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Creative Agency in *The Scarlet Letter*

Tia Byer

University of Edinburgh

This article provides a critical analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's employment of artistic defiance in The Scarlet Letter. In reading Hester Prynne's artistic ability and theological dissent as tools of creative resistance, the article claims that Hawthorne uses self-expression to critique Puritan values. When Hester redesigns the symbol of the scarlet letter A that she is forced to wear as a punishment for the sin of committing adultery, the act of sewing becomes a transgressive form of resistance. By examining the way in which she transforms her symbol of shame into an expression of autonomy, I trace the spiritual significance of Hester's resistance and Hawthorne's statement of individualism as reflecting the Transcendentalist rhetoric of early nineteenth-century New England. Hester's ability to transcend institutional authority to create an independent identity, in turn, cultivates an independent relationship with God. Finally, I read Hawthorne's own parallel creative struggle as author as a metaphor for national independent identity that can be contextualised within the American Renaissance.

Introduction

Set in the Puritan society of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1642, Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 historical novel *The Scarlet Letter* follows the persecuted and ostracized Hester Prynne. One of American literature's most renowned heroines, Hester defies Puritan doctrine by engaging in an extramarital affair and consequently has to struggle to create a life of dignity in the years that follow. When Hester becomes pregnant and then gives birth, she refuses to announce the name of the child's father, her fellow sinner. As a result, church officials demand she wear a scarlet A on her bodice to signify her sin and identity as an adulteress. The A is intended to publicly humiliate Hester and demonstrate her implied exclusion from and repudiation of God's community. Hawthorne describes the moment of Hester Prynne's disgrace in the following passage:

the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement, with all the townspeople assembled and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne, – yes, at herself, – who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold-thread, upon her bosom! (50)

In this article, I provide a close-reading and analysis of the ways in which Hester's artistic ability and theological dissent become tools of creative resistance. By focusing on how Hester is able to augment the signification of the symbol of the letter A, I demonstrate how she changes the puritanically ordained "spectacle of guilt and shame" (55) into a token of personal agency.

Hester's artistic defiance takes place when she self-fashions and redesigns the symbol of punishment through the act of sewing. I will argue that the employment of artistic defiance in *The Scarlet Letter* establishes a sense of autonomy and creative agency for Hester. When autonomy is characterised by an ability to self-govern, its display and exercise, coupled with the rejection of control exerted by external rule, sees the birth of the individual.

Methodology

Hawthorne's depiction of creative agency is evident in the transgressive meaning of the scarlet letter both within and surrounding the confines of the text. For instance, in promoting individualism, I trace how Hawthorne's critique of Puritanism is manifested, not only within the novel itself, but also in his own self-consciously crafted act of rebellious authorship. Textually speaking, Hester's development of creative agency rebels against Puritan values by questioning the theological settlement's ability to enforce ideology on its inhabitants. The autonomy Hester develops as a result of her act of "civil disobedience" is a thinly veiled attack on the Puritan religion (Thoreau 265). This is because Hester is able to transcend institutional authority and in turn create an independent identity and relationship with God. In tracing the spiritual significance of Hester's resistance, I read Hawthorne's statement of independence as reflecting the Transcendentalist rhetoric of early nineteenth-century New England. In particular, I read Hawthorne's championing of an autonomous spiritual relationship as reflecting the teachings of Transcendentalism. The creative resistance under interrogation in this article occurs in a double nesting structure, whereby Hester's act of creative autonomy is nested within another act of creative autonomy. The later part of this article examines how Hawthorne undergoes an act of creative agency through which he establishes autonomy for himself as an American writer. This occurs in the novel's opening chapter, "The Custom-House".

Within literary criticism there exists a tendency to frame readings of *The Scarlet Letter* within the context of Hawthorne's personal relation to America's Puritan ancestry. Critics such as Milton Meltzer and Leland S. Person read Hawthorne's literary attack on Puritanism as an ancestral admission of guilt. Meltzer and Person argue that, as a direct descendant of Judge Hathorne, the lead prosecutor of the 1692 Salem Witch trials, Hawthorne's critique of Puritanism in *The Scarlet Letter* derives from Hathorne's infamous refusal to repent of his actions. In interpreting Hawthorne's amendment of his surname as a dissociative act, Meltzer and Leland's focus remains limited to the authorial confession in "The Custom-House". They explain that in penning *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's inherited "Puritanic traits...may be now and henceforth removed" (29). However, their consideration of authorial intent during textual interpretation is reductionist and ignores the wider transatlantic and colonial significance of Hawthorne's novel.

To avoid such pitfalls, this article will not be limited to a strictly biographical interpretation. Following Anna Brickhouse's observation that contemplation of early nineteenth-century America, as "imagined by the US writers of the dominant literary public sphere ... proves uneasily tied to the larger hemisphere even in its most exceptionalist incarnations", I instead place Hawthorne's creative agency within the national historical context of the American Renaissance (207).

Grounding my reading in the American Renaissance, a literary epoch dating from 1830 until the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, I read *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthorne's cultural self-assertion. A retrospective term coined by twentieth-century critic F. O. Matthiessen, the idea of an American Renaissance primarily centred around five writers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Without discounting Matthiessen's assertion that the invention of early nineteenth-century literature was "America's way of producing a renaissance" to affirm "its rightful heritage in ... art and culture", I also align with Larzer Ziff's view of American Renaissance writing as a form of creative resistance against the former British colonizer (vii). In particular, this article demonstrates how Hawthorne subverts European tropes of the fallen woman to create a national creative legacy for America, which in turn reveals the novel to be an act of political defiance, in that Hawthorne establishes American Literature as independent from the influence of its former European legacy. Therefore, I claim that the novel, and by extension, Hester, acts as a metaphor for America's attainment of an autonomous identity.

Artistic Defiance

Hester Prynne's artistic defiance establishes a sense of autonomy in that she is able to deny and subvert Puritan authority. Hawthorne chronicles how Hester is able to deny and resist the meaning of the scarlet letter by altering its signification. Her ability to alter the intended meaning of the scarlet letter, a "double-tongued discourse", establishes itself when Hawthorne first introduces Hester and the scarlet letter she is forced to wear (Pearson 68). By working with an existing language of signifiers, Hester alters the "fatal symbol" of punishment through embroidery (68). Intended to signify Hester's identity as adulteress and thus communicate "the taint of deepest sin", the scarlet A, according to the puritan settlement, *should* constitute penance. However, instead of acting as a "token of...shame" (50), the scarlet letter's intended meaning is modified by Hester's creativity, allowing her to establish both an economically and creatively autonomous identity. In particular, Hester establishes her individuality when she renders herself indefinable by Puritan logic, and the ability to augment the connotation of the materialized symbol of 'shame' signifies this. For instance, Hawthorne demonstrates how Hester makes her

scarlet letter “beautiful” (78) with a rhetorical embellishment: “on the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A” (50). The extravagant modifiers indicated by the alliteration of ‘fantastic flourishes’ imply that Hester’s rich artistry is intentional.

Hester actively defies Puritan beliefs by opposing the historical sentiment known as “intolerable [...] excess in apparel” (White 183). Puritan values dictated modesty in clothing and outward appearance, a doctrine Hawthorne’s heroine purposely flouts to exercise resistance. Hester’s taste is synonymous with her needlework, through which she possesses “in her nature a rich, voluptuous [...] characteristic” (Hawthorne 78). The fact that the decorative stitching takes precedence over the originally intended signification suggests Hester is deliberately exhibiting her artistry and sense of identity. Thus, by redirecting attention to its aesthetic expressivity, she manages to disassociate the symbol from Puritan definitions.

The scarlet letter thus comes to symbolise a self-expression as, in exerting her autonomy, Hester’s act of artistic defiance undermines the organized religion’s authority. In particular, John Irwin claims that the scarlet letter as an emblem comes to represent “the shattering of all absolutes because of the loss of objective knowledge” (241). Using a post-structural logic, Irwin argues that the letter A becomes a representation of indeterminacy and suggests that the novel demonstrates an awareness of the absence of objective truth. From a post-structuralist viewpoint, perceived objective truths found in the external world are merely projections of one’s own subjectivity, sustained by language. The scarlet A was intended to symbolise and communicate a form of punishment in order to frighten and reinforce theological authority within the textual seventeenth-century society. Hester’s act of artistic defiance, however, deconstructs the moral authority of the “godly magistrates” for “whom religion and law [are] almost identical” (Hawthorne 47). In transforming the Puritan symbol of shame into a powerful symbol of identity, Hester embodies a post-structural understanding of language and signification, as I proceed to demonstrate.

The success with which Hester subverts the intended meaning of the letter A echoes Jacques Derrida’s belief that transcendental signifiers do not exist. A transcendental signifier refers to a perceived meaning that outranks all other signs, and which Derrida sees as embodying a “fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude” (215). However, an absence of these fixed landmarks outside linguistic processing domains results in and reveals the instability of language. From a poststructuralist perspective, if *perceived* notions concerning the human condition derive from interpretation rather than from fixed truths, then the church officials lack reliability (61).

The notion that the Puritan church officials act as a centre, whereby the enforced law provides margins by which to measure subservience to God, is radically undermined by Hester’s

creative resistance. This is because Hester's artistic defiance exposes the hollowness of Puritanism by revealing the infinite play that occurs in the universe. According to Derrida, the notion of 'play' claims and describes how meaning is not fixed but instead exists in constant flux. Hester's "decentering" suggests that if meaning is not fixed, then rules are meaningless (Derrida 213). Consequently, this allows Hester the agency to self-govern her own identity outside of religious dogma. Moreover, Hester exerts control over her own identity by defining who she is through creative expression, thereby determining for herself how she is portrayed within the community. Therefore, the ambiguous meaning of the scarlet letter demonstrates the subjectivity of the act of 'reading'.

Hester's self-assertion as an autonomous individual capable of cultivating an acute sense of morality is a thinly veiled attack on Puritan values. Hawthorne uses setting and environmental positioning to communicate the contradictory nature of organized religion. Ostracized for the sin of adultery, Hester and her daughter Pearl are alone within the community, but gradually become closer to the divine within their private sphere of the wilderness. Within *The Scarlet Letter*, nature is synonymous with a sense of freedom and lawlessness, whereby the wild, untameable natural world that surrounds the town remains untouched by governing forms of institutions such as the church. As a result of this, the natural world symbolizes a behavioural system that opposes the prescribed form of civilization. Whilst the homogeny is governed by a theological authority that punishes any form of transgression, misbehaviour is made possible in the wilderness. When social rules and moral conduct are forsaken, Hawthorne establishes the "wild & savage" outskirts as ungovernable (Bradford 95).

American Transcendentalism

Hester further transgresses the ruling Puritan authority when she rejects the option of leaving the community as punishment for her sin. Although she would be free from Puritan humiliation, Hester sees the punishment of banishment as foreboding. In contemplating life with the Native Americans in the forest, Hawthorne explains how in having "the passes of the dark inscrutable forest open to her, where the wilderness of her nature might assimilate itself with a people whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned her", Hester becomes fearful (83). Hester's determination to remain a member of the community that persecutes her indicates an internal underlying fear of the uncivilising natural world, a fear constructed from the teachings of her Puritan socialisation. The untameable freedom found in the wilderness makes Hester, as an already established deviant by the standards of the church, susceptible to becoming wild herself. Therefore, nature is symbolic of a human condition that Puritanism rejects due to the fear that the lawless wilderness can lead one astray. However, when the wilderness does eventually become

home for Hester, she detaches herself and Pearl from the public community, seeking instead the “sympathy of nature” (189) within their private sphere. This reveals the ironies of Puritanical justice. In being punished for sin, the individual is able to transcend institutional authority and develop an independent relationship with God, who is evident within the natural world.

American Transcendentalism was a spiritualist philosophy that centred on the notion that “nature is the law” (“Writings of Emerson and Thoreau”, 01:26) and emphasised the purity of subjective intuition over corrupt societal institutions and organisations. Established as a coherent movement in 1836, and spearheaded by a number of Hawthorne’s contemporaries and neighbours, Transcendentalism is most commonly associated with New England intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott. With its core beliefs in the inherent goodness and authentic insight of the individual, the philosophical teachings of Transcendentalism are discernible through Hester’s struggle for dignity. For instance, in punishing Hester for her perceived moral laxity, the community inadvertently aid Hester’s self-reliance. Puritan punishment enforces the very thing that it seeks to correct – disobedience – and Hester redeploys their sanctions as a means of liberation.

Hester’s act of creative agency, whereby she develops her own relationship with God, is seen to directly oppose Puritan teachings. Shielded from the prying eyes of the theological community when immersed in nature, her mind is able to probe concepts, which previously would have been impossible to do in the Puritan community. For instance, Hawthorne writes, “she assumed a freedom of speculation ... thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England” (152). This suggests that the intended penance of the letter ironically provides Hester with an independent spirituality. The architect of Transcendentalism, Emerson, encouraged spiritual agency, stating, “let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone” (75). In these words, taken from his speech entitled “The Divinity School Address”, given at Harvard University in 1838, Emerson makes imperative and champions the exercise of individualism. Instructing that it is our moral duty to adhere to one’s self-reliance and avoid externally enforced false constancy, Emerson’s oration claims that one can only understand their role in God’s kingdom once they return to nature.

American Transcendentalism particularly opposed Calvinist teachings that man is fallen and sinful. While Calvinist beliefs claiming humanity needed guidance had a profound impact upon the formation of American patriotism, Puritanism, as a more radical “version of Calvinism”, meant the New World’s first settlers saw the virgin territory as an occasion for establishing a purified version of Christian practice (Durst-Johnson 37). However, Transcendentalists believed that the individual *was* adequate and that the soul had the powers it needed to go through life. In this respect, Hester’s use of creative agency and resistance whereby she attains enlightenment once outside organized religious community demonstrates independence. Therefore, in

displaying transcendental rhetoric, Hawthorne critiques the Calvinist teachings inherent in Puritanism, in that it is only by subverting religious doctrine that Hester establishes a self-reliant relationship with God.

Hester's use of creative agency reflects the overriding concept within the novel that happiness is only possible as long as one remains true to one's nature and does not live a lie. Hester's undermining of Puritanism can also be analysed as an act of civil disobedience, which captures her quest for authenticity. Civil Disobedience is a term associated with Thoreau's essay of the same name, published in 1849, which argues that refusal of submission to governmental law is justified when organized authority interferes with individuals' personal relationship with God. Thoreau asked, "Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?" (266). Here, Thoreau emphasises obligation to one's own conscience over institutionally orchestrated laws and guidelines. This sentiment is likewise employed by Hawthorne in his depiction of the romantic relationship between Hester and fellow adulterer Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. Meeting in the forest, away from the prying eyes of the community, Hester reassures Dimmesdale, "what we did, had a consecration of its own" (181). By encouraging Dimmesdale to find a way to live honestly and answer only to himself, Hester displays a blatant disregard for Puritan law. In lending her own strength to Dimmesdale during his moments of doubt and feared immorality, she demonstrates how her seven years in "seclusion from human society" (88) have only strengthened her covenant with God. Moreover, Hester has used her internal resources to survive ostracism and life. Therefore, Hawthorne privileges the individual's spirituality over that set by dogma or organised religion.

According to Sylvia Soderlind, *The Scarlet Letter* is a literary rendition and documentation of how America's founding "Puritan dream of a paradise of law ... [turns] into a nightmare of lawlessness" (66). Soderlind argues that besides depicting the religious hypocrisy of the Reverend Dimmesdale in fathering Hester's child, Hawthorne, by labelling Hester Prynne as an adulteress, also draws attention to the ways in which Puritan theocracy disregards the possibility of individualized expression of character. Hester's creative will testifies to how exclusionary practices enforced by the governors fail in their quest to enforce shame. The Puritan officials fail to successfully punish Hester's *perceived* deprivation of spirituality as a sinner. Moreover, in qualifying the forest and the natural world as sinister, Hawthorne exposes the inaccuracy and subjectivity of the Puritan interpretation.

American Renaissance

The Scarlet Letter, as a novel, is itself an artistic and political act of defiance. The double nesting effect within the novel reflects Hawthorne's own creative struggle for autonomy and this is seen

when he identifies with the character of Hester Prynne. In the fictional and introductory chapter, “The Custom-House”, Hawthorne describes a “burning heat” he feels whilst holding Hester’s letter against his chest (31). This transference of implied shame and guilt communicates a connection between author and character. Indeed, the novel, as an act of artistry, defies Puritan values concerning creativity that had filtered down into nineteenth-century literature. For instance, within “The Custom-House”, Hawthorne explains the unease he experiences at the prospect of committing an act of creative autonomy that his Puritan ancestors would regard as “degenerate” (12). The persistence of Puritan hostility towards art is demonstrated in Noah Webster’s 1843 “Letter to a young man commencing his education”. In this letter, Webster informs his recipient about the dangers of “current popular reading”, as “your mind ... [will] be dissipated” (qtd in Durst Johnson 76). As such, Hawthorne wears a metaphorical scarlet letter of his own: by subverting Puritan ideological beliefs, he, like Hester, establishes himself as distinct from the collective.

Hawthorne’s act of artistic defiance can also be understood within the historical context of America’s newfound autonomy. Less than one hundred years after independence, America was still searching for its identity as an independent country. In writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne creates his own declaration of American independence. Matthiessen defines works of American Renaissance as literature that writes about and “for our democracy”, and Hawthorne’s text can certainly be considered in that light (xv, my emphasis). In breaking away from European literary traditions, *The Scarlet Letter* is indeed a tool in the invention and defence of American democracy and its founding premise of individualism. Such a categorization, according to Ziff, is contingent on the following observation: although pioneering early nineteenth-century authors utilised “the inherited...English language and with it British Literary conventions, these writers, in their achievement, declared the independence of American culture” (i).

Within European nineteenth-century literature, fallen women are presented as “martyrs to passion” and female sexual transgression viewed as unnatural and punishable by death (Winnifrith 29). For instance, Gustave Flaubert’s 1856 character *Emma Bovary*, Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877) and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) all succumb to tragic ends following their sexual compromise. Despite this, Hawthorne’s Hester transcends literary tropes steeped in European tradition when her employment of artistic defiance enables her to turn the letter A into a sign suggesting she is “Able” (Hawthorne 149). Indeed, towards the end of the text, Hawthorne writes: “many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength”. The extent to which Hester successfully transcends Puritan ideals is suggested when the Native Americans even interpret her scarlet letter as a mark of her importance and status. For instance, they recognize Hester’s elaborate stitching as an indication of “high dignity” (229),

which implies that Hester has successfully made “pride out of what ... the worthy gentlemen, meant for punishment” (51). In subverting European literary tropes of the fallen woman, then, Hawthorne establishes a national creative legacy.

What is more, in placing his subversive fallen woman in an American setting, Hawthorne introduces a new form of literature. Through its literary subversiveness, *The Scarlet Letter* emerges as an act of creative artistry placed within the American Renaissance. This is a retrospective term originating from the twentieth-century critic Matthiessen, who claimed that the writers of the American Renaissance were thematically concerned with producing literature “for our democracy”. The period came to be viewed as a creative epoch that saw European methods of storytelling adapted in order to confront distinctly American history (xv) and values. Indeed, Douglas Anderson claims that “The Custom-House” is a “declaration of independence” and argues that Hawthorne employs verbal echoes of Jefferson’s 1776 Declaration of Independence in order to promote liberty as a core American value (406). Hawthorne’s act of artistic defiance reflects Congress’ declaration to “publish and declare” America’s freedom, rendering former political connections (meaning in relation to sovereign England and Europe) “totally dissolved” (410). As a country that wrote itself into being, historical records and the process of documentation are crucial to defining American national identity. As such, “The Custom-House”, in its rhetoric of political independence, likewise suggests that for Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* was a historically legitimate expression of self-determinism. Further, in creating a distinctly American piece of literature that echoes the country’s founding conception and with it, creative self-affirmation, the novel symbolises an autonomy of national identity. Therefore, the novel, and by proxy, Hester, acts as a metaphor for America’s view of its autonomous identity.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has demonstrated how the employment of artistic defiance and creative rebellion in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* serves to create a national identity within American Literature. Artistic defiance within the novel represents how Hester, in her championing of individualism, attempts to see artistry survive within a community that disapproves of the imagination. Hester’s deconstruction of Puritan authority occurs as a result of her self-fashioning, whereby, in embroidering her scarlet letter, she subverts an authority that seeks to define her as sinful. By undermining the settlement’s church officials through identifying language and signs as meaningless, Hester is able to reclaim her individuality. The subjectivity incurred when reading the letter A works to destabilise the community’s ability to determine Hester’s identity as a sinner. By revealing the indeterminacy of language and signifier, Hawthorne

implies that the theological settlement's laws derive from an unstable notion of divine intuition. Thus, the church officials, in their self-ordained roles as divine mediators, for Hawthorne, have been sanctioned by the act of reading itself. This is because the ambiguity implicit in the scarlet letter suggests that reading – as both act and concept – is subjective, and Hawthorne is thus able to reveal Puritan interpretation to be a mere misconception of spirituality.

When Hester's act of "Civil Disobedience" facilitates and enables a spiritual self-fashioning, Hawthorne renders the Puritans' lack of sufficient spiritual knowledge ironic. The 'divine intuition' used to justify the very foundation of their power is revealed to be inaccurate and consequently unfounded. Therefore, *The Scarlet Letter*, in critiquing exterior forms of influence, privileges the individual's autonomy. Autonomy within the novel is synonymous with the artistic need to self-express and distances the individual from the dogma inherent in exterior governing forces. This sense of autonomy is expressed in "The Custom-House", where the narrator's own creative struggle identifies liberty as a core American value, ensuring that the creative process of writing *The Scarlet Letter* can be understood as a metaphor for national independent identity.

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Author Biography

Tia Byer holds a postgraduate degree in US Literature and Cultural Values from the University of Edinburgh, with a dissertation entitled “Transatlantic Flirtation and Cultural Insecurity: A Postcolonial Reading of Cosmopolitanism in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Henry James’s *The Europeans* and *Daisy Miller*”. She received her undergraduate degree in English Literature from York St John University and has previously written for FORUM.