. Taking the year of publication of the

novel into consideration, it is quite possible that the Seneca falls convention of 1848 where 300 men and women gathered to demand equality for women, thereby, sowing the seeds of feminism, had an influence on Hawthorne, in the moulding of this strong feminine character. Examining the life of Hester who underwent much trouble and struggled hard to overcome her punishment, the novel offers a view of woman's strength, courage, self-reliance, and constancy. She is willing to protect the man she dearly loves at the risk of facing severe punishment by not disclosing his name. She is resolute in her decision to protect him even though he as a man, has no strength to acknowledge his paternity. At the onset of the story, Hester, once brought out of the prison to be disgraced in public, shows her strength by very stoically receiving the sentence passed on her. A young mother with her infant clutched to her chest standing on the scaffold, she does not protest or weep thinking of the gloomy future ahead for both of them, Hester's strength increases with time owing to the challenging experiences she faces. She does not retaliate violently against the daily insults and endless ridicule she must face. Doomed to wear the scarlet letter 'A' for life, she never raised her head to greet people, if they greeted her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter and walked away.¹² Instead, of protesting, by using her inner strength Hester attacks her persecutors mentally by making them feel humiliated through her kind acts. This commendable technique of hers is noteworthy as it goes parallelly with Christian teachings even though she has been banished by the church.

¹² Hawthorne, N. (1978) . *The Scarlet Letter*. Ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and Seymour Gross.

This type of conduct requires an immense level of mental hardness just like an athlete preparing for a feat. In psychology, Mental toughness refers to the resilience and strength that people possess to soldier through struggles and succeed. Research indicates that mental toughness is characterized by traits such as determination, focus, confidence perseverance, positive attitude, emotional regulation and desires for success.¹³ These attributes were abundant in Hester Prynne who was segregated from Puritan society and barred from practicing her religion as a result of her supposed crime of adultery. This isolation is the watershed in the development of her character. Hardships make her pause and consider her future strategies. This punishment imposed upon her, gave Hester time for contemplation on her life and sufficient solitude to plan for the steps to be taken by her, to reintegrate society. James Clear believes that Mental toughness is like a muscle and needs to be worked to grow and develop.¹⁴ This is exactly what Hester Prynne did during her seven years of seclusion where she viewed her insults and ill-treatment positively and turned them into instruments to cultivate her mental endurance.

This strengthening of her mental faculty and power of endurance changed her to a person who would later be appreciated by the very same folk who condemned her. By executing her plan, she is transformed and is able to win

over the very people who punished her and spend her old age in the very same town she was disgraced and pass away peacefully to be interred next to her paramour. Hester's returns to the very place where she had been shamed in spite of the possibility of her being able to live elsewhere reminds us of Nathaniel Hawthorne's desire to cling to his cheerless birth place with 'oyster-like tenacity.' (Hawthorne, 1994, p7) and his assertion that it "is not love but instinct" (Hawthorne, 1994, p10) Wonder whether it was the love of the place or her everlasting love which she had for Dimmesdale which brought her back? Whichever the reason is, the idea that she does not linger on memories, cares little for them and lives in the present, is another marker of her inner strength.

All this goes to indicate that Hester who, stands out as the strongest personality in *The Scarlet Letter* has definitely been cast on feminist lines. *The Scarlet Letter* does not really examine the personality of Hester closely and in detail. Her personality is built through an assessment of the events and circumstances she had to experience and her given response to these situations that one recognizes in the novel. In my opinion she is an early feminist somewhat akin to Nora Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who recognized as an early feminist of the Victorian literary period.

Conclusions

To conclude, it could be said that *The Scarlet Letter*, with its female heroine which is quite an unusual choice of a protagonist for that period - the 19th century, is a harbinger to feminist writing. The protagonist of the novel, Hester is sculpted in the aftermath of the 1848

¹³ <https://psychologycompass.compass.com>, Psychological Training Build Mental Toughness. 05/08/2021

¹⁴ <https://jamesclear.com>, The Science of Developing Mental Toughness in Your Health, Work and Life, 08/03/2021

Seneca Falls conference which was a catalyst to the emancipation of women. Hawthorne structures her character using the information gathered about her from the beginning of her punishment and observing her mental strength which is brought out in the way she confronts the vicissitudes of the life she is condemned to face up to. In the *The Scarlet Letter* one observes that Hester is endowed with the highest level of sustainability in antagonistic surroundings when all the other male characters fall out in the process of the unwinding of the story. Hester Prynne's personality becomes stronger, more courageous and her inner strength develops when honed by hardships which was quite different to the behavior of the other major characters Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth who on the contrary, weakened in adversity. I am not a feminist, but I wish to conclude that the findings of a recent combined university research could be plausible because it has been revealed with scientific evidence that woman is mentally stronger than man when confronted with harsh situations. Observing occurrences around the world of people and families which have encountered unexpected disasters, it is quite usual to find women coming to the forefront to ask for help while the men find it difficult to come to terms with that what has happened. This could be because of the maternal instinct in women who understand their responsibility towards their offspring. The aftermath of the Tsunami which struck Sri Lanka could be considered a classic case in point.

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