



## 'THE SCARLET LETTER': THE TENDERNESS TOWARDS SELF-RELIANCE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper points out what Nathaniel Hawthorn portrays in *Scarlet Letter* relating to Emersonian's self-Reliance. The movement to self-reliance in which it started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Emerson has grasped many– writers' attentions. Hawthorn, as one of the admirers of the idea, views a great endorsement to it in *Scarlet Letter*. Readers observe how significantly Hawthorn devotes characters, theme, and setting of the text in serve to the idea. *Scarlet Letter* provides a clear depiction regarding the idea and a conflict resulting from combating two different perspectives, self–reliance and puritan tradition. In this depiction, Hawthorn clearly shows the significance of self-reliance and the effects coming into the existence for not following this trend throughout the novel. As we see, Hester Prynne—the protagonist of the novel—shares her own individual perspectives. Besides her commitment to an adultery sin, she courageously and independently acts; although she is in isolation, she becomes the example of beauty, happiness, strength, and creativity. Opposite to self-reliance, puritan tradition is on the other side. Because of following predecessors or past, this belief, for always, loses the battle against the idea of self-reliance. Throughout the novel, readers notice the ugliness of townspeople's lives because of embracing this tradition. Furthermore, readers examine what painful moments Dimmesdale—the clergyman—goes through for holding multiple faces. Thus, *Scarlet Letter* holds no progression for any puritan belief holders from the beginning to the end of the book.

**Keyword:** Self-reliance, puritan belief, and particularity, isolation.

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'The Scarlet Letter': The Tenderness  
Towards Self-Reliance

"Speak your latent conviction and it shall  
be the universal sense; for always  
the inmost becomes  
the outmost."-Ralph Waldo Emerson's Self-  
Reliance

The American writers of the mid nineteenth century  
promoted a person's desire and opinion over the

state and a social group. These writers believed the  
existence of an individual perspective lead to  
creativity and progression; on the contradictory to  
the social stance, individuals pursue their goals  
based on their perspectives and desires, but, on the  
other hand, people who follow the tradition always  
attempt to transfer the old system into their  
existence. Thus, throughout the history of human  
beings, those who have been linked to the past have

hindered people who intend to follow their personal goals and desires. This kind of conflict has truly reflected in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Such as Hester Prynne, as the protagonist of the novel, stands alone to the rejection that is built on the puritan ideology in the period. Besides Hester's suffrage and expulsion by townspeople, because of her personal commitment, Hester gains more reconciliation to Emersonian self-reliance. Therefore, Hawthorne's depiction to the privilege of self-reliance over the social group or the puritan ideology gains a good consideration in regard to Hester's progression.

Hawthorne's portrayal to show the significant point of each trend—self-reliance and puritan tradition—directing readers' eyes to observe the reflection of these trends distinctly on peoples' and town's appearances; as we see, at the beginning of the novel, readers first notice dismal looking of the townspeople as a direct reference to the effect of puritan belief. Beside people, "in sad-colored garments and gray", buildings, plants, and prisons all carry ugliness (Hawthorne 33). To attach this disagreeable appearance of the environment of this society to the puritan ideology more, the narrator diligently describes the characteristics of the prison and the area around it; the grass, "overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru", and the prison looks like an old and "ugly edifice" (33). Through these sketches, Hawthorne holds a rejection to American political identity (Gussman 63). The infertility of the land, and prison's decoration provide a symbolic reference to the influences of the system over the society in a way that, in narrator's eyes, "like all pertains to crime" (Hawthorne 33). As Ward points out, Hawthorne's description to the society signifies his uneasiness to ancestors (142). Therefore, in Hawthorne's view, as it is depicted, these people all hold a crime while their acts and thinks based on their predecessors' customs because these people still live in the past so that they never own recognition to "a youthful era"(33). Thus, these ugly images to the puritan society denote Hawthorne's disparaging to the belief.

On the contradictory to the townspeople, Hester Prynne possesses her own individual perspective. As we see, Hester appears completely

different from the townspeople; she looks young and beautiful, and she possesses a "haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed" to townspeople. Through such manifestation, as she appears in the market place after the adultery commitment, signifies her embodiment to her self-reliance, and at the same time, a belittlement to the puritan society (Hawthorne 37). However, to show Hester's opposite stance from townspeople more, Hawthorne puts her in an embarrassment situation while standing in front of the crowd; however, she still presumes a different identity for her stability and self-confidence through viewing an attractive appearance.

Furthermore, Hawthorne's lovely depiction regarding Hester's identity endorses readers' interpretation more about the particularity of Hester in the society. However, readers expect that the scarlet letter on the breast of Hester's gown need to be perceived as a sign of shame by the townspeople, oppositely, this letter, to Hester, increasingly provokes self-esteem; while she appears in front of the crowd for the first time with the letter A on her bosom, Hester embroiders the letter so fantastical that all people admire at seeing the beauty of Hester's look in a way that the appearance "[takes] her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (Hawthorne 37). In Baym's view, this "sensuous activity of her art" to the letter signifies the opposite meaning of what people think and separates her from the society (219). Thus, the letter, instead of causing shame to Hester, makes Hester close to herself more although people undermine the letter as Hester's her own self-commitment of a sin. Therefore, the letter does not surprise readers while it shines on her bosom, but, instead, it shocks townspeople. This letter becomes "the dynamic self full of the vital strength that destroyed the role she once played" (Davis 75). The detachment of Hester's attitude and belief from people, as it is shown through her decoration to the letter, signifies the singularity of Hester in the society, and, at the same time, this detachment directs readers to observe Hester's incompatible personality in compare to the people of the town.

Also, Hester's decision to stay among the people who hurt and expulse her glorifies the belief that she owns. However, Hester lives in isolation and spends a humiliated life, she still declines to leave the town and lives in another place. The decision to stay in the town where she gets punishment daily for her commitment attests Hester's confidence to her own identity; this kind of attachment to her own character leads Hester to be one more step closer to her self-reliance. As we see, Hester, "free to return to her birthplace, or to any other European land, and there hide her character and identity under a new exterior, as completely as if emerging into another state of being", but she does not do that; while she owns a singular perspective—she is not dependent on the society—she does not need to run away from her current being (Hawthorne 54). On the other hand, if Hester chooses to leave the town, she acknowledges the society's power over her belief. This confinement into her own being isolates her perception to life from the influences of the attitudes and believes of the townspeople.

On the contrary to Hester, Dimmesdale—the clergyman—holds a different character from Hester. Unlike Hester, Dimmesdale hides his real identity—he does not reveal the real father of the child in which it is himself. To this reason, Dimmesdale finds himself in a sever condition; "his nerve seemed absolutely destroyed. His moral force was abased into more than childish weakness. It groveled helpless on the ground" (Hawthorne 109). Through depicting this scene, Hawthorne warns readers about the horrible result of holding multiple faces. After doing the affair, Hester and Dimmesdale possess two separated directions; Hester for her self-reliance enables to overcome the difficulties of her life, and at the same time, Dimmesdale's concealment of his real identity causes him suffering. Through these two opposite images, Hawthorne intends to convey the messages that "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 true"(147-8). As long as people's identity connected to the society, these people, like Dimmesdale, become unable to presume their goals and lead a

successful life. People need to possess their own perspectives so as to gain chances to creativity.

Hester's Pearl holds two opposite categories; the first, Pearl becomes Hester's only treasure, and the second, Pearl enhances Hester's degradation to the puritan traditions. Naming the little child as Pearl (great value) by Hester refers to the great price of the child to Hester; only to give this child a birth, "a great law had been broken", thus, Hester has "purchased with all she had—her mother's only treasure"(Hawthorne 61-2). Naming the child as Pearl probably dignify Hester's commitment to the sin; however, this child comes into existence after breaking a law, Hester takes this child as a gift in regard to her self-own independent so that Pearl becomes the only treasure to Hester. Readers obviously notice no regretting in Hester's life after having these all tribulations of her personal life. Instead of these difficulties that she faces in life letting her down, oppositely Hester day by day becomes more stable and responsible in regard to her own life. Therefore, while a person's decision based on consciousness and self-reliance, regretting and instability become improbable.

Besides of Pearl's price to Hester, Pearl expands Hester's degrading to the puritan ideology, and appraising the self-reliance. As Last points out, "Pearl's behavior is one of the few outlets for expressing repressed feelings that Hester has" (364). Since her childhood, Pearl possesses some traits in which they differentiate Pearl from the children of the town. This differentiation causes Pearl to gain particular personality in compare to the rest of the children in the town. In detecting Pearl's nature more, the narrator designates a "wild particularity" corresponded with Hester's past commitment to the sin (Hawthorne 61). Therefore, Pearl has not been isolated from the punishment that the society holds to punish Hester. As a matter of fact, Pearl undergoes a sever atmosphere in her childhood so that "this outward mutability indicated, and did not more than fairly express, the various properties of her inner life. Her nature appeared to possess depth, too, as well as variety" (62). This kind of isolation leads this little child to be closer to herself rather than the society or someone else. Because of this attachment to Pearl's inner consciousness,

Pearls lacks “reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born. The child could not be made amenable to the rules” (62). As a result, Pearl, like Hester, views her self-disgust to the society and becomes closer to Emersonian self-reliance.

Furthermore, Pearl’s passion, beauty, and imagination provide a significant access to Pearl into the stage of transcendent. These three characteristics carry a great role in letting people to know more about their inner lives, and guiding them to their own paths. As we see, Hester’s intention in regard to providing beautiful clothes to Pearl, to lead her imaginations play in her life through wearing the richest clothes. Although, this richness in beauty and imagination differentiates Pearl from other children, it also helps Pearl to recognize herself more. In addition, this child possesses “a trait of passion, a certain depth of hue, which she never lost; and if, in any of her changes, she had grown fainter or paler, she would have ceased to be herself:—it would have been no longer Pearl!” (Hawthorne 62). Readers notice how Hawthorne supports the idea of self-reliance through these two characters, Hester and Pearl; besides mentioning the vital fate of the trend, Hawthorne also depicts character’s feelings and appearances in both ways; those characters who roles far a way from the belief, and those who have deep inclinations to the idea.

In addition, Dimmesdale’s acts, except the affair that he has with Hester, do not cross the traditional boundaries that exist in the society. Besides Dimmesdale’s job as a clergyman in the town, he encourages people to continue their attitudes based on the puritan ideology. Also, he does not have a low regard to the tradition and the belief that exist among the people. Thus, he “had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws”, but he roles as a saver of the old belief in the new world (Hawthorne 137). Because Dimmesdale’s belief is so far away from self-reliance, readers notice how his commitment with Hester causes him “passivity and reclusiveness” (Kreger 325). Also, as a result of the commitment, he is continuously suffering and becoming weak. Thus, according to Tassi’s view, Dimmesdale “exhibits the “feminine” traits of weakness and nervous sensibility” (27). As

long as a man follows traditions, not only instability happens in his belief, but also his body cannot endure the struggles that he faces in life.

On the other hand, Hester’s alienation from the society, because of the commitment, leads her to carry a new face in the society in a way that her “latitude of speculation as was all together foreign to the clergyman” (Hawthorne 137). Hester’s sphere denotes a single separated sound from the rest of townspeople; her reliance on her own belief and speculation has been clearly reflected in her own deeds. Thus, Hester has “wandered, without rule or guidance”; she does not allow or follow any person to guide rather than her own “intellect and heart” (137). In the end, as we see, Dimmesdale—the clergyman—asks her to rescue him from the problem that he is in. Here, readers see a man asks a woman for help in a patriarchal society; in another words, based on the significance of self-reliant idea, a woman enables to empower a man—as Hester does to Dimmesdale (Herbert 289).

Hester’s self-reliance causes townspeople showing a better regard to Hester than before because this self-reliance leads Hester to be more kind with those people who are in need. According to Davis, Hester provokes a “striking example of self’s discovery of value” (78). As we see, this kind of discovery makes Hester stronger to stand towards the problems that she faces in life. Therefore, Hester recognizes “neither irritation nor irksomeness” (Hawthorne 110). She continues depending on her own ability without caring what happens around her by the people of town. Because of this kind of endurance in Hester’s nature, Hester enables to reach the highest level of self-reliance;

The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester’s good qualities than the people. The prejudices which they shared in common with the latter were fortified in themselves by an iron framework of reasoning, that made it a far tougher labor to expel them. Day by day, nevertheless, their sour and rigid wrinkles were relaxing into something which, in the due course of years, might grow to be an expression of almost

benevolence. Thus, it was with the men of rank, on whom their eminent position imposed the guardianship of the public morals. 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 111)

Thus, Hester's self-reliance results in changing people's perspectives regarding her personality. However, she falls in difficult situations in the town, she continues at her triumph till she gains all people's attraction to her side. This success comes all from the power of self-reliance that Hawthorne portrays throughout the novel. This progression develops till, in the end, the scarlet letter has ceased to be the sign of sin, but, instead, this letter "became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (Hawthorne 179). Hawthorne depicts self-reliance in a way that readers think that all good and creative deeds result from a self-reliant person. As we see, "what / she/ must do, is all that concerns /her/, not what the people think" (Emerson 1163). Therefore, Hester's progression from the lowest point of the social scale to the highest dignifies the importance of being self-reliance; all people curse Hester at the beginning of the novel, but, in the end, these people longs to Hester's position.

Self-independent as the outcome of the self-reliance leads people to creativity. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne emphasizes on the greatness of the self-independence. As we see, Hester holds this personality; for her self-reliance; however, she does not possess companion, she becomes capable to provide sufficient food to herself and her little child through depending on art—handiwork— "in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise" (Hawthorne 56). Besides the difficulty and disturbing of the isolation that Hester has been in, she still possesses hopes and desire to her life. As a result of her handiwork, she embroiders many beautiful clothes. To this regard, she obtains enough food for her life and draws people's attention to the

skill that she has. Thus, "by degrees, not very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion" (56). Hester's handiwork does not only become beneficial to herself, but her handiwork also delights townspeople.

From what we have discussed, Hawthorne's depiction in privilege to self-reliance features a great part of his novel—*The Scarlet Letter*. Throughout the novel, readers observe the importance of being self-reliance to human beings. To show the significance of this belief, Hawthorne portrays different characters whom some of them, like Hester and Pearl, highlight this model as it does reflect from their attitudes and behaviors, and some of them, oppositely, are unaware from it. Hester as the protagonist of the novel, however goes under difficult situation in her life, she enables to succeed over the obstacles that she meets in her life; Hester's isolation and humiliation does not stop Hester's progression into her recognition to the self-reliance. As a result, day-by-day, Hester one step becomes closer to the self-reliance, and her success in her life all result from this choice that she has made to her life. Hawthorne does not leave any other options to readers instead of self-reliance; if they intend to pursue success in life so as to spend a comfortable time and benefit themselves and people, they must be independent and follow their conscious such as Hester and Pearl do; if not, they must accept a life full of suffrages and empty from invention.

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