

**الجنـدر، والمراقبة، وسياسات التشهير العلني في
رواية الحرف القرمزي**

**Gender, Surveillance, and the Politics of
Public Shaming in The Scarlet Letter**

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة رواية الحرف القرمزي بوصفها نقدًا للمجتمع البيوريتاني المتشدد ونظرته القاسية إلى العقاب. وفي الواقع، تستكشف هذه الدراسة رؤية الرواية للعقاب باعتباره نظامًا مستمرًا من المراقبة الاجتماعية يُشكّل الهوية من خلال العار الداخلي، والانضباط القائم على النوع الاجتماعي، والظهور العلني أمام المجتمع. ومن خلال تحليل الرواية، يتضح أن الكاتب يدين قسوة العقوبات البيوريتانية والبني الهرمية للسلطة التي تجعل الأفراد موضوعًا للسيطرة والتحكم. كما تبحث الدراسة في الطابع الجندي للعقاب، ولا سيما الاختلاف بين العار العلني الذي تعرضت له هيستر والشعور الداخلي بالذنب الذي عاناه ديمزديل، مما يبرز القواعد الأكثر صرامة التي يفرضها المجتمع على النساء. وتعتمد هذه الدراسة بصورة أساسية على الإطار النظري لميشيل فوكو، وبخاصة أفكاره المتعلقة بالمراقبة، والآليات الخارجية والداخلية للعقاب، والسلطة المتجذرة داخليًا.

Abstract

This paper investigates Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* as a critique of the strict Puritan society and its cruel perspective on punishment. In fact, this study explores the novel's view of punishment as an ongoing social surveillance system that shapes identity through internalized shame, gendered discipline, and public visibility. Examining the book makes it clear that Hawthorne condemns both the harshness of Puritan punishment and the hierarchies of power that make people objects of control. It also explores the gendered nature of punishment, especially the difference between Hester's public shame and Dimmesdale's internalized guilt, highlighting the much stricter rules forced on women by society. This study is mainly based on Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, particularly his ideas on surveillance, the external and internal operation of punishment, and internalized power.



Introduction

Since Puritanism was a late sixteenth-century religious reform movement, it is seldom ever referenced in this day and age. Numerous authors have been motivated to produce creative works by the Puritan phenomenon. Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of them. The Puritan past of America is a theme in most of Hawthorne's works, but *The Scarlet Letter* makes the most of it. This novel illustrates the profound influence of Puritanism on people's lives and ideas. Hawthorne depicts the Puritan community and individuals who are greatly impacted by Puritanism. Anyone who sins will be punished in Puritan society.

Puritanism has an impact on social, cultural, educational, and political spheres in addition to theological ones. Additionally, Hawthorne's background as a descendant of Puritan figures influences his presentation of Puritan society's sophistication, which leads to images of the intricacy of Puritan New England in the 17th century, as seen in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Based on the fact that the Puritans were Protestant reformers who first appeared in England before moving to the American colonies of New England. They also sought to "purify" politics and religion of corruption. On the other hand, the Puritans who wish to reform and purify the faith end up treating sinners cruelly in this novel. Everyone who sins is judged by them.

In New England, Puritan culture operated more as a strict system where the only obvious indicator of virtue was exterior obedience than as a caring community. The moral framework penalized outward violations rather than inward ideas or intentions, and it placed a higher priority on compliance than conscience. Preserving social order was more important than the individuals' moral development. Rather than redeeming the individual, the penal system aimed to purify the society.

Literary scholar Nina Baym points out that the Puritan way of thinking did not allow for individualism or privacy. People were only seen in public, and any hint of privacy was considered as a sign of disobedience. The intention was to reveal all that was concealed and turn private actions into public trials. A sin was a crime against the state-like religious order, not just a personal shortcoming, and as such, it was punishable by the law and public condemnation.

This paper investigates *The Scarlet Letter's* perception of punishment as a continuous system of social surveillance that contributes to shaping identity through public visibility, gendered discipline, and internalized shame. It is evident through examining the novel that Hawthorne criticizes both the cruelty of Puritan punishment and the systems of power that turn people into subjects of control.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a Foucauldian framework to examine the concepts of discipline, surveillance, and punishment in *The Scarlet Letter*. Michel Foucault's work represents systems of power not as repressive forces, but as structure that actively contribute to shaping behaviour and identity. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents a trace of punishment's historical transformation from a public display of physical violence to a more subtle system of psychological control (Foucault 7).

According to Foucault's theory, discipline refers to a set of techniques that are used to control individual behaviour and produce what he calls "docile bodies". In fact this term is used to refer to individuals who can be controlled, observed and normalized within the context of the social system. (Foucault 136). Discipline does not operate through overt force; instead, it operates through everyday practices, norms and institutions. Based on that, routines of observation, categorization, and correction spread power across society.

Closely related to discipline is the concept of surveillance. For Foucault, surveillance is a key mechanism of modern power. He introduces the idea of how visibility becomes a means of control through his famous model of the "Panopticon" (Foucault 201). People start to internalize authority by controlling their own behaviour, because they are unable to detect when they are being observed. According to Foucault, "visibility is a trap" (Foucault 200) because it ensures compliance without requiring ongoing physical enforcement.

Another central aspect of Foucauldian theory is the transformation from external punishment to internalized discipline. Previous power systems used to inflict punishment directly on the body in public displays of power. However, modern disciplinary systems are different as they aim to control the mind and behaviour of individuals by creating a state of constant visibility and self-surveillance (Foucault 202-03).

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to the analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*, which depicts a Puritan society that is structured around visibility, communal judgement and moral regulation. The represented Puritan community in the novel operates as a disciplinary system in which individuals are under constant surveillance and observation according to strict moral values. While Arthur Dimmesdale's interior suffering represents the later development of internalized discipline, public punishment, such as Hester Prynne's exposure on the scaffold, symbolizes the earlier kind of spectacle outlined by Foucault.

This paper, by applying Foucauldian concepts, investigates the novel as a representation of power that operates both external and internal mechanisms. In fact, the theoretical framework contributes to a deeper



understanding of the extension of punishment beyond legal and religious practices.

The Scaffold as a Theater of Public Shame

Throughout the book, the scaffold represents a variety of facets of human nature. It conveys both love and punishment as well as the shame and remorse of transgression. For instance, Hester's adultery with Dimmesdale is an example of a sin motivated by love. She was represented as being outside of society after the secret was revealed. She is forced to publicly display the scarlet letter when she stands on the scaffold since it was thought to represent sin, shame, guilt, and punishment.

In addition to acting as a kind of public humiliation and punishment, the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter* aids in revealing how the plot and characters involved in the sin of adultery grow. Three scaffold scenarios that symbolize sin can be found in *The Scarlet Letter*. This is the first scaffold scene when Hester Prynne was charged with adultery.

Sin is symbolized by the scaffold scene. The second scaffold, which stands for public evil, is where Dimmesdale sits at night. He yells a lot because the thoughts are so overwhelming. In the third and last scaffold scene, Dimmesdale calls for Hester and Pearl while standing on the scaffold. He then confesses his transgression and passes away. The last scene of the scaffold symbolizes both exposing and confessing sin. The book's main structures are the scaffold scenes, which illustrate the idea of sin and guilt. Others may see the scaffold as a reliable, secure haven, while others may see it as a sinister and horrible place.

The first scaffold incident in Chapter 2 brutally displays the colony's fury at malefactors. The colony's "good women" talk about the potential benefits to the community if they were in control of public punishment. "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead." The "most pitiless of these self-constituted judges" is another woman in the throng who draws attention to the colony's legal system's scriptural foundation: "This woman should be executed because she has embarrassed us all. Doesn't it have a law? There is, in fact, both in the Bible and the statute book. If their own wives and daughters depart, let the magistrates, who have rendered it useless, thank themselves."

In fact, the theory of Michel Foucault further explains this dynamic of public exposure. Foucault explains in his *Discipline and Punish* that during early modern societies, punishment functioned as a public spectacle (Foucault 32-35). Therefore, the scaffold represents as a space where authority is reinforced before a crowd. Similarly, the punishment of Hester was displayed before the entire community, transforming her into an object of collective scrutiny.

The Scarlet Letter as a Visible Mark of Shame

The letter in red "A" in the text *The Scarlet Letter* is largely a visible stigma inflicted by Puritan society to subject Hester Prynne to perpetual censorship and public criticism. The message appears throughout the novel as a very significant symbol. The fact that Hester was compelled to adorn the scarlet for life from the start of the novel implies that this letter has begun to have a long-term influence on her. When she was obliged to wear it, everyone discovered that she had meticulously embroidered the letter "A" on her chest, even embellishing it with gold threads. By placing the letter on her breast, the community ensures that her shame is permanently visible, turning her body into a public site of moral judgment.

In the prose that follows, this superb embroidery also served as the basis for her independent life. Subsequently, abandoned by secular society, Hester had to wear the red letter A. Her physical separation reinforces the idea that the mark does not only identify her but also controls her position within society through constant visibility and exclusion. In this situation, she had spare money to donate to charities and relied on her unmatched stitching talents to maintain herself and her kids. The A on her breast gradually lost its brilliance in the eyes of people who knew her; instead, it took on the appearance of pity and admiration.

Meanwhile, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester's lover, was deteriorating in his condition, owing primarily to Roger Chillingworth's seemingly persistent incitement, until Dimmesdale knew that death was approaching. Dimmesdale summoned all of his remaining strength and stood on the punishment platform, declaring to the assembled multitudes that he was the traitor represented by the "Crimson Letter A". His body trembled violently before he took his last breath in Hester's arms, and he untied his priestly dress from the front, revealing the bloody crimson letter "A" engraved on his chest and screaming at the top of his voice the truth that he had kept hidden deep in one's soul for a decade.

In contrast to Hester, whose shame has been publicly disclosed, Dimmesdale's secret label emphasizes the distinction between public feeling and concealed guilt, as well as the importance of public disclosure in deciding the manner of societal retribution. Hester eventually left and returned—many years later—to the very spot where she had endured immense shame because of love. Years later, a new tomb was built next to an ancient, subterranean burial; nonetheless, the two tombs shared a single tombstone engraved with the sentence, "On a black background, the letter A stands out in scarlet." (Hawthorne, page 244). This inscription emphasizes the importance of the "scarlet letter A" and its frequent appearance in the book's folds.



Hester's essential essence is related with the letter "A". Throughout the book, Hester views the note as a trophy of pride rather than a reproach. She tries to maintain her dignity and must accept her penance to continue living in this world.

Within what is possible, Hester will seek to establish her character's presence and prove herself; nevertheless, because the aim of that mark is to erase her character and subjugate her to the dominant Puritan order, an unavoidable conflict has developed between Hester and that order. (Baym 12)

Hester opted, with her own free will, to accept the punishment imposed by society; she works to preserve her personality and being, while still being cognizant of the constraints imposed by her society. As a result of her sin, Hester found herself "outside the scope of familiar relations with humanity, confined within an orbit of her own and isolated from others" (Hawthorne 54). At this time, Hester and her community are on opposing sides.

Hester continues to live her own life despite the community's attempts to dictate her circumstances. She embraces the letter "A" with the goal of attempting to alter its connotations. Despite how society perceives her, she doesn't waver. Even the actors and actresses on stage are always reciting their own texts, as she proudly states with her "A" (Martine 522). Hester transforms from an object of the law to an agent of the law in an effort to alter the meaning of the letter.

First, because she was made to wear the letter, she saw herself as a victim of her community. She thus forms a revolutionary dedication to the repercussions of her transgression. Instead of changing herself, she is committed to changing society. As Aziz points out, the scarlet letter becomes a sign of her good actions; Hester is able to display the community—to which she once offended—"a face more gentle than she ever aspired to, or perhaps more than she deserved." Thus, Hester is portrayed as a radical thinker waging a revolutionary war against the established order. (Aziz 9)

Throughout her trial, Hester expresses intense anger toward the Puritan system and everything it represents. In an effort to show her freedom of choice, she refuses to bow to the "calling" (Beadle), which represents the Puritan legal system; she believes that the social order provides no degree of freedom. Michael T. Gilmore writes: "For [novelist] Hawthorne, the individual is not specified simply as a member of a wider social unit, but is defined mainly by acting in opposed to civilization; he is a separate creature, owed respect only to his own beliefs and purposes" (Gilmore (2004) 206). She believes that the world's laws are not applicable to her, and "A" signifies her new identity.



She believes that the laws of the world do not apply to her; the letter "A" symbolizes her new identity. Over time, this letter comes to reflect Hester's "benign qualities," rather than her previous actions. The letter itself does not change, but its meaning does; the way it is understood reflects the evolution of its interactions with Puritan society" (Korobkin 444).

She gains experience and strength from her society's hatred of her. In a society that is mainly concerned with appearances, she finds a means to deal with her status as a sinner via penitence. Hester believes that the Puritans are unaware of a higher plane of existence and truth. She doesn't think what she did was bad. She believes that she shouldn't regret or hate her love affair with Dimmesdale because it was a human deed.

Once again, Hester's social exclusion—which led her "to get lost with no control or calm in a vast, complex, and dark moral wasteland, just like a wild forest"—highlights and reinforces this facet of her nature. Hester chose to remain in the place where she was shamed in order to be close to her lover, despite the fact that she had complete freedom to return to England. She had an irresistible and unstoppable emotion, but she possessed the power of fate and destiny.

Her sorrow and remorse were the foundations that took root in the soil; it appeared as if a new birth—more established and integrated than the first—had transformed that forest area into a home for Hester Breen: a wild and dismal home, but the home of a lifetime (187). As a result, the "scarlet letter" remains an expressive example of how shame is generated and maintained, not just via internal feelings but also through the public eye and societal judgments.

Public Shame vs Hidden Guilt (Hester vs Dimmesdale)

The story of "The Scarlet Letter" revolves around Hester and Dimmesdale's romance. Pearl is born as a result of their shared transgression. The narrative depicts the corrupted Puritan society in which the poor are primarily affected by the punishment meted out for transgressions. The impoverished end up being the victims, while the people of status, frequently seen decent. Two forms of punishment are depicted in the book. One is evident, as demonstrated by Hester's forced wearing of the badge of shame (public punishment). As demonstrated by Dimmesdale, the other is more agonizing yet invisible. Even though his sin is invisible, it never stops eating away at him on the inside (Internal Conflict). despite the fact that the sin is the same.

Nevertheless, each gets punished separately. Dimsdale is embarrassed by what she did, and Hester feels terrible about it. Michael Lewis defines guilt as "action," but shame is associated with the "self." At the beginning of the story, Hester escapes from imprisonment as a fearless individual, climbs the killing platforms to tell the truth about her crime.



Instead of being humiliated, you are always convicted of what you did. Despite being on the execution platform, Dimsdale is embarrassed and refuses to confess. Dimsdale is held captive inside yet physically free. The poem following explains this: "You are glad, Hester, because you wear a red letter on your chest! "Secretly, my toolkit is on fire." Hawthorne (page 217).

She walks towards her daughter. At that time, thousands of stares pierce Hester's heart, lurking as a symbol of immorality; Hester is forced to wear the badge as a show of humiliation. In the context of the story, she states, "This badge taught me—and it teaches me every day—and it even teaches me at this very moment" (Hawthorne, p. 126). Her life became unpleasant after she wore this badge; people stopped dealing with her, and she was marginalized. Despite popular belief, they "marked Hester's forehead with a protective iron" in actuality. (Hawthorne, p.61).

She was regularly harassed by the school's students, who were allowed a half-day off to find her and mock her. The impact of that insignia is described as follows: "That crimson letter, embroidered and decorated with amazing skill above her chest." She generates a spell-like effect, removing her from her normal contacts with others and isolating her in her own orbit. (Hawthorne 1964).

Dimsdale finds himself in the same situation: he is an outcast from within, not beyond. Despite being amid a vast throng, he feels alone. Internal isolation is more intense and difficult to manage than external isolation. When the crowd discovers the truth, they notice the arrows that will crush his heart. "all that fear of public scrutiny, which possessed him for so long, comes back to him" , Dimsdale says. (Hawthorne, page 174).

Swathi and Suganya argue that this "uncovers the fear that inhibits Dimsdale from being able to take accountability for his actions, while maintaining to preach morality and virtue." Repressed guilt can negatively impact one's health and emotional well-being (465)."The moment he accomplished that, there was what looked like a roaring flow of a new existence, distinct from his own [...]," writes Dimsdale, conjuring up an imaginative scenario of the execution platform where he is striving to repent and find serenity.

It is as if the mother and infant are providing critical warmth to his body, which has nearly entirely slowed down (Hawthorne, 173). These phrases vividly demonstrate the magnitude of Dimsdale's weight as a result of his refusal to accept; he feels as if a million-ton boulder has been lifted from his chest when he imagines this temporary structure.

All of this occurred as a result of social norms that prohibited sin. Individual sins are never perceived by nature, and it never establishes guidelines for transgressors. When Hester and Dimmesdale first meet in the forest, it is clear that they are content and at ease. "She removed the



formal cap that contained her hair on a different impulse. Her cheek, which had been so pale for so long, was burning with a scarlet blush. (Hawthorne, 230)

Sundström states, "Hester reincarnates into her former self during this scene, once again glowing with energy." The distressed preacher's character shifts the moment he takes a breath from his surroundings (13). " The problems in his breast were illuminated by a flickering glow of odd enjoyment. According to Hawthorne (228–229), His soul rose—as if in a single leap—to reach a scene from heaven closer than it had reached throughout all the misery that had kept him crouching on the ground.

Hester's public retribution gave her the courage to face her situation, transforming all of her unattractive qualities into positive ones. The following remark is a fantastic description: "The whole world frowned at her—and for seven long years, he kept continuing to frown at this one woman—and so did heaven, which grimaced at her too; yet she did not die" (Hawthorne, p. 220).

Furthermore, she handed the letter to her teacher, which was a sign of shame. "I was able to enter worlds that other women feared to enter, thanks to the 'Crimson Letter.'" Shame, despair, loneliness! These were her harsh and unruly teachers; and though she refined her powers, she also taught her many wrong things" (Hawthorne, 226–227).

The entire city came together to make her life so miserable that it would lead her to death, but she grew stronger until she chose to stay there. Johnston goes on to say that she is: "not ashamed, nor has she given up; rather, she freely acknowledges her identity and what she has done, and in fact, she silently defies the shame which the judges have tried to use to kill her soul" (31).

However, Dimmesdale's internal struggle is like a tumor that grows inside of him and eventually causes his demise. Shame is experienced as an inner pain, a disease that affects the soul. Shame is a pain that a person feels deep inside himself, and it isolates us from ourselves and one another." claims Pattison.(1). In a culture so corrupt that a person of high status could easily avoid repercussions for their deeds, his rank acted as a shield for his transgressions. Nature steps in and punishes the offender in a way that is more agonizing than retaliation from the public. Nature forces Dimmesdale, who is devoid of prejudice and corruption, to confess his transgressions in front of the assembly on election day. He eventually passes away after realizing he is a hypocrite after his confession. This demonstrates how nature punishes a criminal impartially.

Hawthorne's novel illustrates nature's unbiased punishment, conveying a lesson to all societies tainted by any type of society. As the crowd punishes Hester, nature gives her more power. Nature, on the other hand, intervenes to show Demsdale's true identity, which in turn reveals



the genuine character of the community, despite the fact that the public was already aware of it.

Hawthorne's novel illustrates nature's equitable punishment. He conveys a warning to all nations as have been contaminated by any means. The public punishes Hester, but nature enables her to grow stronger. Despite the fact that the public has no concerns about Dimmesdale, nature intervenes and reveals the real him, revealing the true essence of society.

Gender and the Politics of Public Shaming

One of the male writers of the 19th century who provided room for feminist interpretation in his works is Hawthorne. The issue of women is central to his writings, and it appears that Hawthorne was so interested in the psychology of women that he foresaw feminism in his day. "Hawthorne portrayed with superb accuracy the condition of women in the 19th century and the psychological process of men who could not tolerate the notion of female equality," according to Louise DeSalvo (DeSalvo 121).

Hawthorne was affected by his friend Margaret Fuller's feminist writings, which addressed the overall situation of women in American society. Ashley L. Cohen: "Hawthorne uses the challenges of his female character as a precursor to the dialogue on women in the middle nineteenth century America, spanning the novel *The Scarlet Letter*" (Cohen 4).

Hawthorne's female characters frequently fulfill the same goal, though not necessarily in the same books: they "embody desirable and valuable qualities that male protagonists lack" (Baym 60). Many of Hawthorne's novels depict women dominating males and imposing their ideals on them. Hawthorne frequently employs his female characters as mouthpieces, describing specific aspects of women's roles in a given society.

The Scarlet Letter (The Scarlet Letter) can be read as a social commentary because it reflects Hawthorne's perception of the time and society in which he lived. Hawthorne creates the character of Hester Prynne, who symbolizes feminist ideas; In the story of Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale, Hester is represented as a strong, self-sufficient woman, one who "bitterly hates the oppression she feels obliged to endure, and sees it as something that casts a veil over the entire sex of women" (Herbert 528).

Hawthorne depicts Hester as an independent person who believes that freedom exists outside of the social framework. Michael T. brings up this point. According to Gilmore, "Hester develops a counter institution to the patriarchal structure... It survives as an independent entity that isolates itself from the existing social order and achieves its own identity in the company of other women." (Gilmore 60.)

Hawthorne used a variety of tactics to transform Hester into a real woman; According to the story's context, she appears to be particularly interested in rallying women around her, with the intention of inspiring



other women in her community to combat male resistance. In this context, Jan Yels writes: "The novel *The Scarlet Letter* seriously tackles the new feminist definition of womanhood, but in dismissing those definitions, it reproduces accepted stereotypes and supports authoritarian concepts" . (Baym 546)

Hester's concept of womanhood is founded on her tremendous capacity to resist the assumption that she is a male lady based on specific aspects of her behavior. It appears that Hester Prynne respects the order's rules while forging her own path in an attempt to change how society perceives her. She manipulates the environment surrounding her in order to change how society perceives her. "There's something primeval about Hester's femininity that sets her apart from the Puritan women around her. She is an alien with a touch of the strange (Herzog 7).



Conclusion

This paper explores the novel as a depiction of power that uses both internal and exterior mechanisms by using Foucauldian principles. In actuality, the theoretical framework advances our knowledge of how punishment extends beyond the bounds of the law and religion. In actuality, this public exposure dynamic is further explained by Michel Foucault's theory. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how punishment served as a public spectacle in early modern cultures (Foucault 32–35). It also looks into how authority is reaffirmed in front of a crowd on the scaffold. In a similar vein, Hester's punishment was made public, making her the subject of widespread criticism.

The essay also examines the meaning of the letter "A," suggesting that it is an obvious mark of humiliation. Because of this, the *Scarlet Letter* is a powerful example of how shame is not only felt internally but also manufactured and sustained through public view and social criticism. Hawthorne's book illustrates the unfair retribution of nature.

It sends a warning to all populations that have been poisoned by any system. Hester is chastised by others, but nature grants her power. Although the public has no interest in Demsdale, nature intervenes and exposes his actual identity, revealing the essence of civilization. Furthermore, the study investigates the gender nature of punishment, demonstrating that Hester's idea of femininity is founded on her superior capacity to contradict the belief that she is a masculine woman due to certain characteristics of her behavior. In order to modify society's perception of it, Hester Prynne seems to pursue both her own path and the rules of the order. To change how society views her, she manipulates the situation in which she finds herself.

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