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The Timeless Feminism of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Imagine if you will, a scenario set in a modern graveyard. On one end, a tombstone belonging to “Hester Prynne” with a large scarlet A underneath the name. On the other end, a grave that reads “Georgiana, a truly perfect woman.” These women come from the mind of Nathaniel Hawthorne, though their stories are set decades apart. What if these two women, one night, were to meet each other as ghosts? What if they were to realize just how much they had in common, from their spiritual sins to the scarlet imperfections upon their individual person? What might they learn from each other? Find surprising about each other? What might they learn about the fate of feminism in today’s world versus their unique time periods?

The Scarlet Letter (1850) is about Hester Prynne’s ostracization from Puritan society. The scarlet A she wears on her clothes represents her sin of adultery that resulted in the birth of her daughter, Pearl. As Hester’s life continues, she experiences trouble with her daughter and the culture of shame placed upon her by the townsfolk.

“The Birth-Mark” (1843) is about a scientist named Aylmer who obsesses over removing a small red birthmark on the cheek of his newlywed wife, Georgiana. At first Georgiana objects to the idea, but eventually puts full faith in Aylmer to develop a “cure” for the mark.

Not only does each work share a female focus, they also share the trait of their main woman having a scarlet-colored imperfection, Georgiana with her birthmark and Hester with the scarlet A. These marks symbolize both a physical difference from their peers as well as a personal sin they have committed, and therefore their mark allows them to be shunned for it.

Hester Prynne and Georgiana are symbols of feminism, for both Nathaniel Hawthorne’s time and for today. The personalities of these women and how they each react to their respective problems is something to be taught as a lesson in literary relevance.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne’s decision to stay in the colony reflects the standard of women in the time to know their place and stay submissive to higher authorities. In chapter five, the narrator says that despite Hester being “Free to return to her birthplace, or to any other European land, and there hide her character and identity under a new exterior . . . this woman should still call that place her home” (79). Although the scarlet A has already caused her

so much grief and rejection, not to mention the possibility of Pearl being taken away from Hester, she doesn't decide to move away from her colony despite having the opportunity. In fact, Hester doesn't take the opportunity at all until she's under threat of having her affair with Arthur Dimmesdale being exposed.

There's something to be said about a shunned and scorned woman making a conscious decision to stay where she'll continue to face abuse from the townsfolk instead of leaving for an objectively better life for her and her child. Based on the cultural standards of the time for women, Hester could be doing this out of fear for being seen as a coward by her community. Firstly, Hester "is not merely a wayward individual but represents the vulnerability of all women in her culture (including, ironically, any woman who might join in persecuting her)" (Evans). Hester fleeing wouldn't only affect her, but it would also be represented on all the women of the town.

According to the book, this "one for all" mentality for women of the time is the primary contributor to why Hester decides to stay. Again in chapter five, she convinces herself that "here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul" (80-81). You'd think it would be easy for Hester to say that she doesn't need to put up with this and leave New England with her infant daughter. Unfortunately, not only has Hester committed adultery, she's also a woman. In these colonial times, "This feminine standard of perfection, driven by the needs of men, was dangled in front of women to lure them with a false sense of importance and glamorization into acceptance of this male construct" (Gunn 3). Hester is an imperfect woman, unable to fit into the constructs of her society, and therefore she must face punishment for it, seeing her sin as a chain that confines her to New England. Additionally, even if she did leave, what would that say about her? A woman faced with a crime not choosing to stay and face a rightful punishment would be considered a cowardly move and may bring upon her even more residual trauma than if she simply stayed in New England.

The tremendous amount of shame Hester chooses to face occurs because of Hester's role in society as a housewife, and the belief of cowardice that may come with Hester deciding to abandon not only her colony, but also the crime that she's committed with her nameless

accomplice. A new home couldn't erase the sin within her, and Hester is aware of that. In her eyes, all of these reasons are why she must stay.

With this said, why is Hester seen as a feminist symbol? This could be explained by Hester's assertiveness throughout the story despite the shame the community shoves upon her. For example, when describing Hester's refusal to name her lover to the Reverends, Suzan Last, a professor at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, points out that "She does not conform to an acceptable model of womanhood that reflects the man to whom she might belong; she belongs to no man in her community, and thus projects her own meaning" (360). Where this is most greatly emphasized is when Hester and Pearl go to the governor's mansion, where both the minister and governor say that Hester should hand Pearl over to a better caretaker. Hester refuses. "'God gave her into my keeping,' repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek. 'I will not give her up!'" (115). Hester's love for Pearl is so strong that she is willing to risk being seen as a poor caretaker by her colony just so she doesn't have to give her child up, and ultimately, Hester is allowed to keep Pearl through Dimmesdale's convincing.

Throughout the story, the reader sees the impact of the scarlet letter bearing less and less upon Hester's soul, and her relationship with Pearl strengthens. At the end of the story, Hester "Succeeds as a single mother within a judgmental society, and eventually becomes a valuable member of the community, winning the respect of those who originally judged her" (Gunn 79). Even after Hester's passing, her impact is still left on not just her community, but in the hearts of the people who read her story. The A is even changed in the eyes of the townsfolk from "adulterer" to "able" or "angel," showcasing Hester's personable transformation in both private and public view.

It's easy to call Hester a feminist when viewing her through the lens of what being a feminist means, but another meaning can be added when comparing Hester's personality through the lens of what Hawthorne viewed a feminist as in his time. In favor of this theory known as New Historicism, "The novel, since it has long been read as a canonical text, may in fact have helped change American values over the lengthy course of its history as a text assigned to students" (Evans). A more in-depth example can be seen through the history of Nathaniel Hawthorne himself, and his changing views on feminism. Before he wrote *The Scarlet*

Letter, Hawthorne had written many letters to his wife Sophia, painting the two of them in a fictitious nature as an “era-perfect” husband and wife duo.

It was noted by many who read the letters that the way Hawthorne seemed to portray their relationship was the opposite from how he would portray Hester in *The Scarlet Letter.* Helen Gunn pointed out that the way Hawthorne made these portrayals was through the third person, almost detaching himself and his wife from the people in the letters, and more so making the letters refer to fictional characters that Hawthorne may be comparing himself and his wife to. However, “The characters of the letters are improbably idealized and glamorized; the absolute rigidity of their construction reveals their apocryphal nature” (Gunn 10). The ways Hawthorne and Sophia attempted to embrace the nature of these characters was with good intentions on the surface, but within Hawthorne’s mind, acting wasn’t enough.

Gunn also discusses that two different versions of Sophia’s character were created by Hawthorne. There’s a version where Sophia is a religious icon, and a version called “Sophie” who is the ideal feminine wife that services Hawthorne’s needs. What caused this eventual change was when Hawthorne and his wife ran into financial troubles after Hawthorne got fired from his previous job, along with his mother passing away. “Now, when he needed it most, the idealized marriage he had imagined in the letters, the relationship where he could always find solace, did not meet his expectations” (Gunn 12). His ideal view of femininity failed him. In his overwhelming angst, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* and used his newfound reality check to write Hester Prynne as a “dark lady,” or in other words, the opposite of the housewife archetype. “Although [Hawthorne] never found a way to allow this new dark lady to triumph, to be accepted by society while living life on her own terms, neither does he ever point the finger of blame at her” (Gunn 52). Hester is written as independent, courageous, and willing to stand up for herself and her beliefs, which shattered not only the colonial view of the role of a woman but played into Hawthorne’s realization of what it meant to be a woman. Through New Historicism, we can look at the context surrounding the motivations of Hester and the townspeople, and better understand why Hester’s actions make her stand out not just within her own community, but in the world of literature.

What about Georgiana then? If *The Scarlet Letter* is such an outstanding work of fiction, and Hester is regarded as a great historical and feminist icon, how does Georgiana from "The Birth-Mark" compare? Unfortunately, Georgiana portrays the opposite of Hester in terms of actions and marital devotion, but this does not make her any less of an important figure in literature and feminism.

Georgiana is a victim of her husband's scientific perfectionism. Throughout their marriage, Aylmer is obsessed over a small scarlet birthmark on Georgiana's cheek that he considers a physical sin, though it has no virtual effect on his wife's character. At first, Georgiana herself has no issue with her birthmark. She feels no shame by it and is proud of the fact that previous boyfriends considered her birthmark as a blessing by a small fairy. However, the more she sees Aylmer disgusted by her birthmark, the more she feels guilty for having it. Until finally, the emotional manipulation from her husband forces Georgiana to agree to Aylmer finding a "cure" for her birthmark, going as far to say, "'Danger is nothing to me; for life--while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust--life is a burthen which I would fling down with joy'" (3). This sort of marital relationship, in which the wife will relent whatever is necessary for the sake of her husband's happiness, was certainly not uncommon in Hawthorne's time, nor Aylmer and Georgiana's. As emphasized by Liz Rosenberg, "The 'love' in Hawthorne's fiction seldom takes any other form--his women are not mothers but wives, not angels but household saints . . ." (1). Women in general, in Hawthorne's writing, are put on a pedestal to be more than expected of them by the average man, which rings true when it comes to Georgiana's romance with Aylmer.

Not even Georgiana and her imperfect beauty could compete with Aylmer's scientific endeavors. In Hawthorne's introduction to "The Birth-Mark," it's explained that "[He] had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies, ever to be weaned from them by any second passion" (1). In his ongoing quest to artificially perfect everything he created, Aylmer ends up killing his wife by making her drink a "cure" for the birthmark. While one would want to blame Georgiana for agreeing to drink something that would eventually kill her, it must be understood that Georgiana had full faith in her husband that no matter what, he would want to do what's best for them both. She puts so much of herself in the jeopardy of her husband

and his obsessions, to the point she exclaims, “Remove it! remove it!--whatever be the cost--or we shall both go mad!” (10) as she relents to Aylmer’s disgust at her mark, now considered a stain on her beauty.

Going further into Georgiana’s motivations, in her eyes, she may have not felt like there was a choice to begin with. In the time that this story takes place, “The perfect woman was the woman who dedicated herself and all resources to the wellbeing of her husband and the patriarchal society” (Qabaha 6). In this scenario, that would be Georgiana allowing Aylmer to get rid of her birthmark. Though hesitant at first, eventually Georgiana may realize that at the end of the day, she is the woman and Aylmer is the man, and ultimately, she would not be able to handle her own guilt over Aylmer’s manipulative, self-inflicted guilt about her birthmark. Lest she not be seen as a “perfect wife” anymore, the mark would have to go.

There’s also quite a few religious connotations and references found in “The Birth-Mark” that connect to Aylmer and Georgiana. For example, Aylmer having a God complex and believing he has control over aspects of nature through his science, such as when he tells Georgiana that he keeps an Elixir of Immortality, and when Georgiana witnesses a flower bloom in front of her in seconds, only to turn black and wither when she plucks it. There’s also much reference to the birthmark being a “sin” on Georgiana. At first, Aylmer simply views the birthmark as a physical imperfection, insulting as that already is. Later however, Aylmer is described as “selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever . . .” (2). Aylmer is actively viewing the birthmark as a symbol of sin on Georgiana’s character, some of the “sins” she has barely any control over.

Georgiana follows into her husband’s actions and promises with a sort of devoutness that can be compared to religious types. No matter what Aylmer has her do or make her drink, Georgiana follows him with the full belief that she will be “cured” of her birthmark that doesn’t follow into Aylmer’s standards. When she dies, Georgiana tells Aylmer that he has “rejected the best the earth could offer” (12). Aylmer became so caught up in his own perfectionism and trying to play God with his wife, that you could say he neglected the natural beauty that God had already created for him.

Georgiana is far from the symbol of feminine independence that Hester Prynne is, but Georgiana also made strides in the world of feminine literature through her portrayal as a victim to her husband's manipulative nature and a side piece to his God complex. She serves as a cautionary tale to men to not force their wives into changing parts of them that they have no control over to fit the masculine vision of a "perfect woman."

And so we come back to this graveyard where Georgiana and Hester meet. Each with their own unique experiences of love, strength, devotion, and courage. If they were to strike up a chat with each other, Georgiana may come to learn that her birthmark and eventual death weren't her fault, and she may learn how to become more courageous and caring through Hester. Hester may learn a lesson of her future, since Georgiana comes from a time beyond Hester's. Georgiana may tell Hester that the relationship between men and women hasn't changed all that much with women having to continue to fit the visions of the men around them. What they both may learn, however, is that their lives have been placed among the greatest lessons told about historical feminism. Their stories can teach how both men and women may craft more inclusive relationship, marital, and gender standards.

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