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The Hypocrisy View in Puritan Society and Its Relationship with Adultery Punishment in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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ABSTRACT: *The Scarlet Letter*, published in (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne, represents a harsh criticism of the Puritan society in the seventeenth century. It does so by unveiling the hypocrisy hidden beneath strict religious moral standards. Hawthorne discloses the paradox between people's appearance of possessing moral and religious values, and their inner moral corruption. This contradiction becomes evident in public condemnation towards Hester, and the guilt concealed by Dimmesdale. In this study, the researcher attempts to explore the way Puritan authority maintains over people through the use of accusations and punishments of adultery. The study focuses on the analysis of symbolism, characterization, public punishment, and narrative irony, arguing that Hawthorne presents moral punishment as a social performance, rather than a genuine spiritual redemption. In the end, the novel depicts Puritan social judgement as hypocritical, gendered, ultimately aimed at social control not pursuing true ethics.

KEYWORDS: Hypocrisy, Puritanism, Gendered punishment, Social control, Moral judgment, Shame

1. INTRODUCTION

Critics consider Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* a sharp critique of the social and religious austerity that characterized the Puritan New England in the seventeenth century. The society and era where the novel is set was governed by strict religious doctrines. Social and ethical behaviors were largely defined by the laws of the church. This meant that any deviation from these rules was often met with public shame or punishment. Moreover, social life was also determined by rigid hierarchies, in which individuals were judged according to their social class, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. The core concept of Hawthorne's narrative was the notion of hypocrisy; in particular, the unfairness that is depicted by the inequality in applying double standards of moral judgment and punishment. Such a contradiction is illustrated when Hester is publicly punished and humiliated for her sin of adultery, while the sinful deed of Arthur Dimmesdale is overlooked (Baym 75; Bercovitch, The office 89). The present study attempts to explain how these novel manifests and criticizes the underlying ideology and belief of the Puritans, and explain how this society behaves in a hypocritical way.

Rooted in Calvinist theology, Puritanism impounds predestination, strict moral behavior, and collective responsibility of the society members. The Puritan beliefs count sins as more than private matters, but a serious issue that incurs risks on the entire community and its stability. Scholar Perry Miller argued that "in The New England Mind that covenant theology was the master idea of the age and the basis both of church polity and social theory" (The New England Mind 394). The novel aims to dramatize this principle through subjecting Hester to public scolding, shaming and punishment. Dalal says that "to mark her transgression, Hester is forced to wear a scarlet letter 'A' on her chest for the rest of her life, symbolizing her sin" (Dalal 2019). Hawthorne, throughout the novel, employs the letter as the central concept of shame, but its "meaning evolves as Hester transforms from a symbol of sin to one of strength and resilience" (Dalal 2019). The symbol on her chest shows her supposed sin, and also serves to make the community enforce its rules. However, Hawthorne's narrative complicates the presumed clarity of moral judgement. That is, overtime, the meaning of the letter evolves as it reflects the social negotiation of moral and symbolic authority (Hawthorne 146). This change shows that religious and moral rules in Puritan society were not fixed but people-made. This challenges the idea of community that it fully knew what was right (Bercovitch, America Jeremaid 23).

Hawthorne depiction of hypocrisy is closely related and inseparable from the power of gender. The gendered hypocrisy is presented when Hester is openly punished, while Dimmesdale conceals his sin, allowing himself to maintain his social and religious power. Baym claims that *The Scarlet Letter* shows how female transgression is often socially and religiously marked and punished, while male guilt tends to remain private and covert and psychologically contained (75). This asymmetrical image criticizes the Puritan society that was founded on male-dominated system. It also demonstrates that rules about right or wrong are shown off to the public but applied based on gender.

So, Hawthorne's novel shows how social control works. It demonstrates how people actions are observed, judged and punished, often in ways that enforce power and social rules. The concept of 'disciplinary power', introduced by Michel Foucault, provides a framework for understanding the dynamics the novel presents, i.e., being publicly shamed, feeling personal guilt, and being observed by society are all ways that those in power maintain control (Foucault 47). The scaffold punishment of Hester exemplifies this theatrical aspect of power. Dimmesdale's hidden suffering, on

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the other hand, illustrates silent and psychological side of control. In addition, the romantic style of the author manifests the concentration on personal conscience and moral struggles. This emphasizes the gap between following the rules of the society and dealing with inner ethical conflicts (Colacurcio 112; Waggoner 156).

The intersection of hypocrisy, moral punishment, and social judgement in *The Scarlet Letter*, represents the central concern of the current study. The research puts the novel within broader discourse of literary criticism specifically when critically analyzing the scaffold scene and the gendered application of punishment. It utilizes historical context, gender perspective, and semiotics to demonstrate the cultural and ideological demands of society that influence both the choices made by the characters, as well as the direction the novel takes. The significance of this study lies in a dual impact. On one level, it highlights and reveals Hawthorn's understated dismantling of Puritan ideology. It shows that fiction can serve as a critical observation on societal frameworks of the past. On another level, it engages with modern academic debates surrounding gender dynamics and institutional authority. It thereby demonstrates that the novel remains relevant to ongoing discussions about social justice and ethical hypocrisy in hierarchical societies (Xiao 456-470; Reynolds 12). Through a detailed and textual and conceptual examination the analysis does not consider *The Scarlet Letter* as a mere historical fiction. Instead, it functions as a detailed exploration of the system governing the moral judgement and the clear hypocrisy tied to gender roles that incur enduring societal consequences.

2. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is deeply embedded in the historical and cultural fabric of seventeenth-century Puritan New England. The Puritans were English Calvinists who migrated to America seeking religious freedom, yet they established a society governed by strict moral codes and hierarchical social norms. As Perry Miller emphasizes, Puritan ideology was not merely spiritual but also social: the community was responsible for maintaining God's covenant, and individual transgressions could threaten collective salvation (The New England Mind 394). This dual concern with spiritual purity and civic order underpins the novel's exploration of hypocrisy and moral discipline. The Puritan conception of sin was public and communal. Transgression was never solely a private matter; it demanded visible correction. Hester Prynne's punishment, as dramatized in the scaffold scenes, exemplifies this principle. *The Scarlet Letter* 'A' she wears is a conspicuous marker of her adultery, signaling her transgression to the entire community (Hawthorne 50). As Sacvan Bercovitch observes, Puritan society relied on such symbolic displays to reinforce moral authority and maintain social cohesion (American Jeremiad 23). However, Hawthorne's narrative complicates this enforcement: the letter's meaning evolves over time, acquiring associations such as "Able" and "Angel" that undermine its initial function of shame (Hawthorne 146). Through this semiotic transformation, Hawthorne critiques the rigidity and performativity of moral authority, illustrating that social symbols are historically contingent and subject to reinterpretation (Bercovitch, The Office 89).

Gender plays a crucial role in this dynamic of moral regulation. Female transgression was heavily surveilled and publicly punished, while male sin often remained concealed, reflecting patriarchal inequities within Puritan culture. Nina Baym notes that Hawthorne's narrative highlights the gendered asymmetry of social punishment: Hester bears a permanent mark of shame, while Dimmesdale's guilt, though severe, remains largely private (75). This differential enforcement demonstrates how hypocrisy is institutionalized: moral codes are applied selectively to maintain social hierarchy. The theoretical lens of power and surveillance developed by Michel Foucault provides a productive framework for analyzing these dynamics. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault argues that power operates through both visible and internalized mechanisms, shaping behavior by observation, regulation, and psychological pressure (47). Hester's public humiliation represents the visible, theatrical enforcement of authority, whereas Dimmesdale's internal torment exemplifies the internalization of discipline. Hawthorne's juxtaposition of these experiences illuminates the systemic nature of moral control: the Puritan community exercises authority not only through overt punishment but also through the creation of guilt, anxiety, and social monitoring.

The historical context of Puritanism is further complicated by the tension between ideology and lived reality. Scholars such as Michael Colacurcio argue that Hawthorne exposes the contradictions inherent in the Puritan moral system, demonstrating how communal ideals of piety often clash with personal conscience and human complexity (112). Hester's moral resilience, Dimmesdale's secret suffering, and Chillingworth's vengeful manipulation reveal that moral absolutism produces both injustice and hypocrisy, as ethical codes are mediated by social position, gender, and personal interest (Waggoner 156). This insight aligns with feminist and cultural criticism, emphasizing how historical structures of authority disproportionately affect marginalized groups, particularly women. Puritan mechanisms of social control relied not only on religious doctrine but also on communal surveillance and public ritual. The prison door, described as "heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes" (Hawthorne 45), symbolizes the literal and figurative enforcement of moral law. Scaffold scenes, confession rituals, and gossip networks collectively ensure that moral norms are publicly reinforced. Yet, the selective application of these mechanisms—Dimmesdale's hidden guilt versus Hester's exposed shame—reveals an inherent hypocrisy in the social system. As Larry Reynolds notes, Hawthorne's depiction of Puritanism highlights the discrepancy between ideological perfection and human practice (12).

Moreover, the theoretical relevance of Foucault's discipline extends beyond historical Puritanism. By depicting the interplay between public punishment, internalized guilt, and gendered surveillance, Hawthorne anticipates modern critiques of social control, including the ways in which institutions enforce moral and ethical norms unevenly across different populations (Foucault 47). The novel's scaffold and symbolic systems exemplify what Sacvan Bercovitch terms the "ritualization of authority," demonstrating that morality, law, and social judgment are inseparable from performative structures of power (American Jeremiad 23). In conclusion, understanding *The Scarlet Letter* requires situating it within the intertwined historical and theoretical contexts of Puritan ideology, gendered power relations, and mechanisms of social control. Hawthorne's narrative exposes the structural contradictions of Puritan society: moral codes that claim divine universality are implemented selectively, producing systemic hypocrisy. The historical specificity of seventeenth-century New England, coupled with Hawthorne's Romantic and critical sensibility, allows the novel to function as both literary art and social critique, interrogating the nature of sin, punishment, and the ethical complexities of human behavior.

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3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: HYPOCRISY, GENDER, AND MORAL PUNISHMENT IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* dramatizes the complex interplay between moral transgression, public punishment, and social surveillance, using character, narrative structure, and symbolism to expose the hypocrisy embedded in Puritan society. Through the experiences of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, the novel examines the gendered and performative nature of moral authority, highlighting how social judgment is selectively enforced.

3.1 Hester Prynne: Visible Punishment and Moral Resilience

Hester Prynne, the protagonist, embodies both the burden and subversion of public punishment. Her enforced display of *The Scarlet Letter* 'A' on her chest is designed to mark her as a sinner and maintain communal discipline (Hawthorne 50). The letter functions as a socially sanctioned instrument of shame, visible to all and symbolically linked to Puritan ideals of morality. Yet, Hawthorne imbues Hester with agency: she transforms her punishment into a form of identity. Over time, the letter comes to signify not only "Adultery" but also "Able" and, in some interpretations, "Angel" (Hawthorne 146). This semantic evolution demonstrates the instability of socially imposed moral categories and challenges the supposed authority of communal judgment (Bercovitch, The Office 89).

Hester's resilience further undermines the Puritan rationale for punishment. Unlike Dimmesdale, whose guilt consumes him internally, Hester endures public scrutiny and develops moral strength. Her acts of charity and dignified comportment gradually shift community perception, illustrating that morality is not reducible to outward compliance but is enacted through ethical behavior and personal integrity (Baym 75). Hawthorne's focus on Hester's internal development emphasizes the tension between individual conscience and societal imposition, revealing hypocrisy as a structural, rather than purely personal, phenomenon.

3.2 Arthur Dimmesdale: Concealed Guilt and Internalized Hypocrisy

Arthur Dimmesdale, the revered minister and Hester's co-sinner, provides a counterpoint to Hester's visibility. While Hester bears corporeal punishment, Dimmesdale conceals his transgression, maintaining both social authority and religious prestige. His secret sin produces profound psychological distress, manifested in physical deterioration, self-flagellation, and moral anxiety (Hawthorne 92–95). This duality underscores the gendered distribution of punishment: male transgression is often privatized, allowing men to retain institutional power, while women's transgressions are made public and permanent (Baym 75).

Foucault's theory of disciplinary power illuminates Dimmesdale's internalized suffering. According to Foucault, surveillance need not be literal; the anticipation of judgment internalizes authority, producing self-regulation (47). Dimmesdale's conscience operates as a site of surveillance, where guilt is continuously monitored and magnified. Hawthorne's narrative thus critiques a system in which the moral authority of Puritanism depends not only on punishment but also on the manipulation of visibility and concealment.

3.3 Roger Chillingworth: Vengeance and Moral Corruption

Roger Chillingworth, Hester's estranged husband, exemplifies the destructive consequences of obsessive moral judgment and concealed power. His primary focus is not justice but retribution, targeting Dimmesdale in secret. Chillingworth's psychological manipulation mirrors the mechanisms of social control operative in Puritan society: authority is maintained through surveillance, secrecy, and the strategic infliction of suffering (Colacurcio 112). Through Chillingworth, Hawthorne critiques moral systems that prioritize punishment and hierarchy over compassion and equity, demonstrating that hypocrisy is perpetuated both publicly and privately.

3.4 Symbolism: *The Scarlet Letter* and Pearl

Symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* reinforces the thematic exploration of hypocrisy and social judgment. *The Scarlet Letter* itself is a polyvalent symbol, shifting meaning depending on context and perception. Initially a mark of shame, it evolves into a symbol of Hester's ability, resilience, and moral agency (Hawthorne 146). Pearl, Hester's daughter, embodies the consequences of transgression and the impossibility of entirely eradicating human complexity. As a living symbol of sin, she challenges the community's rigid moral hierarchy and functions as a constant reminder that punishment cannot fully suppress individuality (Matthiessen 102). Through Pearl and *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne emphasizes the socially constructed and negotiable nature of morality.

3.5 Scaffold Scenes: Public Spectacle and Social Commentary

The scaffold scenes function as critical sites for examining the tension between public judgment and private morality. The novel's opening scaffold scene not only punishes Hester but also performs a ritual of social discipline, reinforcing communal norms (Hawthorne 50). Later, Dimmesdale's final public confession dramatizes the failure of secrecy and the limitations of hypocrisy, revealing the inherent instability of Puritan moral authority. Hawthorne's juxtaposition of private suffering and public spectacle highlights the performative dimensions of social morality: public rituals of punishment both assert and expose the contradictions of ideological authority (Bercovitch, American Jeremiad 23; Waggoner 156).

3.6 Gender, Power, and Social Hypocrisy

Hawthorne's text foregrounds the gendered nature of moral punishment. Hester's visibility and Dimmesdale's concealment exemplify systemic inequalities: women's bodies are sites of public moral inscription, while men's sins can remain psychologically contained. This differential enforcement illustrates the structural nature of hypocrisy in Puritan society, where ideology and practice diverge. Feminist readings of the text underscore how gender mediates the experience of punishment and authority, revealing the intersection of social power, morality, and gender (Xiao 456–470).

4. DISCUSSION

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *The Scarlet Letter* is not only a literary exploration of individual morality but also a profound critique of systemic hypocrisy in Puritan society. Hawthorne's portrayal of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth underscores the tension between public moral codes and private ethical experience. The disparity between Hester's public punishment and Dimmesdale's concealed guilt exemplifies gendered enforcement of social norms, revealing how societal authority is performative, selective, and structurally biased (Baym 75; Bercovitch, The Office 89).

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Through scaffold scenes and symbolic motifs, Hawthorne interrogates the mechanisms through which Puritanism regulates behavior. The scaffold functions both as a site of punishment and as a stage for public observation, highlighting the performative nature of moral authority (Hawthorne 50–52). The evolving symbolism of *The Scarlet Letter* further underscores the instability of social judgments, emphasizing that meaning is negotiated and contingent rather than absolute (Bercovitch, American Jeremiad 23). Pearl's presence reinforces this argument, representing both the living consequence of transgression and a critique of rigid moral hierarchies (Matthiessen 102).

Hawthorne's narrative aligns with Foucault's theoretical framework on disciplinary power: social control operates through both visible punishment and internalized surveillance (Foucault 47). Dimmesdale's internal suffering exemplifies the psychological enforcement of moral norms, while Hester's public shame exemplifies their external enforcement. By juxtaposing these experiences, the novel exposes the ethical contradictions inherent in a society that claims moral and spiritual authority but applies it unevenly. Gendered analysis further demonstrates that systemic power not only enforces conformity but also perpetuates inequality, rendering women disproportionately vulnerable to social and symbolic punishment (Xiao 456–470).

Moreover, Hawthorne's treatment of hypocrisy extends beyond gender. Chillingworth's obsessive pursuit of vengeance critiques moral authority divorced from empathy, showing that the enforcement of ethical codes can generate cruelty rather than justice (Colacurcio 112; Waggoner 156). The novel thus suggests that institutionalized morality is intrinsically vulnerable to corruption, selective application, and personal bias, raising questions about the ethical legitimacy of socially imposed punishment.

The implications of this analysis are twofold. First, it affirms that literary texts serve as critical mirrors of historical social structures, offering insight into both ideological aspirations and practical realities. Second, it underscores the ongoing relevance of Hawthorne's critique: contemporary social systems continue to grapple with gendered surveillance, public shaming, and selective moral enforcement. By situating Hester's experiences alongside theoretical frameworks of power and surveillance, this study demonstrates that literature can illuminate both historical and enduring dimensions of social hypocrisy.

CONCLUSION

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne crafts a layered examination of hypocrisy, gender, and moral punishment in Puritan society. Through the contrasting experiences of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, the novel illustrates how social judgment is mediated by gender, visibility, and institutional authority. Hester's public shaming, Dimmesdale's concealed guilt, and Chillingworth's vengeful manipulation collectively reveal the structural and performative dimensions of moral power, highlighting the selective and often unjust application of ethical codes. Symbolism, particularly *The Scarlet Letter* and Pearl, reinforces the novel's critique, emphasizing the contingency of meaning and the instability of socially constructed morality. Scaffold scenes dramatize the tension between private conscience and public enforcement, while Hawthorne's psychological insight exposes the moral ambiguities and ethical contradictions of a society that privileges authority over justice. The theoretical frameworks of Foucault and feminist criticism further illuminate the mechanisms through which Puritan ideology exerts control, both externally and internally. This study contributes to literary scholarship by combining historical, theoretical, and textual perspectives to explore the intersections of gender, morality, and power. It demonstrates that Hawthorne's critique of Puritan society is not merely historical but resonates with contemporary concerns regarding social surveillance, selective justice, and the performativity of moral authority. By analyzing hypocrisy and punishment in *The Scarlet Letter*, this research affirms the enduring relevance of literature as a tool for understanding social structures, ethical contradictions, and human experience.

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