



**Complex of Salvation in Kafka's *The Trial* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: A Comparative study**

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**Abstract in English**

This comparative study examines the theme of salvation in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspectives of psychoanalytic theory and existentialism. The research examines the paths of the protagonists, Josef K. and Hester Prynne, to redemption or despair, investigating the influence of societal structures, individual guilt, and existential anxiety. The complicated dynamics of judgment and liberation are emphasized by Kafka's critique of bureaucratic absurdity and Hawthorne's interrogation of Puritanical moral rigidity. This research addresses a critical gap by examining the relationship between internal psychological conflicts and external societal pressures in these texts, which provides novel perspectives on their general usefulness. The research depicts the convergence of the existential conflict for meaning and the psychoanalytic investigation of repression and identity, which clarifies the multiple aspects of salvation in literature.

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## Introduction

Franz Kafka and Nathaniel Hawthorne are two remarkable authors whose writings examine the complexities of guilt, judgment, and the quest for atonement amid harsh social structures. Kafka, a twentieth-century author recognized for his harsh and existential themes, embodied the uneasiness of contemporary existence in his masterpiece *The Trial* (1914-1915). The story chronicles Josef K., a man arrested for an unclear crime, as he traverses a bureaucratic and bizarre court system. In this complex universe, Kafka conveys a disenchanting perspective on salvation, illustrating how institutional frameworks and ambiguity obstruct human redemption. Nathaniel Hawthorne, a nineteenth-century American author, explores the idea of redemption within the parameters of Puritan morality in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Set in 17th-century New England, Hawthorne narrates the tale of Hester Prynne, a lady subjected to public humiliation for having an illegitimate child. Hawthorne investigates her quest for atonement, analyzing the ethical and spiritual conflicts of both Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale as they contend with the effects of their deeds in a strictly moralistic society.

The notion of individual redemption, while grounded in different historical and cultural settings in these two works, remains important to their thematic investigations. In Kafka's *The Trial*, salvation is impossible, linked not alone to individual deeds but also to the bureaucratic device that governs the course of existence and mortality. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, salvation is contextualized within theological and moral frameworks, as characters pursue salvation through confession and atonement. This comparative analysis examines how both authors depict salvation as a complicated, varied process influenced by external social factors and personal conflicts. Both works emphasize the potential for repentance while simultaneously illustrating the limits imposed by society, legal systems, and individual responsibility.

This study explores how Kafka's existential viewpoint and Hawthorne's Puritan framework depict the journey to salvation, emphasizing themes of guilt, judgment, and personal responsibility. This study aims to reveal the similarities and differences in the representations of salvation by examining the psychological and sociological aspects that shape the characters' pursuits of redemption. This research demonstrates how the conflict between personal agency and societal limitations influences the characters'

destinies and uncovers deeper understandings of human nature and the search of atonement.

This paper discusses that in *The Trial* and *The Scarlet Letter*, Kafka and Hawthorne use guilt, judgment, and personal duty to explore the limitations and possibilities of salvation, offering a comparative study of how existentialism and Puritanism form their characters' quests for salvation.

Though few comparison studies exist, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* have been studied for their salvation themes. Both books examine the intricate relationship between guilt, atonement, and human growth in different cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts. Existentialists view Kafka's *The Trial* as absurd and pointless since the protagonist fights an oppressive and arbitrary system. In contrast, *The Scarlet Letter* is often seen morally and religiously, notably in terms of Puritan salvation. However, this research uses Existentialism and Psychoanalytic Theory to compare both works and show the psychological and philosophical aspects of redemption in both writings.

Existentialism, which studies the quest for meaning in a chaotic, indifferent world, has been applied to Kafka's *The Trial*. According to Stanley Corngold, *The Trial* depicts Josef K.'s existential crisis: caught in an illogical and unintelligible court system that mimics modern life's isolation and absurdity (Corngold 104). Existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who study absurdity, alienation, and existential liberation, provide light on Josef K.'s psychological issues. In Kafka's universe, the conflict between individual freedom and society limits makes salvation impossible and atonement absurd. Existentialism shows how Kafka's depiction of the court system stresses the individual's isolation and powerlessness rather than presenting a moral answer. Psychoanalytic interpretations of *The Trial*, particularly those based on Freud's repression and unconscious, reveal Josef K.'s mental condition. Ritchie Robertson suggests that Kafka's investigation of guilt and punishment may mirror our suppressed signals and psychological tensions that regulate conduct. Josef K.'s failure to understand his trial may be a sign of unconscious guilt, a recurring subject in Kafka's novels (Robertson 98). Thus, the judicial system is both a social construct and a metaphor of psychological forces beyond the character's control, increasing his existential misery.

However, *The Scarlet Letter* is widely interpreted psychoanalytically and morally, focusing on Hester Prynne's salvation in Puritanical society. Robert D. Kaplan believes Hester's salvation is related to her struggle with sin and her desire to reconcile with a judging society. Hester's psychological and moral change is marked by an internal conflict, generally described in terms of suppression and shame (Kaplan 45). In Psychoanalytic Theory, academics like Kaplan show how Hester's experiences represent the psychological conflict between public recognition and freedom from social control. Kaplan says that the heroine sacrifice herself by accepting guilt and transcending social traditions that limit her individuality.

Existentialism, together with Psychoanalytic Theory, illuminates Hester's struggle in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester's inability to adapt to society explores existential issues like alienation and the desire for personal authenticity, whereas Hawthorne's tale is more moral and religious. Michael J. Colacurcio claims that Hester may overcome her shame and find redemption by confronting her identity, regardless of judgment. Hester's trip reflects existential ideas of freedom and self-realization. Hester's transformation is driven by her understanding of her deeds and the morality of her remorse (Colacurcio 57). Despite much scholarly attention to Kafka and Hawthorne's books, comparative studies remain lacking. *The Trial* and *The Scarlet Letter* have seldom been analyzed using Existentialism and Psychoanalytic Theory, especially in regard to salvation. Some reviewers, like James E. Miller, have briefly noted thematic connections between the books but have not widely investigated how the philosophical and psychological components of redemption interact (Miller 112).

Salvation and guilt have always been central to literary studies of the human condition, like; culture, history, and philosophy. *The Trial* and *The Scarlet Letter* are major works that explore similar topics through different lenses—Kafka through modernity's absurdity and alienation, and Hawthorne through Puritanism's moral rigidity. Both novels have been evaluated within their cultural and philosophical settings, but few scholars have compared their salvation themes. This study uses Existentialism and Psychoanalytic Theory to show how each novel handles guilt, salvation, and identity in the context of social forces.

A critique of modernity's alienation, Kafka's *The Trial* makes salvation an unreachable ideal. Joseph K.'s journey through an unfair and opaque court system

illustrates existential suffering and psychological disintegration caused by external factors. In contrast, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* follows Puritan morality, which requires sorrow, social judgment, and personal change. Hester Prynne's salvation involves confronting remorse and asserting her uniqueness within a difficult moral framework. The comparative analysis pursues to discharge how both manuscripts show salvation not as a static endpoint but as a psychological method formed by cultural, philosophical, and social influences.

Kafka's *The Trial* delves into the alienation and disorientation of modernity, depicting salvation as an unattainable ideal within a system of oppression and absurdity. The existentialist concept of the inherent absurdity of life is symbolized by Josef K.'s arrest, which is devoid of explanation or clarity. Kafka's work exemplifies the quest for meaning in an irrational world, as Camus observes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 13). Josef K. is not only in pursuit of justice, but also struggling to understand his position in a world that provides no solutions.

Even in the absence of concrete sin Josef K.'s interactions reveal a deeply internalized regret from a psychoanalytic perspective. Freud's concept of the superego aids in the clarification of this dynamic, as social limitations are evident in Josef K.'s psyche, resulting in a persistent sense of inadequacy and failure. This remorse is reflected in the judicial system's enigmatic nature, which serves as a projection of his interior turmoil (Freud 78). As Bloom notes, "Kafka's characters frequently reside in a perpetual state of psychological tension, where internal fears and external forces combine to ensnare the individual" (Bloom 94). The existential despair of modernity is underscored by Josef K.'s inability to reconcile his desire for clarity with the obscure and chaotic nature of the system.

Critics have highlighted the symbolic importance of the surroundings in *The Trial*. The intricate passageways of the courtrooms and the bizarre, unpleasant environment deepen the protagonist's psychological disintegration. Sokel asserts that Kafka used these harsh environments to "externalize Josef K.'s inner conflicts, creating a physical manifestation of his existential anxiety" (Sokel 56). These situations not only confuse Josef K. but also emphasize the hopelessness of pursuing redemption in a world that rejects comprehension.

Moreover, Kafka's narrative structure—characterized by sudden changes and unsolved tensions—echoes existentialist concepts. Sartre argues that Kafka's writings "deconstruct conventional ideas of narrative resolution, compelling readers to face the ambiguity and absurdity of existence" (Sartre 45). The absence of conclusion in Josef K.'s narrative is not a narrative deficiency but a conscious decision to illustrate the elusive essence of redemption in a fragmented contemporary society.

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* provides a profound examination of guilt and redemption within the austere Puritan society of 17th-century New England. Hester Prynne, ostracized for her adulterous affair, symbolizes public disgrace, while Arthur Dimmesdale, her quiet contrast, endures private pain. Through their narratives, Hawthorne critiques the repressive essence of societal disapproval and explores the internal and external conflicts surrounding redemption.

From an Existentialist viewpoint, Hester's experiences underscore the necessity of personal autonomy under public criticism. Although her punishment aims to alienate her, Hester opts to accept her situation, converting *the scarlet letter* into a sign of courage instead of disgrace. Sartre's concept of freedom under limitation is seen here, as Hester reconstructs her identity, affirming her position in a society that aims to marginalize her (Sartre 89). This action demonstrates her existential search for meaning, in sharp contrast to Dimmesdale's apathetic acquiescence to his internal guilt.

Dimmesdale's situation, however, corresponds with Psychoanalytic Theory, since he is consumed by an internal conflict that emerges as both bodily and psychological sufferings. Freud's theory of repression is seen in Dimmesdale's incapacity to admit his transgression, resulting in his declining health and ultimate demise. His guilt is not just a reaction to societal condemnation but also an embodiment of his internalized superego, which sustains emotions of inadequacy and self-disdain (Freud 67). According to Bloom, "Dimmesdale's silence constitutes his most significant punishment, as the act of concealment deprives him of the catharsis, he fervently desires" (Bloom 103).

The contrast between Hester and Dimmesdale's reactions to guilt highlights Hawthorne's criticism of Puritanism. Hester confronts the community's moral inflexibility, but Dimmesdale is ensnared by it, incapable of matching his deeds with the demands of his beliefs. This contradiction embodies the overarching existential conflict of aligning individual ethics with society standards. Sokel contends that

“Hawthorne’s characters become involved in a liminal space where societal expectations conflict with individual desires, resulting in a complex interplay of guilt and redemption” (Sokel 47).

Furthermore, Hawthorne used symbolic symbols, such *the scarlet letter* and the forest, to manifest the characters' interior problems. *The scarlet letter*, originally a sign of disgrace, evolves into a symbol of Hester's change and struggle. Likewise, the forest functions as a liminal area where social limits are temporarily lifted, allowing Hester and Dimmesdale to confront their feelings and consider the idea of salvation.

Comparing the theme of guilt in the two novels, Kafka introduces the picture of guilt and salvation due to the social and political environment of his time and his view of the humankind. Kafka criticizes the absurdity of the political regime, while Hawthorne criticizes the Puritan rule also to show individual struggle under oppressive systems during the existentialism and psychoanalytic theory. In *The Trial*, Josef K.’s guilt is ambiguous, reflecting the existentialist notion of humanity’s confrontation with absurdity. The opaque judicial system mirrors K.’s internalized guilt, perpetuating a sense of helplessness (Camus 13). This aligns with Freud’s concept of the superego, as K. battles an oppressive force that is both external and deeply psychological (Freud 78). Conversely, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* experience guilt as a direct consequence of their moral transgressions, shaped by the rigid expectations of Puritan society. While Hester bears her guilt publicly, Dimmesdale internalizes his shame, resulting in physical and psychological decay. Hawthorne’s critique of Puritanism reveals how societal judgment can exacerbate personal suffering (Bloom 103). Despite the differences, both novels underscore the destructive potential of systems whether societal or bureaucratic that impose guilt without offering redemption. As Sartre argues, both Kafka and Hawthorne present characters “trapped in structures that deny their agency, forcing them to seek meaning within themselves” (Sartre 45). The two works explore universal themes in their unique contexts. As Hawthorne criticized Puritanism, 19th-century America grappled with morality and independence. Hester and Dimmesdale's conflicts represent a young nation's identity dilemma.

Instead, Kafka's modernist lens shows early 20th-century Europe's isolation and confusion. A faceless bureaucracy in *The Trial* symbolizes the rising separation of individuals in industrializing nations. Camus's conclusion that Kafka's work “captures



the absurdity of modern existence” indicates K.'s universality regardless of culture. Kafka and Hawthorne complicate salvation and guilt. Dimmesdale's tragedy exposes the cost of removal, while Hester's transformation criticizes social morality. Josef K.'s death in *The Trial* represents existentialist acceptance of life's absurdity and human limits. This analysis combines Existentialism and Psychoanalytic Theory to explain how both volumes investigate the human condition. Kafka and Hawthorne's heroes make readers face guilt, repent, and find meaning in an incomprehensible world.

*The Trial* and *The Scarlet Letter* use religion to explore guilt, redemption, and fallibility. Kafka and Hawthorne both critique religion as restrictive, but their approach and cultures differ. In *The Scarlet Letter*, puritanism dominates and sins are punished. Hester Prynne's scarlet letter represents shame. Divine judgment conflates personal violation with collective blame, creating a complex moral foundation. Hawthorne shows how dishonest and harmful a culture that favors exterior piety above inner redemption is (Bloom 56). A self-styled-religious legal system mimics divine judgment in *The Trial*. Josef K. experiences a strange process mimicking partisan theological doctrines. Kafka condemns organized religion's role in existential misery by judging guilt secretly. Camus believes Kafka's trial “a parody of divine justice, where the absence of clear rules renders salvation impossible” (Camus 78). Hawthorne emphasizes salvation by grace and activity. Hester's acceptance and reframe of her punishment means self-discovery, not compliance, leads to salvation. Dimmesdale's struggle shows how religious shame harms sin. Last confession is awful, but truth redeems. Kafka rejects Josef K.'s salvation for existentialist stupidity. *The Trial* critiques religious and governmental groups that provide mystical salvation without addressing moral or theological difficulties. «Kafka's culture denies grace, creating a religious vacuum where humanity must accept its insignificance» (Sokel 34).

Both authors use symbols to challenge religion. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scarlet letter “A” symbolizes sin, guilt, and salvation, rising from humiliation to importance. The scaffold represents judgment and confession, linking physical location to spiritual struggle (Bloom 67). Kafka's labyrinthine courtrooms and mysterious Law symbolize an abstract, even religious power that reigns without clarity. Camus believes these images suggest a “world where divine judgment is replaced by human absurdity, yet the psychological weight of sin persists” (ibid 93). The Puritan idea of fallibility as a



path to grace provides sinners redemption, according to Hawthorne. Hawthorne contrasts Hester's resilience with Dimmesdale's pain to uphold religious principles and proclaim salvation. Human fallibility is inherent to Kafka, without transcendence or conclusion. Josef K.'s quiet acceptance of his fate indicates that a heartless society cannot bring meaning or atonement. Sokel says Kafka's trial "reflects a theological silence, where the absence of divine intervention amplifies existential despair" (Sokel 22).

*The Scarlet Letter* and *The Trial*'s protagonists struggle with guilt, judgment, and salvation due to society and culture. From distinct cultural views, both works reject restrictive human structures.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne exposes Puritan morals and government. Hester Prynne's public sentence represents theocratic authority that converts sin into common judgment. This shame and isolation culture restricts one's redemption outside collective morality. Bercovitch calls Puritanism "a moral compass and an instrument of control, conflating divine will with societal judgment" (Bercovitch 115). Hawthorne calls Puritanism hypocritical. Hester becomes a powerful, quiet rebel, but Dimmesdale's repression reveals how affected guilt. Society and culture make *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Trial*'s characters battle with guilt, judgment, and salvation. Both works oppose limiting human systems from different cultural perspectives. Hawthorne challenges Puritan values and governance in *The Scarlet Letter*. Theocratic power turns guilt into common judgment in Hester Prynne's public punishment. This shame and isolation culture limits salvation beyond social morality.

## Conclusion

The exploration of salvation in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Trial* reveals profound insights into human struggles within rigid societal and existential frameworks. Hawthorne's critique of Puritan moral rigidity and Kafka's depiction of bureaucratic absurdity offer compelling portraits of individuals navigating guilt, judgment, and redemption. The application of existentialism underscores the tension between human agency and systemic oppression, while psychoanalytic theory reveals the internal conflicts stemming from repression and guilt.

Both novels, though originating from vastly different contexts, converge in their exploration of the complexities of salvation. Hester Prynne's resilience and Josef K.'s existential plight reflect universal themes of alienation, identity, and the search for meaning. Together, they illuminate the human condition, offering a rich comparative study that underscores the timeless relevance of these works.

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