

## “The Scarlet Letter” Rewritten: A Unique Portrayal of Hester Prynne’s Motherhood

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### Abstract

*This paper is trying to bring out the unique characteristic features of motherhood that have been traced within Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (1850). The protagonist of the novel conceives a daughter with Arthur Dimmesdale, to whom she is not married, and then she has been struggling to give a secure new life to her daughter, Pearl. The paper is trying to explore her maternal feelings not only towards Pearl but also towards her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale. The novel has multiple times shown Arthur’s overobedience towards Hester Prynne, which symbolises a son’s obedience towards his mother. The dominance of extreme motherhood towards Arthur Dimmesdale has not ever allowed her to reveal the identity of her daughter’s father. She has endured intolerable insults and shame, but her unique motherhood has never dictated to include the name of her partner, who should have been given the same inexplicable pain and insult which Hester has alone endured throughout. The unique motherhood has suppressed the honest vows of parenthood where the father is always expected to stand beside his family to give them a secured life. Hester has stood as a single mother who has been continuously trying to safeguard her two children from every obstacle, her motherhood has been working as a shield to protect both Pearl and Arthur Dimmesdale.*

**Keywords:** motherhood, maternal feelings, inexplicable pain, shield, safeguard, obedience.

Motherhood is the state where someone, specifically a mother, undergoes maternal roles, and sometimes the meaning of motherhood goes beyond just mere fertility. It is not always mandatory to give birth to a child to become a mother, sometimes motherhood is also shared between a mother and a child to whom she has not given birth, but the intensity of her motherhood remains the same. Nathaniel Hawthorne has portrayed a different definition of motherhood within his heroine, Hester Prynne. “... she saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home; a decayed house of gray stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of antique gentility... her mother’s, too, with the look of heedful and anxious love which it always wore in her remembrance, and which, even since her death, had so often laid the impediment of a

gentle remonstrance in her daughter's pathway." (Hawthorne 57), the notion of motherhood has been always there within her since her childhood days.

Despite sorrows and inexplicable agony, she has never bowed down in front of her motherhood for both Arthur Dimmesdale and Pearl. "Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something that should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life..." (Hawthorne 55). Even Nathaniel Hawthorne has stated as well as placed her in the most sacred position (motherhood) even after she has conceived a child with Dimmesdale to whom she is not married, Hawthorne has even never hesitated to portray her as the Virgin Mary when Hester was standing alone with her infant "at her bosom" (Hawthorne 55). Hardly had she come out of the prison door to stand on the scaffold for her sin of adultery when the people around her started to dehumanise as well as criticise her: "They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a theme for jest in an exhibition like the present." (Hawthorne 56). She was enduring the entire situation without a single word and the partner of the adultery has never been named by her, she has proved herself to be a shield in the life of her partner: "Madam Hester absolutely refuseth to speak, and the magistrates have laid their heads together in vain. Peradventure the guilty one stands looking on at this sad spectacle, unknown of man, and forgetting that God sees him." (Hawthorne 60).

Hester's badge of shame or the scarlet letter that she had to carry throughout brings up the biggest question. Does the letter "A" stand for Arthur Dimmesdale in her life? The people around her scorned and dehumanised her by looking at her token of shame, which was given by the magistrates as a punishment for committing the sin of adultery, but does that affect her? Does she ever think of the badge of shame as the symbol of shame, or does she admire and show affection toward her badge as if the badge symbolises her child Arthur? "... midday sun burning down her face and lighting up its shame; with the scarlet token of infamy on her breast; with the sin- born infant in her arms;" (Hawthorne 61). She has somewhere pride in this token of shame, which she loves to show in the same way she loves to admire her Pearl, the love reflects the same for both Pearl and Dimmesdale: "Her prison door was thrown open and she came forth into the sunshine, which, falling on all alike, seemed, to her sick and morbid heart,

as if meant for, no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast.” (Hawthorne 73). She has somehow transcended the meaning of that badge of shame: “It was the art—then, as now, almost the only one within a woman’s grasp—of needlework. She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold.” (Hawthorne 76). The badge of shame is sometimes covered by Hester, a symbolic representation of protecting one child from another when two children generally fight with one another: “In the afternoon of a certain summer’s day after Pearl grew big enough to run about, she amused herself with gathering handfuls of wild-flowers and flinging them, one by one, at her mother’s bosom, dancing up and down like a little elf whenever she hit the scarlet letter. Hester’s first motion had been to cover her bosom with her clasped hands.” (Hawthorne 89). “... thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother’s rights and how much the stronger they are when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter!” (Hawthorne 102-103), the best sentence, which has wonderfully symbolized her unique motherhood.

There is a great difference between the relationship that she has shared with Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, her husband, and her partner of adultery. The harsh husband’s nature gets quite cleared in the novel, but the question always remains there. When we want to find that clarity between Hester and Dimmesdale, do they really share the relationship of love due to which Pearl came? Perhaps the answer comes when we go deep into their relationship and find traces of mother-son relationship. On one side, Roger Chillingworth threatens her not to reveal Hester’s husband’s identity when he says, “Let, therefore, thy husband be to the world as one already dead, and of whom no tidings shall ever come. Recognise me not, by word, by sign, by look! Breathe not the secret, above all, to the man thou wettest.

1. Shouldst thou fail in this, beware! His fame, his position, and his life, will be in my hands. Beware!” (Hawthorne 72) whereas on the other side, Arthur Dimmesdale says, “... I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow- sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for 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.” (Hawthorne 65). The difference between a husband’s tone and her lover’s tone can be perceived by the readers as Hester, who has been terribly insulted and ashamed

in front of the citizens, partially due to Dimmesdale never speaking out the name of her lover and it described as well as portrays Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Divine Maternity" (Hawthorne 55) and "the most sacred quality of human life" (Hawthorne 65). Sometimes Hester has given gestures by shaking her head, indicating that she would never confess the name and sometimes she directly said, "Never." (Hawthorne 65) or said, "I will not speak!" (Hawthorne 66). She has always proved her best to carry forward her unique motherhood throughout the novel. Even after repeated threatening enquiries by Roger Chillingworth, Hester Prynne never disclosed the name as if till her last breath she would protect her child from every obstacle; this idea gets clarified when she said to her legal husband, "Ask me not!" (Hawthorne 71), she further said, "That thou shalt never know!" (Hawthorne 71). Chillingworth kept on threatening by telling her- "Thou hast kept the secret of thy paramour. Keep likewise, mine... Breathe not, to any human soul, that thou didst ever call me husband... My home is where thou art, and where he is. But betray me not!" (Hawthorne 72). But after repeated threats and insults she never tells his name; she can endure insults and threats and tortures but she never gives a second thought when she thinks of not protecting her both children.

Similarly, Hester Prynne has proved herself a shield for Pearl as well, when Governor Bellingham decided to take Pearl away from Hester, Hester got furious and cried and said, "God gave me the child... He gave her in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness!- she is my torture, nonetheless! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a millionfold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first!" (Hawthorne 102). She even doesn't think about coiling herself without thinking. She goes to Arthur Dimmesdale to request him not to take her child from her. She has been continuously requesting them not to take her pearl and her scarlet letter from her, a unique mother who can endure innumerable torture to keep Pearl and Dimmesdale safe.

Arthur Dimmesdale also proved himself to be an obedient son of Hester. Sometimes, he replies to Roger Chillingworth's continuous inquiry regarding Hester by saying, "No- not to thee!- not to an earthly physician!" (Hawthorne 123), he appears to be an over-obedient boy who always follows his mother's advice. Hester's motherhood is also clearly depicted when she says, "... Yet it was not without heavy misgivings that I thus bound myself; for, having cast off all duly towards other human beings, there remained a duty towards him, and something whispered to me that I was betraying it in pledging myself to keep your counsel. Since that day, no man is

as near to him as you. You tread behind his every footstep. You are beside him, sleeping and walking. You search his thoughts. You burrow and rankle in his heart! Your clutch is on his life, and you cause him to die daily a living death, and still he knows you not. In permitting this, I have surely acted a false part by the only man to whom the power was left me to be true!” (Hawthorne 151-152). The words of Hester clearly state that she is not just the mere lover of Dimmesdale but their relationship is unique, and that uniqueness is within the mother-son relationship which can be felt if we inwardly try to understand their relation. Like a mother, Hester faces Dimmesdale when she says, “You wrong yourself in this... Your sin is left behind you in the days long past. Your present life is no less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people’s eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace?” (Hawthorne 169-170). Like a mother, she asks for forgiveness sometimes, a lady who has suffered alone without causing any harm to him, but now Hester, who has not done anything is asking for forgiveness from Arthur, “O Arthur... forgive me... he was my husband.” (Hawthorne 171). The calm Dimmesdale whom the readers have known knows how to appear violent, and the violence is first felt when he is spending an isolated time with Hester, and he learns about Chillingworth’s relationship with Hester. Hester continues to give him advice like a mother, “... Leave this wreck and ruin here where it happened. Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew! Hast thou exhausted possibility in the failure of this one trial? Not so! The future is yet full of trial and success. There is happiness to be enjoyed! There is good to be done! Be, if the spirit summon thee to such a mission, the teacher and apostle of the red man. Or- as is more thy nature- be a scholar and a sage among the wisest and the most renowned of the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die! Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame. Why shouldst thou tarry so much as one other day in the torments that have gnawed into thy life!- that have made thee feeble to will and to do!- that will leave thee powerless even to repent! Up, and away!” (Hawthorne 175-176). These lines beautifully describe her motherhood instinct within her, which is forcing her to let Dimmesdale start a new life by leaving everything behind. “Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.” (Hawthorne 177). Hester is known as the woman who has the terrific capability of endurance and still after these tortures the behaviour that she has towards the partner of her adultery even after enduring so much speaks of Hester’s motherly instinct towards Dimmesdale. Even in the Chapter, *The Child at the Brookside*, a sibling relationship can be felt between Pearl and Arthur Dimmesdale when, after seeing Dimmesdale,

Pearl never comes near them: “Pearl, without responding in any manner to these honey-sweet expressions remained on the other side of the brook. Now she fixed her bright, wild eyes on her mother, now on the minister, and now included them both in the same glance, as if to detect and explain to herself the relation which they bore to one another. (Hawthorne 184-185). The feeling of jealousy can be explicitly felt in this chapter, even when Dimmesdale kisses Pearl’s forehead, “... bent forward, and impressed one on her brow,” (Hawthorne 188), Pearl reacts differently to prove her jealousy, she “... broke away from her mother, and running, to the brook, stooped over it and bathed her forehead, until the unwelcome kiss was quite washed off and diffused through a long lapse of the gliding water.” (Hawthorne 188). She is the woman who endured a lot to see happiness in the lives of Pearl and Arthur Dimmesdale, her motherhood, or rather her unique motherhood has never allowed her to put them in distress; she has tried throughout. She even has insisted Dimmesdale change his identity and leave, which indicates her motherhood and not the adultery that Pearl faced once, she doesn’t have the physical lust that was expected by the readers, but we get the love and anxiety, which we are familiar to see within mothers.

### Works Cited

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