

# Misogyny or Feminism? A Probe into Hawthorne and His *The Scarlet Letter*

Yueming Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Languages Teaching Department, Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, Tongliao, China

Correspondence: Yueming Wang, Foreign Languages Teaching Department, Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, Tongliao, China. E-mail: ymwang1969@163.com

Received: March 27, 2017 Accepted: April 25, 2017 Online Published: May 30, 2017

doi:10.5539/ells.v7n2p139 URL: <http://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v7n2p139>

This paper is sponsored by the project *Liberal Training Development and Evaluation Construction for College English Teachers* with the support of Inner Mongolia Social Science Institute and Foreign Language and Research Publishing House Project number WYZX2015-03.

## Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has been focused on by critics from different aspects due to his ambiguity used in the novel. Hawthorne himself has been doubted as to whether he is a misogynist or a feminist when describing the female character, Hester Prynne. This article supports the idea that Hawthorne holds the idea of feminism in his work *The Scarlet Letter*: A writer who mirrors Hester's life as his own cannot be a misogynist; a writer who honors a woman's rebelling against patriarchy cannot be a misogynist; a writer who has a beloved wife and mother cannot be a misogynist. Harmonic family relationships, sympathetic character descriptions, and mild demonstrations against patriarchy all prove that Hawthorne is not a misogynist, but a feminist. Hawthorne depicts through four aspects on Hester's life, Hester's rebel, Hawthorne's own family relationship to advocate feminism in his novel.

**Keywords:** Hawthorne, misogynist, feminist, Hester Prynne, *The Scarlet Letter*

## 1. Introduction

*The Scarlet Letter*, written in the 19th century, by American romanticism writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, is regarded as a most beautiful but painful story. *The Scarlet Letter* is a story of crime, sin, and punishment. It tells of the "ignominy" (literally, the loss of name) of a woman who has broken scriptural and statutory law in a community dedicated to the maintenance of the authority of the law. Since the central and overarching concern of the narrative is with authority, with the ultimate source of all authority, and the relationship between the source and the men who are empowered to act as its mediators, the characters of those mediators (and the fact that they are men, not women) must be significant. (Brian Harding, Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, 279)

When talking about *The Scarlet Letter*, D. H. Lawrence comments, "No other book is so deep, so dual, so complete." (Roy R. Male, 1957, p. 93) The structure of it is classic, the contrast subtle, the characters vivid and distinct, Hawthorne, himself, is seen as the master of ambiguity. Many critics argue on the point of whether Hawthorne is a misogynist or a feminist. That is, if his description of Hester Prynne wants to give warning to women's misconducts and criticize adultery or to express his sympathy and speak highly of this brave, rebellious, and unshaken woman. Critics give different comments about Hawthorne's description of the protagonist, Hester Prynne. To Hester, she broke the Ten Commandments, but to romantic enthusiasts, she merely acted according to the deepest of human instincts. According to some critics, as a writer with an ambivalent character, Hawthorne cannot be a feminist, so therefore he is a misogynist who states the deep evil in a woman's heart.

Although modern feminism has been around since Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist literary criticism is a product of the resurgent women's movement in the late 1960s (Nina Baym, Thwarted nature: Nathaniel Hawthorne as Feminist, 1982, p. 58). The initial works of feminist criticism analyzed the writings of important male authors and critics in attempt to find the hidden, destructive attitudes toward women that they contained. Hawthorne, as one of the few classic authors of the 19th century who uses a charming and impressive woman in his *The Scarlet Letter*, was abandoned by feminists. The feminist criticism of Hawthorne showed little feminist consciousness,

indeed it often displayed a strong antifeminist bias. More recently, feminist criticism has turned away from male authors entirely, hence little work on Hawthorne with a feminist stamp has been produced since 1976 (Nina, 1982). Critics wish to define him as an orthodox espouser of patriarchal attitudes. However, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne signifies Hester's interior strength, passion, and individuality. He is a feminist.

## 2. Criticism on Hawthorne's misogyny and feminism in *The Scarlet Letter*

Misogyny is the hatred of, contempt for, and prejudices against women or girls. Misogyny can be manifested in numerous ways, including social exclusion, gender discrimination, patriarchy, male privilege, or belittling of women. Misogyny can be found within sacred texts of religion, myths, and literary works, for example, Medusa, Harpy, Io, or Pandora in Greek myths. These women either have ugly faces such as Medusa and Io or nasty behavior such as Harpy and Pandora.

Kate Millet, a critic, judges that male novelists during Hawthorne's time are not immune from misogyny, one of the governing principles of a patriarchy, and believes that Hawthorne cannot escape from that mindset. Many critics have maintained that although, Hawthorne may present portraits of extraordinarily powerful woman in his fictions, his narrative stance towards these women is one of extreme ambivalence, if not outright hostility. (Louise Desalvo, p. 23) Wendy Martin in "*Seduced and abandoned in the New World*" has argued that in American fiction, women are perceived as morally inferior creatures who, beguiled by their own passions, are destined to tragic lives if they deviate from the laws. (Louise, 23) Martin sees Hawthorne's female characters as part of this need to condition women to accept their inferior status. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne reminds his readers that for a woman, independent thought and emotion, that is, self-reliance, can be dangerous. According to Judith Fryer in *The Face of Eve*, although Hawthorne's portrait of Hester Prynne is more complex, she too is portrayed as tempting "others" to her own brand of lawlessness, and she threatens to destroy the society in which Dimmesdale and Hawthorne do live and serve. (38) Feminist critics have taken the absence of a strong female presence in the "Custom House," the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, to be a sign of Hawthorne's unrelenting male bias. The critics do not think Hawthorne is a feminist who wants to use his pen to support women like Hester Prynne.

However, feminist critics, who enjoy the fact that *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the few acknowledged American masterworks whose protagonist is a woman written before the Civil War, began to probe how Hawthorne is concerned with women's status in society and raised the question as to whether he is a feminist.

Feminism defines political, economic, personal and social rights for women. It seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. First-wave feminism was a period of activity during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in America.

Feminist critics of Hawthorne employ a number of critical approaches to arrive at their conclusion. The finest critics use an eclectic approach which, for instance, might combine close-reading technique, psychological inquiry, and methodologies derived from historiography and social science.

The fact that Nathaniel Hawthorne is a writer with feminism overtones can be proved from the fact that Hester's life mirrors Hawthorne's feminism; Hester's rebellion against patriarchy enlarges Hawthorne's feminism; Hawthorne's beloved wife honors his feminism and Hawthorne's mother roots Hawthorne's feminism.

## 3. Hester's Life Mirrors Hawthorne's Feminism

From a biographical perspective, this novel can be seen as a reflection of Hawthorne's life. After graduation from college, Hawthorne lived almost as a hermit, asking his sister Louisa to get him library books. He read some two hundred library books a year, remaining in his room until evening and then taking long solitary walks. Just like Hawthorne, in the novel, Hester is also a hermit who is isolated from the community. Hawthorne seeks to excuse Hester Prynne, a married woman, for loving the Puritan minister on the grounds that she has no love for her husband Chillingworth.

At the beginning of the story, Hester Prynne is accorded much sympathy. Her beauty, her courage, her pride, all receive emphasis; and the scaffold, meant to degrade her, elevates her, figuratively as well as literally. Even from Chillingworth's mouth, readers can find Hawthorne's sympathy for Hester. Chillingworth owed Hester's misbehavior to his first wrong, he betrayed her "budding youth into a false and unnatural relation" with his decay. The author presents her as an image of divine maternity and, more important, as a member of the old order of nobility suffering at the hands of a vulgar mob. Her recollection of her paternal home, "poverty-stricken", but "retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms over the portal" (p. 58) established her link to aristocracy. (Larry Reynolds, *The Scarlet Letter and Revolutions Abroad*, p. 242)

Nina Baym holds the idea that Hawthorne himself was a rebel from a spoiled system. Like Hester, he became a

rebel because he was thrown out of society. “Meanwhile, the press had taken my affair, and kept me for a week or two, careering through the public prints, in my decapitated state... So much for my figurative self.” (Nina Baym, 1988, p. 148) Though Hawthorne was anxious to be of some importance in the good townfolks’ eyes, he accepted his mixture of concrete person with a literary man. This episode had a fortunate ending, for the composing of *The Scarlet Letter* made him much “happier, while straying through the gloom of these sunless fantasies. (Nina Baym, p. 149) Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is a demonstration of women’s power. The writer employs Hester to demonstrate his rebel cause and express his own idea. He wants this woman to be his spokesperson; he is not a misogynist. Hawthorne wants to state the fact that a rebellious, defiant and disobedient woman can win a place in society.

Hawthorne allies himself with Hester Prynne and, despite occasional adverse judgments, devotes himself to her cause. His cause is to obliterate her obliteration, to force the readers to accept Hester’s scarlet letter as a badge of honor instead of a mark of dishonor. The author forces the readers, just as Hester forces the town, to see her as a good woman on her own terms. In contrast to the two distorted male personalities, one obsessed with revenge and the other with his holiness, Hester appears almost a miracle of wholeness and sanity. While these two men struggle with their own egos and fantasies, she starts her own battle of maintaining her dignity in a community that scorns her. She stays whole and sane in the solitude by feeding her and her child and raising her child to adulthood in spite of so many obstacles. The author also reminds the readers that though Hester has been abandoned by the Puritan society, she retains a lot of this world; whereas Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, who are at the very center of society, are totally immured in their self-absorption.

In Hester’s integrity and response to society, she is a model. (Nina Baym, *Thwarted nature, Nathaniel Hawthorne as feminist*, p. 216) Cautiously Hawthorne wants to advance this notion that if society is to be changed for the better, such changes will be initiated by women. Hawthorne wants to indicate that Hester’s achievements, in a social sense, come about as a by-product of her personal struggle to win a place in society. The fact that she wins her place in the end means that society has been changed by her.

In addition, Hawthorne uses passionate words such as “perfect elegance, abundant hair, beautiful face, richness of complexion” and sympathetic words such as “gentility and dignity” to show this woman’s beauty. All through the book, the description of this woman shows Hawthorne is not a misogynist. He writes about this woman passionately, and he wants the readers to sympathize with, and gradually love this woman. This is not misogyny.

#### **4. Hester’s Rebel Against Patriarchy Proves Hawthorne’s Feminism**

In the late 20th century, second-wave feminist theorists argued that misogyny is both a cause and a result of patriarchal social structure. Hester, described by Hawthorne, as a brave, unshaken, independent, and rebellious woman has the characteristics of feminism. In the novel, the ruling group consists of old males, including Chillingworth who persecuted Hester Prynne with his power. This patriarchy surrounds itself with displays of power. Then, by virtue of Chillingworth’s age and relation to Hester, in a large framework, Hawthorne characterizes Chillingworth as a sort of father to establish the patriarchal structure of Puritan society. (Nina Baym, 1998, p. 142) So Hawthorne developed Hester as the first of a group of female representatives of the human creative and passionate figures. Hester’s betrayal of Chillingworth is a kind of rebellious spirit against the patriarchy that seven years of solitude had cultured in her. (Nina Baym, p. 36) At the beginning of the novel, Hester submits to the public exhibition on the scaffold and wears the scarlet letter, but it is clear her heart has not been touched. She strongly rebels against the hypocritical love. Even her dress on the first day shows her carelessness towards the audience. Her behavior is subversive and cunning, for she had transformed the letter into a work of art with gorgeous embroidery. Her persuasion to flee to a new land with her lover, Dimmesdale, is also a rebellion against patriarchy. Time flies, and she wears her dress and regulates her attitude, but she still continues to manifest her rebellion through the bright and imaginative embroidery of the letter *A* which the community intended to be a heavy sign of guilt. Hester feels she has not sinned against the community, and therefore the community has no right to inflict its penalties. Through the veil of old fashioned jargon and 17th century costume, readers can feel the same human heart beating there as in modern times. Hester might hope to live happily with her lover after winning a divorce from her cruel and vengeful husband. (Frederic I. Carpenter, 1988, p. 180) As a writer who verifies Hester’s rebellion firmly and repeatedly in the novel, his feminism is clear to be seen by readers.

#### **5. Hawthorne’s Beloved Wife Honors by Hawthorne’s Feminism**

Joyce W. Warren’s *The American Narcissus* details the importance of the impact of women on Hawthorne’s work, particularly the influence of his wife Sophia, who was independent and often called “accomplished woman”. (1900, p. 204) Without Sophia’s help, he probably could not finish the influential *The Scarlet Letter* and

probably would not have become a successful writer. In Warren's view, this is the reason why Hawthorne was able to create a female character who stands out in American literature as a woman of substance and individuality. (1900, p. 200)

The year 1837 was a lucky year for Hawthorne's career and his love story because in March his *Twice-told Tales* was published. Unknown to Hawthorne, Horatio Bridge had given a financial guarantee to the publisher. In July, Longfellow's highly favorable review of *Twice-told Tales* appeared in the North American Review. Also in this year, in November, he met Sophia Amelia Peabody. After a year and a half of contacting, on March 6, 1839, Hawthorne writes his first surviving love letter to Sophia Peabody. In September 1841, Hawthorne is such a tender husband that he buys two shares in the Brook Farm project, planning to bring Sophia to live there when they are happily married. No one doubts that such an obliging and loving husband would have the idea of misogyny in his mind.

On July 9, 1842, they got married and moved to Concord, Massachusetts, where they rented the "Old Manse." On March 3, 1844, their first daughter Una was born. In October 1845, Hawthorne's tenancy of the "Old Manse" was terminated, forcing them to move to the family home on Herbert Street in Salem where they lived with Hawthorne's mother and sisters for five years. They lived harmoniously. Sophia is so understandable and she must have been a good-tempered sister-in-law and daughter-in-law, for many critics describe Hawthorne's mother and his dark-haired sister, Ebe, as grotesque.

Hawthorne took his post at the Salem Custom House. (Nina, p. 132) In 1848, after democracy was defeated, the local Whigs threw Hawthorne out because they doubted his administrative ability. Hawthorne detested the work in the Salem Custom House, but it was a living. To lose it, especially in a publicly humiliating way, was a disgraceful experience. As long as the Whigs retained the office, he could not expect another political appointment. When Hawthorne told his wife the news of his dismissal, Sophia exclaimed happily, "Then you can write your book!" (Annette T. Rubinstein, p. 92) Sophia's help and brave attitude to face difficulties assisted Hawthorne to structure and finish *The Scarlet Letter* within a year. In the period immediately following his dismissal, the Hawthorne family lived on money Sophia Hawthorne had saved through sales of her hand-decorated lamp-shades and hand screens. (Nina, p. 132) Sophia was a diligent, thrifty, and independent woman. During the time her family lacked money, she did not complain; she gave all her love, patience, and care to Hawthorne and his work. At that time, Hawthorne was poor and out of work. His current crisis was exacerbated further by the death of his mother to whom he was deeply attached on July 3, 1849. *The Scarlet Letter* was written in a mood of grief and anger. Sophia seemed to have a therapeutic effect on him; her gentleness, her tenderness, and her delicacy gave Hawthorne support and encouragement to finish this masterpiece. Sophia reported the state of her husband in a letter to her mother, "He writes immensely, I am almost frightened about it. But he is well now and looks very shining." Hawthorne captured his understanding of his independent, brave Sophia with the image of Hester.

Near the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne tells the readers about Hester's eventual change of heart, about how she at last forsook radicalism and recognized that women who would lead the reform movements of the future and establish women's rights must be less 'stained with sin,' less 'bowed down with shame' than she. This woman must be "lofty, pure, and beautiful, and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the eternal medium of joy." (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. In W. Charvat, R. H. Pearce, & C. Simpson (Eds.). Columbus: Ohio State Uni. Press, 1962, p. 263.) More than one reader has correctly surmised that this ending to the novel constitutes a veiled compliment to Hawthorne's little dove, Sophia. (Larry Reynolds, *The Scarlet Letter and Revolutions Abroad*, p. 242).

## 6. Hawthorne's Mother Roots Hawthorne's Feminism

Most critics accuse Hawthorne's mother of playing a grotesque, pernicious role in his life or, alternatively, they deny her any role at all. But it is Hawthorne's mother who roots his feminism. Hawthorne's wife, Sophia once wrote to her mother that the death of his mother struck Hawthorne very strongly because they were deeply connected in mind.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was the second of three children to Elizabeth (Manning) and Nathaniel Hawthorne. After hearing the news of Hawthorne's father's death from yellow fever in Surinam (Dutch Guiana) in 1808, the Hawthorne family moved to the Manning (Hawthorne's mother's family) home in Salem, Massachusetts. From then on, Elizabeth Manning closed herself in her own room and refused to see anyone except the servant who served her meals until 1818. Then, the Hawthorne family moved to Raymond, Maine, which was a wilderness area. Hawthorne hunted, fished, and ran wild. In 1819, Hawthorne returned to Salem to live with his mother's family, under the guardianship of his uncle Robert Manning, while his mother stayed in Maine. When

Hawthorne's daughter Una was born in 1844 and his tenancy of the "Old Manse" was terminated, his family was forced to move to the family home on Herbert Street in Salem, where they lived with Hawthorne's mother and sisters. While he lived with them, he was always sympathetic to the women in his life and not alienated from them.

Nina Baym in *Nathaniel Hawthorne and his mother* argues that because Hawthorne was deeply affected by his mother's death and because he began to work feverishly on *The Scarlet Letter* soon after, his creation of the character of Hester Prynne is best understood within the context of the impact of his mother's life on his own.

Baym speculates that Hawthorne turned the facts of his mother's life into the fictional experience of Hester Prynne, who, like his mother, was a socially stigmatized woman abandoned to bear and rear her child alone. Throughout his life, Hawthorne became increasingly aware of the effect of how men perceived and treated women. According to Baym, although Hawthorne's interests were very different from the feminists of his time, he concurred with the judgment that the life of women in society was slavery. He was more interested in discussing the "warping and distortion of women's minds under the unremitting pressure of...male myths" (p. 251).

## 7. Conclusion

*The Scarlet Letter* has been considered a classic: its ambiguous illustration leads to fundamental confusion. To many critics, Hawthorne is a misogynist for Hester is truly a sinful woman, and death and tragedy resulted. However, Hawthorne, not only employs Hester Prynne's life to mirror his own with his description of Hester's independence and rebellion against patriarchy but also proves his feminism. In addition, Hawthorne feels highly honored by his beloved wife and his mother's behavior deeply roots his feminism, proving from different aspects that he is not a misogynist. As a frontier feminist, Hawthorne, and his work, *The Scarlet Letter*, are testimony to feminism.

## Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Inner Mongolia Social Science Institute and Beijing Foreign Languages and Research Publishing house, without whose sponsor I can't finish the paper so smoothly. In addition, I want to give my thanks to my friend Emily Minter who helps me revise my paper for several times.

## References

- Baym, N. (1976). *The Major Phase I. 1850: The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Baym, N. (1982). *American Novelist Revisited: Essay in Feminist Criticism*. Boston: G.K Hall.
- Budick, E. M. (1991). *Hester's skepticism, Hawthorne's faith; or what does a woman doubt? Instituting the American Romance Tradition*. New Literary History
- Desalva, L. (1987). *Feminist and Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Brighton: E. Sussex
- Harding, B. (1990). *Introduction to The Scarlet Letter*. Oxford World's Classics edition.
- Male, R. R. (1991). *The Tongue of Flame: The Scarlet letter*. Boston: Bedford/st. Martins.
- Reynolds, L. (1984). *The Scarlet Letter and Revolutions Abroad*. European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance, rptd New Haven 1988.
- Rubinstein, A. T. (1988). *American: Root and Flower*. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).