



GUILTINESS: A WEAPON OF JUSTICE AMIDST THE BIASED SOCIETY IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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Received: January 04, 2024, **Accepted:** January 30, 2024, **Online Published:** February 15, 2024

ABSTRACT

The paper entitled, "Guiltiness: A Weapon of Justice amidst the Biased Society in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*" is an attempt to analyze the trauma inflicted by the guilt to the main characters and also to show how the guilt has become the weapon of justice amidst the prejudiced Puritan society. Literature always acts as a portrait of the psyche of an individual or a community. They consistently manifest the unquestionable society's lifestyle, traditions, and customs. While most male writers glorify men and feeble the structure of feminine quality in their artistic works, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his fiction, *The Scarlett Letter*, exhibits both male and female characters equally. He also reveals the condition of the individuals who suffered under the suppression of Puritan customs and traditions. Donald L. Carveth, a Canadian psychoanalyst, in his book 'The Still Small Voice,' identifies two different forms of guilt: *reparative guilt* and *persecutory guilt*. Nathaniel Hawthorne portrayed the main characters of the novel as guilt-traumatized souls. While society favors men and punishes women, the author exposes guilt as the unbiased justice that punishes sinners equally.

Keywords: Prejudice, Guilt, Self-destruction, Persecutory and Psychoanalyst.

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne is a dark romantic writer focused on the themes of sin, guilt, and self-destruction in his fiction *The Scarlet Letter*. The major characters of this fiction have been swayed by reparative and persecutory guilt all over the story. Reparative guilt is an emotional sign that makes the sinner face the trauma inflicted by the offenders and take serious endeavors to restore the destroyed relationship. The conscience inflicts retribution on the self by turning aggression and hostility against the self, and this type of guilt is said to be persecutory guilt. Donald L. Carveth, a Canadian psychoanalyst, in his book *The Still Small Voice*, defines reparative and persecutory guilt thus: “When our narcissism renders conscious moral suffering (depressive or reparative guilt) intolerable, the superego exacts its pound of flesh either through unconsciously constructed forms of self-torment (persecutory guilt and shame) or by scapegoating others onto whom one’s guilt is projected.” (8).

Analysis

The protagonist, Hester Prynne, has been exposed to a man who is much older than her. The society obliged Hester to be in a marital relationship with no soulful connection. Consequently, Hester Prynne is overpowered by her desire and sins

adultery. Society blamed the protagonist, Hester, and accused her. Most importantly, Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, the offender in this case, queried Hester and said, “Speak out the name of thy fellow sinner and fellow-sufferer!” (54) For the reason that Hester is traumatized by the society and also by the reparative guilt, she repudiated to reveal her fellow sinner.

Reverend Mr. Wilson harshly shouted at her to tell the name of the fellow sinner. But Hester is stubborn and refuses to utter his name. The clergymen tried hard to make her expose their fellow sinners, but in vain. A clergyman coldly and sternly cried, “Speak and give your child a father!” (55). However, Hester responded that her “child must seek a heavenly father;” (55) and not an earthly one. Instantly after Hester’s repudiation to answer, Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, who had been waiting for the result, said, “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart! She will not speak!” (55).

Hester Prynne tolerated the torment of her disguised husband, Roger Chillingworth. He kept on pestering her to reveal the identity of her fellow adulterer. Yet she never exposed Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. Her reparative guilt retained her inaudible. Hester took an oath to keep the identity of her disguised husband secret as he warned her about the fellow sinner:



“Beware! His fame, his position, his life will be in my hands. Beware!” (61).

The legalistic Puritan clique and the prejudiced society accused her pitilessly with the sword-like words. The clique's pitiless and ugliest women cried, “This woman has disgraced us all” (43). The author reveals the mentality of the women who not only find faults but also exaggerate the faults of another woman. The men of the Puritan clique intended to manifest both the sinners. They tried their best to make Hester expose the fellow sinner. However, the female characters insult Hester with vulgar words. The biased society pressured her to wear the Scarlett Letter. With her infant, Hester Prynne was commanded to show the Scarlett Letter to the gathered mob in the marketplace without mercy. “Open a passage, and I promise ye, Mistress Prynne shall be set where Man, woman, and child may have a fair sight of her brave apparel from this time till an hour past meridian. A blessing on the righteous Colony Of Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-Place!” (45) Uttered the grim beadle.

Hester Prynne even consoled Reverend Dimmesdale by saying, “Let us not look back” and “The past is gone!” (158). She put her utmost effort into

repairing and restoring their damaged relationship. They decided to depart to Europe to restore Dimmesdale's health. Hester Prynne had sinned adultery and was driven away by the guilt. Consequently, Nathaniel Hawthorne portrayed Hester Prynne as a struggling soul of reparative guilt.

Arthur Dimmesdale exemplarily executed his duties as a Puritan minister. The line “Mr. Dimmesdale was a true priest, a true religionist” (97) authenticates him as the epitome of a good Puritan. Throughout the story, Dimmesdale scuffled to subdue the agony vanquishing his mental and physical goodness. The agony is due to his inability to reveal his sin of adultery to get relief. The superego forbade him from concealing his sin. But Arthur Dimmesdale is struck by the persecutory guilt and begins to inflict injuries on himself. His conscience inflicted retribution on him by turning the aggression and hostility against himself. As a result of the persecutory guilt, Arthur Dimmesdale began to sicken. The community declared that “if Mr. Dimmesdale were going to die, it was cause enough, that the world was not worthy to be any longer trodden by his feet.”(94) The community, with concern, obliged Dimmesdale to get medical assistance of Roger Chillingworth, a physician. But “Mr. Dimmesdale gently

repelled their entreaties” (96) and said he did not need any medicine. However, with cunningness and vengeance, Roger Chillingworth tricked Dimmesdale and became his Medical adviser. Jane Caflisch, in his article, remarks on the change from reparative guilt to persecutory guilt thus: “When a person is unable, either in a transient or more enduring way, to bear depressive guilt, the object that rouses guilt is turned into a persecutor, and guilt itself can be “felt as persecution” rather than as an opportunity for repair” (583).

Ego, superego, and persecutory guilt tribulated Arthur Dimmesdale. The superego urged him to disclose his sin with Hester since it injured Hester’s life. However, his ego took the authority over the super-ego and kept him voiceless. Subsequently, the persecutory guilt had caused serious affliction not only in his physique but also in his psyche. Heinz Weiss, in his book *Trauma, Guilt, and Reparation: The Path from Impasse to Development*, observes, “Super-ego and reparation are thus in a complex interrelationship. On the one hand, the capacity for reparation depends on the availability of a relatively benign superego. On the other hand, such a super-ego can only develop when projections are taken back and reparation processes are activated” (17). Nathaniel Hawthorne

reveals the inner terror that is discerned in Arthur Dimmesdale’s eyes in the line, “Alas, to judge from the gloom and terror in the depths of the poor minister’s eyes, the battle was a sore one” (101). The conversation between Roger Chillingworth, the physician, and Arthur Dimmesdale also emerges as a confirmation of Dimmesdale’s spiritual trauma. Roger Chillingworth said, “A bodily disease, which we look upon as whole within itself, may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part..... You, Sir, of all men whom I have known, are he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified, so to speak, with the spirit of which it is the instrument” (107), and Arthur Dimmesdale replied, “Then I need to ask no further,” “You deal not, I take it, in medicine for the soul!” (107)

Dimmesdale’s mental turmoil led him to a worse health condition. In the end, Arthur Dimmesdale, “the minister, conscious that he was dying, conscious, also, that the reverence of the multitude placed him already among saints and angels, had desired, by yielding up his breath in the arms of that fallen woman, to express to the world how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man’s righteousness.” (201) The spectators who witnessed Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale’s death



“testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a scarlet letter-the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne-imprinted in the flesh” (241). Thus Arthur Dimmesdale though an epitome of a best Puritan minister involved himself to wrestle hard with the imprinted dark red letter A on his chest as his punishment “with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter” (241)

The prejudiced society, before finding out the fellow sinner, imprisoned Hester Prynne despite her pregnancy. They even obliged Hester to wear the Scarlet letter A to tag her as an adulterer. Similarly, the guilt inflicted by Arthur Dimmesdale imprints the scarlet letter A on his chest, which is testified by the spectators who witnessed his death. The biased society ordered Hester Prynne to exhibit the scarlet letter in front of the mass in the marketplace along with her infant baby. Comparably, the persecutory guilt tormented Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale and forced him to confess about his relationship with Hester Prynne and also exposed his chest to the gathered mass, smashing his ego.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that guilt and justice are profoundly dealt with in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* amid a prejudiced Puritan setting. By

introducing the characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, this study discusses reparative guilt vs. persecutory one as it displays community prejudices regarding punishment for sinfulness versus principles of moral standardization in practice. The analysis brings out how guilt, although the thought of as a bane, is an impartial constant beam with which characters are punished and atoned, even in the face of society’s biases. Indeed, this understanding of the balance between individual conscience and societal justice provides a powerful statement about humanity, as reflected by Hawthorne’s subtle literary genius.

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