



RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ASPECTS IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S NOVEL "THE SCARLET LETTER"

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Abstract

This article gives information about religious and social views in British literature and its features in the novel "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Also this article helps learners who are interested in religious and social situation in 19th century and their impact on literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* explores the deep interplay between religious doctrine and social norms in Puritan New England. The novel critiques the rigid moral codes imposed by Puritan society, highlighting themes of sin, guilt, and redemption.

Key words: Puritan, Puritanism, Church, literature, social, impact, adultery, Puritan leaders.

Introduction

Religious issues were particularly controversial in Britain during the Victorian era. The established Church of England was no longer the sole religious force in England. Evangelists, Liberals and Catholics became separate denominations within the country. Different doctrines associated with each religion governed all aspects of Victorian life. "Religion occupied a place in the public consciousness and a central place in the intellectual life of the age" (War of Consciences). Victorian morals and virtues were governed by religious ideas and doctrines. Through faith sermons, clergymen were able to spread the "Word of God" to believers. They were responsible for keeping the congregation engaged in prayer and service (Naomi, Rebecca, Angharad, Richa, Clare, 2020).

In times of religious unrest, when pamphlets and texts critical of religion were being produced, it was the clergy's job to uphold the faith of the congregation is mentioned by Elliott of Middlemarch, which follows the lives of characters living in provincial towns deeply rooted in religion.

This four-volume historical resource provides new opportunities for investigating the relationship between religion, literature and society in Britain and its imperial territories by making accessible a diverse selection of harder-to-find primary sources. These include religious fiction, poetry, essays, memoirs, sermons, travel writing, religious ephemera, unpublished notebooks and pamphlet literature. Spanning the long nineteenth century in 1789–1914, the





resource departs from older models of 'the Victorian crisis of faith' in order to open up new ways of conceptualising religion. A key concern of the resource is to integrate non-Christian religions into our understanding and representations of religious life in this period.

Each volume is framed around a different meaning of the term 'religion'. Volume one on 'Traditions' offers an overview of the different religious traditions and denominations present in Britain in this period. Volume two on 'Mission and Reform' considers the social and political importance of religious faith and practice as expressed through foreign and domestic mission and philanthropic and political movements at home and abroad. Volume three turns to 'Religious Feeling' as an important and distinct category for understanding the ways in which religion is embodied and expressed in culture. Volume four on 'Disbelief and New Beliefs' explores the transformation of the religious landscape of Britain and its imperial territories during the nineteenth century as a result of key cultural and intellectual forces (Kagramanov, 1999).

METHODS

Who were the Puritans?

The Puritans were English Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries who sought to purify the Church of England of Roman Catholic practices, maintaining that the Church of England had not been fully reformed and should become more Protestant. Puritanism played a significant role in English history, especially during the Protectorate.

What is the Puritanism?

Puritanism is not a formally defined religious division within Protestantism, and the term Puritan itself was rarely used after the turn of the 18th century. It was incorporated into the teachings of the Church of England. Others assimilated into the many Protestant denominations that arose in North America and England in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Widely regarded as part of the Reformed tradition, the Congregational Church is descended from the Puritans.

The Reformation movement took place in the late 16th century and his 17th century to wash and purify the Church of England. This movement is known as the Puritan Revolution. Some extreme Protestants who were dissatisfied with the changes made by Henry VIII, Edward II and Queen Elizabeth after the Reformation expressed contempt and dissatisfaction. It laid the foundation for New England's religious, intellectual, and social order. But Puritanism was not the only historically specific phenomenon coinciding with the founding of New England. It is also a way of being in the world, a style that responds to lived experience, and has resonated with American life ever since. ([Callum](#), 2006)

•The Puritans coloured their lives on the preaching of religious reformers, John Wycliffe and John Calvin. They had their own sets of beliefs and idealisms. These are:





- They believed that The Bible represented the true law of God. So they always wish to reshape people and church on the ideology of Bible.
- They were up against the episcopacy or the rule of Bishop. Instead they wanted church to be managed by a group of 'presbyters' or elders.
- They believed the voice of God in each man's conscience and hence no priest or bishop could rightfully come
- They insisted on extreme austerity of worship, believing that images, ornaments, alter, rituals, embroidered surplices owned by the priests
- The puritans were strict disciplinarians who stressed on grace, devotions, prayers, and introspection.
- They hated to see the Church being reduced to political body. They challenged Elizabethan religious settlement of 1559 to solve the religious debate. They didn't accept the Tudor doctrine that every member of the state was automatically the member of state Church.

Charles I of England made efforts to purge all Puritan influences in England, which resulted in the Great Migration to Europe and American colonies. Those who remained in England responded to this persecution with the English Civil War in 1641-1651, which led to the execution of Charles I, the Exile of his son Charles II and the rise of Oliver Cromwell.

The age of the Puritans was too short for man to be born and mature, but its influence was the strongest and it was too stormy. Poets such as Andrew Marvel, Abraham Cowley, and John Milton are credited with having a great influence on Puritan poetry. Milton's Paradise Lost is a Puritan's dream. In the field of prose literature, mention should be made of Robert Burton and John Bunyan. Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress has reached the pinnacle of success and is considered "next to the Bible". This book is undoubtedly a masterpiece of Puritan literature. Drama declined sharply in the Puritan era. After the Tempest of 1611, the production energy of the English Renaissance seemed to have dried up.

While the Puritan literature speaks of age of sadness, gloom and pessimism, the Elizabethan literature throbbed with youth, vitality and hope. The Elizabeth literature was intensely romantic; in Puritan literature critical, intellectual takes the place or romantic ardour.

The great victory in the Civil War provided the Puritans with the oxygen to establish the Commonwealth. Oliver Cromwell established a military dictatorship during his protectorate, but in 1660 the monarchy was restored. They failed, but the Puritans took off their shoes to step into England's political affairs for the Whigs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, religion dominates society as a major factor in life and work, but nature can attack it in many ways. Religion in the novel is an important factor in society's feelings towards Hester. Nature, on the other hand, sympathizes with the hero, giving him hope and divine light. In





The Scarlet Letter, these two factors go head-to-head in her as religion attacks and nature heals (Boivin, 2016).

Nature in the novel can be seen as a passive element that sympathizes with the protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, nature is represented as a rose bush next to the prison. This symbolizes hope for prisoners, as it is the only life that lives on the prison grounds and the only thing they see before and after they enter prison. Later in the story, when Hester and Pearl visit the governor's mansion, Pearl is seen violently yelling at Rosen in front of the mansion. I started crying and couldn't calm down." This shows her desire for roses, her desire for hope. Nature interrupts the story with a secluded encounter between Hester and Dimmesdale. During this meeting, Hester courageously rips off her A in the scarlet letter and throws it to the ground. Nature sympathized with Hester's experience of the Scarlet Letter with the "Flood of Sunshine." Another of his uses of nature in the novel is that of the alchemist Roger Chillingworth with herbal medicines, learned from his native Americans when he was captured upon his arrival. Overall, nature sustains all the characters in the novel, and most importantly gives them hope and freedom from social and religious struggles.

Religion in society is a very important factor as it affects relationships, status and etc. The Scarlet Letter prominently centers around religion as the main character, Hester, is affected by such. She is caught being an adulterer and is subjected to societal punishment with the lifelong sentence of wearing a scarlet letter "A". Hester is at the head of the community conversation and sees herself used as a "living sermon against sin". Further, religion alters the views of Hester on Pearl, as at some point, she thought she was a demon-child, mainly because of "some of her odd attributes". Due to her hardships within society, Hester chose to live on the outskirts of Boston, making a living by making various items using her embroidery skills. She is well renowned for this except for wedding dresses as no one in the town wants to buy a dress from her for a religious event. Basically, religion and Puritan values base daily life in 19th century Boston, with strict consequences if any of the values are broken, as did Hester ([Leema, 2016](#)).

In the novel, religion and nature combat each other in many ways, changing the interactions of characters, the feelings of society, and other ideas. In the prison, situated in Boston, "a wild rose-bush...fragrance and fragile beauty," is seen to greet prisoners with the feeling of hope. This is ironic as prison represents, "the black flower of civilized society," which is basically society's moral and religious views, combating nature's rose bush, which gives a sense of hope to the prisoners as they enter and leave. Hart has similar views, stating, "Hawthorne contrasts the beauty of nature with the community prison to identify Puritan societal corruption." Furthermore, along with the black rose representing the values of society, the Black Man, is shown to represent the views of nature among Bostonians. Depicted as a form of evil, he is usually referred to in conjunction with the forest. This places society's views of the





forest to be mostly negative, as that area is uncontrolled and without Puritan values. Another event in which nature sympathizes with going against religion is when Hester and Pearl meet up with Dimmesdale in the forest. With the action of Hester throwing the scarlet letter on the forest floor, nature thus reacts by filling the forest with sunlight, forgiving Hester of her sin. Furthermore, Paula Mas Ferrer states, "She escapes from the discomfort of society through nature. Pearl is an elf child and her natural habitat is the forest. She is neither good nor evil," depicting that nature can easily thwart societal values. The split between religion and societal values and nature can be simply stated as, a "gloomy and energetic religious sect, pioneers in a virgin land, with the wolf and the Indian at their doors" (Sinkevich, 2019).

At the time of this writing, Boston was heavily influenced by prominent Puritan leaders and Puritan values. This created a rigid judicial system and a rigid social network among Bostonians. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the harsh punishment and social exclusion experienced by Hester and Pearl are evident. In contrast, we also see nature forgiving and pitying the hero. Her two conflicting influences cause Hester to struggle in Boston, especially with her child, Pearl.

CONCLUSION

In the novel, religion and nature battle each other in many ways, shifting character interactions, social sentiments, and other ideas. In Boston's prison, "the scent and ephemeral beauty of the wild rose bush" welcomes inmates with hope. Ironically, prisons represent the "black flower of civilization", a moral and religious view of society that essentially fights against the natural rose bush, giving the prisoners the hope of entering and exiting. giving you a feeling. Hart holds a similar view, stating that "Hawthorne contrasts the beauty of nature with the district prison to identify the corruption of Puritan society." Bostonian view of nature. Depicted as a form of evil, it is usually mentioned in relation to forests. This results in an overwhelmingly negative society's view of the forest, as the area is uncontrolled and lacks Puritan values. Another event in which nature sympathizes with opposition to religion is Hester and Pearl's meeting with Dimmesdale in the woods. When Hester throws the scarlet letter on the forest floor, nature fills the forest with sunlight and Hester forgives her sins. Furthermore, Paula Mas Ferrer said: Pearl is an elf child and her native habitat is the forest. It is neither good nor bad" shows that nature can easily interfere with social values. The schism between religion, social values and nature can be easily described as "a brooding, energetic religious sect, pioneers of virgin lands, with wolves and Indians at the door."

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