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## Elements Of Transcendentalism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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### Abstract:

Transcendentalism (1830-1860) began in the mid nineteenth century of New England. Soon after the second war of Independence in 1812 the Americans started to concentrate more on developing a literature of their own, which in turn gave birth to new movements of social, philosophical and intellectual importance. Transcendentalists of New England rejected the doctrines of Puritanism and Calvinism. For they believed in the inherent goodness of humans and nature and it is the society that corrupts them to the core. Nathaniel Hawthorne through his The Scarlet Letter portrays the different beliefs and dimensions of Early American life in the seventeenth century. Though being married to a transcendentalist painter Sophia Peabody, and more acquainted with the famous transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson his novel stands afar from all the novels of his time.

**Keywords:** Hawthorne, Hester Prynne, Pearle, Roger Chillingworth, Arthur Dimmesdale, Transcendentalism, Dark Romanticism.

The Scarlet Letter revolves around the theme of guilt and sin which has elements of transcendentalism and views ways in organising life. Hester bears a child Pearl, by committing the sin of adultery with Dimmesdale. Whereas Dimmesdale's failure is he cannot admit his sin of adultery with Hester in public. Chillingworth's sin is the pitiless torture towards Dimmesdale, in spite of his silent sufferings. The elements of transcendentalism portrayed in the novel includes faith in self-discipline and self-confidence, better living, service for the good of people, advantages of being close to nature, where truth is got through intuition and not logic or reason. Death penalty for adultery was reduced due to the fact that Hester's husband is already deceased at sea and she has a child and she can now be considered a widow. Hester was condemned for public humiliation and asked to stand on the scaffold for three hours at mid-day and not to remove the scarlet letter on her chest until her death.

Hester is self-confident even though she is engrossed in shame and covered with guilt by the towns people initially by their ridicule and harsh judgements. She is covered with dignity and walks on her own.

“...he placed his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward; until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free-will.” When the town beadle tried to force her to move ahead from the prison door, she was reluctant to do so and rejected him in spite of his force. She never gave way for the officials nor the people of the town to make her feel vulnerable. Later Hester proudly embroiders the scarlet letter with a luxurious velvet red and golden thread upon her bosom, which in turn turned to cast a spell on her which made her relationship to humanity far different. The Scarlet Letter depicts her strong will to normal way of life far from adversity. Instead, the letter on her bosom represents an act of shame, she carefully selects the cloth and thread and embroiders with care to celebrater her unique way of life, that differs from her fellow Puritans. She wears it as a token of love from her secret lover Arthur Dimmesdale representing his initial letter rather than a symbol of shame. She is courageous when she settles on the outskirts of the city with her daughter in an abandoned cottage near the shore surrounded by forests. In order to feed themselves she does needlework where her skills are utilized to the core. She never wants to leave the town with a hope of reuniting with her lover someday.

During the years of her seclusion from the society Hester experiences a changing transformation in herself. “To the

credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates. Hatred, by a gradual and quiet process, will even be transformed to love, unless the change be impeded by a continually new irritation of the original feeling of hostility” (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 156). Her transformation from an angry woman to a lovable person is a clear picture of transcendentalism. She possesses the transcendental ideology as she develops love for beauty in human nature. As she transforms, she goes on to help the dissolute and the poor, who are worse in state than her. She engrosses herself in making coarse garments for the poor. Her kindness towards the society was not imposed by the laws of the society, rather she chooses to be so. She was even looked down by the same people whom she fed. Her prominent transcendentalist character was her kindness towards her fellow humans, which makes her appreciable by the towns people later. They see her scarlet letter no more representing “Adultery” but “Able”. It takes seven long years for the people to think about the scarlet letter to be removed from her dress. As a strong individual she openly acknowledges her sin from making it destroy her from inside, to move forward in life, and to flourish as a caring individual in the society.

Her closeness to nature is seen in her living on the outskirts of the town with her daughter surrounded by nature- She learns about herself in the wilderness, as her heart was to be found in a desert place. As she had acquired freedom, she comfortable

advises her lover Dimmesdale, about the actions that can reduce his guilt and sufferings. She even discloses that Chillingworth was her long-lost husband at sea. When she unites with her lover in the forest nature responds to celebrate “the bliss of the two spirits! Love...” (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 199). The woods that surround Hester and Pearl allows the innocent Pearl to express herself. “The truth seems to be, however, that the mother-forest, and these wild things, which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child. And she was gentler here than in the grassy-margined streets of the settlement, or in her mother’s cottage,” which makes her to be independent like her mother. The unruly Pearl transforms into a girl of principles not corrupted by the laws of the society which she inherits from her mother.

As addressed above the elements of transcendentalism are highlighted although the elements of sin and evil are pervasive in the story. When Hester and Dimmesdale are in the woods, Hester throws the scarlet letter that was on her neck off to the side, and it appears by luck that it lands just a few feet from a bubbling creek. This is another instance of how Hawthorne incorporated the simplicity and delight of nature into his work.

“All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very torrent into the gold, and sparkling down the solemn trunks of the grey trees,” the author wrote after erasing the stigma imposed by society” (183). Nature's pristine beauty enables the natural world to shed

light on things that were once in despair, transforming them into things of ecstasy and making them into objects of beauty and joy. Such was nature's sympathy with these two souls' happiness—that wild, heathen nature of the forest, never restrained by human law or enlightened by higher truth (183).

This depiction, however, focuses more on Nature's resistance to society conventions and rules than it does on the purity and joyous disposition of nature. This quotation demonstrates this by asserting that human law or greater truth will never illuminate or subdue nature's pristine state, meaning that nature is an unchangeable and unique source of kindness, forbearance, and joyous happiness. When Hester is determining where she and her child will live, that is another aspect of the novel that is based on the runners of nature.

Transcendentalism holds that since civilization's artificial nature so cruelly damaged society, it is best to embrace nature's purity and that it was a much more helpful environment. Transcendental concepts are most influenced by society's general corruption. The *Scarlet Letter* features Hawthorne. The Puritans believed in a rigorous system of government, exclusionary practises, and regulations that, when broken, frequently resulted in severe penalties and a general sense of alienation in society. An illustration of this would be when Hester is made to stand on the scaffold for hours with her baby child while being made to wear the scarlet letter

fastened to her clothing. In this instance, she is punished not only by the actual letter and stated repercussion but also by how the community perceives both herself and tiny Pearl.

The narrator of Hawthorn's story discusses Hester's reaction to her punishment and how society's erroneous laws have made her feel rejected and euthanized: However, despite all of her interactions with society, she never had a sense of belonging. Every action, every utterance, even the silence with those she entered with nothing that gave her a sense of belonging. Every action, every word, and even her silence with individuals she came into contact with hinted and frequently communicated that she was exiled and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere or interacted with common nature through other senses and organs than the rest of humankind (78). This account discusses the severity of the punishment, not so much in terms of its accuracy as in terms of the psychological and emotional effects it has over time. Because society would not only regard her as an outsider but also refuse to recognise her presence as a fundamental component of society, this remark also alludes to how corrupt society is. Another illustration of Hawthorne's rotten creations likewise refuses to recognise her status as a fundamental component of society. When the influential residents of the hamlet conclude that Hester is a poor role model for her kid, this is another instance of how Hawthorne creates a corrupt society.

They conclude that removing Pearl from her mother would be the best course of action because they don't think she can serve as a decent role model. Many people in the village held the opinion that "If the child, on the other hand, were truly capable of moral and religious growth, and possessed the elements of ultimate salvation, then, surely, it would enjoy all the fairer prospects of these advantages by being transferred to a wiser and better guardianship than Hester Prynne's" (91).

Naturally, Governor Bellingham, who holds one of the most powerful positions in society, strongly backed this. She formed an opinion on the corrupt leaders in society and the human foundations. She is only a small part of it, and that's just because she's cut off from it. Hawthorne compares Hester's perspective of society to an Indian's appreciation of social convention after she discovers her self-worth and purpose in life: "For years past she looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators have established; criticising all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel."

When Hawthorne depicts Dimmesdale's trip back to town after their encounter in the woods, that is another instance of how he uses transcendental themes in his writing. The author informs the reader that "the same minister returned not from the wilderness" because everything about him, including his behaviour, changed as a result of the scandal, the way society handled the

offence, and the ensuing punishment. Children are negatively impacted by the sordidness of this village's society, which also leads to corrupt laws, severe penalties, and corrupt adults. Children in our society learn through the examples set by individuals in their immediate surroundings. Because of Hester's wrong doing and the way, the rest of society views them, they are instructed to behave differently toward Hester and Pearl. Hester overhears some children saying, "Look, verily, there is the woman of the village," as she and Pearl are strolling through the community.

Additionally, it contrasts the transcendental ideals of youthful purity and innocence and relates to the cruelty that Hester and Pearl were made to experience as a result of the terrible punishments of a corrupt society. Hawthorne emphasized the transcendentalist ideal of youthful innocence in *The Scarlet Letter*. All through the book Hawthorne lays out his vision for civilization. He emphasises the value of childhood innocence to the point where it seems more natural to be moral, innocent, and pure than to be educated. When youthful naivety takes precedence over education, for instance, The most desirable traits for a young lady to possess are innocence and religious purity, which Dimmesdale observes while strolling through the town. He makes the following comparison between her attractiveness and purity: "She was fair and pure as a blossom that grew in Paradise. The minister was well aware of himself ensconced with the sterile holiness of her heart, which draped

its white curtains over his image, giving love a religious purity and bringing warmth to religion (197). This relates to religion and purity while also demonstrating the very significant influence that youth and innocence have over things. The fact that Dimmesdale is a very intelligent, articulate man who nonetheless commits sins is another way that Hawthorne emphasises the concept of youthful innocence over education. Speaking with Hester "But all my life had been made up of earnest, studious, contemplative, silent years, bestowed sincerely for the increase of the other, - faithfully for the advancement of human happiness," Chlorinating thinks of his own life (156). This passage demonstrates Hawthorn's transcendental view that childhood and innocence do indeed transcend learning.

After the presence of a young mother or young lady, the impression of youthful innocence over education is frequently noticeable in *The Scarlet Letter*. According to Hawthorne, everyone has a disposition that enables their hearts to withstand suffering and despair without realising how it will influence them. It captures the suffering that Hester will eventually experience but doesn't yet sense in its fullness. Another heart-related truth that was exposed looks at the deceit between Damsely's and the public and how it played out. Hawthorne warns the reader against portraying two sides of oneself: one for the public and one for oneself without questioning which is not only the true one but also which was intended to be hidden in the first place.

When he described this truth, Hawthorne concentrated on Dimmesdale.

"No man, for any long period of time, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without ultimately becoming confused as to which one may be the truth," not just of him but also of the human heart (194). When taken in context, this quote captures the agony Dimmesdale experiences as he struggles to come to terms with the sin he did and his impending confession. Additionally, it describes how his personality has changed. How he presents himself to the world as weak, reverend, and a terrible sinner eventually confuses himself. The debilitating repercussions of guilt on the self are emphasised throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. One of the topics that recurs frequently in this book is guilt, which appears to influence the lives of the characters, their inner selves, and the overall plot of this iconic book. And let it be known that the hole that guilt once created in the human soul is never, in this life, repaired.

This remark highlights the profound effect that guilt has on the human spirit and heart and how difficult it can be to mend. Through his narrator in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne blends aspects of transcendentalism and romanticism. His description of the natural world's purity, the omnipresent notion that society corrupts, childhood innocence, and the truths of the human heart are all there in every narrative turn, every chapter, and throughout the entire book the concepts made clear and implied in this classic book. In addition to

using these components to create a book that was largely considered as a literary success in 1850, Hawthorne also succeeded in creating a book that would go on to become a classic of American fiction.

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