

## Imperceptible Strength: Delving into Hester Prynne's Resilience in *The Scarlet Letter*

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**Abstract:** Hester Prynne, the leading character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's precious novel *The Scarlet Letter*, is the subject matter of this thesis. In the face of Puritan society's draconian ethical etiquette, Hester's resilience displays itself as a subtle but dynamic force that propels her capacity to endure rejection, shame, and mental distress. This thesis highlights the complex aspects of Hester's power through a close reading of *The Scarlet Letter* which is enhanced by historical and feminist viewpoints. Beyond the outward manifestations of torment, this study affirms the inner workings of Hester's resilience through an analysis of her behaviour, relationships, and inner conflicts. It contends that Hester's determined devotion to her quest for inner liberation, parental love and personal rectitude is the foundation of her tenacity. In addition, it looks at Hester's resilience in the light of its larger themes of sin, shame, and social denunciation. Hester Prynne is a multifaceted and endless literary character whose resistance and optimism in the face of hardship are demonstrated by her resilience. This study offers new insight into the relevance of resilience as a transformational force in literature as well as in human existence.

**Keywords:** Hester, Manifestation, Scarlet Letter, Resilience, Imperceptible

**Introduction:** *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a seminal work of American Literature. It was published in 1850. Before writing this novel, Hawthorne had been fired from his job. When he started to write this novel, he was thinking about revenge. He could not protest on his own, but he tried to create a character who could protest, but silently. He has successfully shown that silence can greatly change someone's life. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne proves himself to be an insightful psychologist.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, the lead character, is a resilient and strong-willed woman. She sinned adultery and gave birth to an illegal child. So, she is compelled to wear the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of her immorality. Hester shows unbelievable bravery and resilience in the face of social disgrace by choosing to bear the weight of her guilt on her own. She refuses to reveal the identity of her child's father.

Hester struggles with feelings of loneliness and shame throughout the book. But she also shows compassion and generosity, defying social norms. She has become a symbol of resilience and inner strength by overcoming all the challenges. By her moral courage, determined resolution and devotion to social service, she transforms herself into a great philanthropist.

Hester Prynne is the symbol of imperceptible strength. She wears the scarlet letter "A" as a result of her crime, but she refuses to let her adultery define her in the eyes of society. With the scarlet letter on her bosom, she starts her work of helpfulness and ultimately the letter "A" turns into "ability" from adultery. Because of her inner strength, she seeks forgiveness while holding fast to her moral integrity and feeling of self-worth. At the end of the story, her invisible strength helps her overcome social limitations and face her obstacles with dignity and elegance.

**Literature Review:** Hester Prynne is the most important character around whom all the events and incidents of *The Scarlet Letter* revolve. Since its publication, many scholars have examined the novel's themes of sin, shame, and social exclusion. In her essay "Hester Prynne's Feminist Stands in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*" Sara states that

Hester challenges social rules and offers a new viewpoint in an era when women's acts were considered a sin under the male patriarchal order. This is the most important message for the women. It encourages them to join the stormy rebellion against institutionalized male power institutions in early America" [1].

She also states that female characters have ever taken the responsibility of growing the rebellious spirit in women; Hester Prynne appears to be one of these resilient and brave female leads [1]. Alghofaili says, "Apparently, she practices what her community believes in but, in reality, she remains firm in her own concept of herself which is not in line with the Puritan-made rules. Her belief is not defined by reason but by feelings. She is guided by love and affection" [2]. Jayasinghe says, "Women are mentally stronger than men. In the worst situation, women make better decisions than men. The same thing has been observed between the characters Hester and Dimmesdales" [3]. Bayam explores the novel's Boston Society and gives an opinion that

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Hester had had a painful effect on her society's system of meanings which means that she has been an agent of social change. At the end of the story, the community is different from what it was at the beginning and this difference is symbolized by the emergence of a new reading of the letter [4].

Mardiyatus shows how difficult it is for the lead character, with no help from others, to start a new life and take care of her daughter Pearl [5].

According to Miruna, the society depicted in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* follows the reality of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan America, which stands as an example of what must have been going on at that time. Even though women are brave, strong, industrious, kind and dedicated, their lives can still be calamitous. It is, thus, revealed not only the dark side of the Puritan ideology but also its determination to impose a lower status upon its female members [6].

Bloom investigates the novel's themes and symbols and affirms that Hester's scarlet letter is a sign of shame and sins which are enfolded in all humanity. He adds that Hester's shameless character and her disinclination to comply with societal norms are also evidence of Hawthorne's autonomy [7]. Jacobson says that Hester's isolation from her community and her refusal to reveal the identity of her child's father signify a quest for identity and an effort to individuate [8].

Hecht argues that Hawthorne was a writer who used his knowledge of both feminism and the patriarchy to take a stand against the oppression of women. This stance is primarily shown in the characters of Hester and Zenobia, who, while facing patriarchal challenges on both personal and communal levels, triumph in the end [9]. From the point of view of Sigmund Freud, İsaoglu explains that

She is torn between her id and superego. Despite being in between, she is not ashamed of her sin; she looks after both Pearl and her scarlet letter by carrying it on her chest for many years. This is a kind of revelation with which she accepts she is defeated by her strong id. She cannot resist against the strong gratification need of her id [18].

Zayed clearly observes Hester's character and states in his articles that,

As an existential individual, Hester, despite a lot of suffering, is able to change her badge of ignominy to one of honor and acceptance. In a word, Hester Prynne presented as an existential figure who is able to turn her predicament to a blessing [19].

Ahmaad points out that, in the Puritan society, women are seen as men's dependents. Without controversy, Hester achieves economic independence without asking God for support. Even though she should have been held accountable for her unhappy life, she does not ask for assistance from her husband Chillingworth or her lover Dimmesdale. This is unequivocal evidence of Hester's disobedience to the Puritans and their belief that women are dependable on men [20]. Leland focuses on Hawthorne's silent works of his characters and states that Hester's

... silence, or "perfect quietude," does have one tangible, essentially political effect; indeed, thought can "suffice" her precisely because it can have the effect of action. In particular, remaining silent enables her to revenge herself upon the man who cannot or will not acknowledge his relationship to her [21].

### **Resilience in Hester Prynne:**

**Enduring Public Shame:** As a result of Hester's affair, she endures public humiliation and shame. It demonstrates her resilience. She tolerates mockery of exclusion from her community. She is unmoving in her determination to continue. It shows how Hester's resilience tolerates the terrible burden of criticism from the public. She faces and manages the terrible reflection of her deeds. She knows well that what she has done is not right. She accepts that she deserves this type of behaviour from others. But she makes herself strong and proves that she has the potential to become a good lady and a good mother. According to Sara, "Though she actually feels repentance for her moral transgression, she does her best to seem strong" [1].

In the movie *Annapoorani*, [10] we can see the same scenario: a woman from a Brahman family wants to become the best chef in the country but to do so, she has to master non-vegetarian dishes going against her orthodox family's beliefs and values. Everyone in her society takes it as a crime. So, they punished her family. Eventually, her father breaks the relationship with her. She also faces public shame but does not give up in this situation. She faces all the things, tries to be a good chef, and wants to prove that a woman can do anything if she wants. Annapoorani endures public shame like our heroine, Hester Prynne. They show their imperceptible strength and prove themselves as a strong character in their own story.

**Motherly Devotion:** Another example of Hester's resilience is her constant love for her daughter Pearl. She importantly guards and nurtures Pearl. She gives her love and direction despite the difficulties she encounters as a single mother in a critical and judgmental society. Hester's love for Pearl highlights her persistence and inner tolerance as she manages the challenges of parenthood in the face of social criticism and ensures that Pearl is okay.

In a male-centric society, women are considered inferior to men. When a child goes against society and its rules, people think that her mother does not give her the education she should have. Even society raises questions about the mother's education and character. All believe that not only a mother but also a father and the family have a responsibility to educate her child and should care about it. Unfortunately, everyone forgets this and blames a mother when anything bad happens to a child. The same thing happened with Hester. Because of her crime, nobody believes that Hester can teach her daughter the best lesson. Everyone doubts it and wants to snatch Pearl's responsibility from Hester. Huimin Liu says, "The Governor does not trust that Hester, a woman wearing the scarlet A, can teach the child well and wants to take Pearl away" [11].

**Emotional Strength:** Throughout the book, Hester demonstrates emotional tolerance in the face of hardship. She keeps herself cool and does not allow her situation to destroy her spirit, even in the face of extreme oppression and loneliness. Emotional strength focuses on exploring and analyzing the character of Hester Prynne through the lens of emotional resilience. It might also investigate how important emotional tolerance is to Hester's growth as a character and how this has wider ramifications for comprehending the story's themes of redemption, social criticism, and individual identity. Throughout the book, Hester is seen to struggle with psychological reactions and the development of her emotional resilience.

Everyone makes a little bit mistake in their life. Sometimes it is seen that some mistakes are uncovered and the person gets punished, while some are left hidden for a lifetime. But people forget their own mistakes when they curse others. Hester is well-acquainted with this reality. So, when she sees that the women who humiliate her and curse her are not free from that belief, their secret sins become more dangerous and heinous than hers. According to Sara, "The Scarlet Letter enables her to boldly encounter those who humiliate her, with contemptuous eyes, with shameless soul, for she knows how foul their hearts are and how more dangerous their secret sins are than her own" [1].

**Acts of Charity and Getting Respect:** An act of charity means expressing compassion, kindness, and generosity towards others. People can take various forms, such as donating money, food, or clothing to those who need it. Sometimes people do it voluntarily, offering support and comfort to someone going through a difficult time. These types of activities not only benefit the recipients but also contribute to building a sense of community and fostering empathy among people. Society considers these donors to be well-wishers of the society. Just the same way the character of Arthur Dimmesdale, the town's revered minister and Hester's secret lover, feels guilty but shows a paragon-like figure in the outward world. So, it can be said that what is seen with our open eyes is not always right. In *The Scarlet Letter*, people regard Hester as a criminal and fail to recognize her potential as a good woman in society. She starts to do this type of charity work for the needy and herself. She thinks that, by doing this work, she can prove herself to be a pure-hearted woman. She wants to feel their pain so that she can compare it with hers and decide that her pain is not as severe as theirs.

Society excludes Hester for her sin, but she shows persistence and a strong desire to make a difference in the world by helping and performing acts of kindness. These generous deeds include her care for Pearl and her support for the weak and the maltreated. The people who ignore her are also impressed with her activities. Hester also helps those who are suffering from a serious disease. They never think of the fact that Hester will become a good person and help the needy. Hester proves that a sinner can be a helpful one in a silent way.

Hester starts to work on needlework, and with this work, she tries to help the needy person. She wants to be an independent woman for herself and her daughter. She uses her needle as a pen, in which she writes her history, her pain, and everything. Through her charity, she communicates with the people who neglect her for her sin. She creates a new identity for herself by doing this work. Liu aptly says,

Needle is her pen to write her history. Needlework plays the role of language, with which Hester communicates with the townspeople. In a silent way, she belongs to the community again with her new identity, sloughing the skin of a sinner, transforming into an angel, an able and admirable woman [11].

Like a writer, Hester tries to express her feelings through her work. Hester takes the needle and expresses her inward feelings through it. According to the Xu. Q, "Needlework is a pen in her hand to write her inner world" [12].

**Personal Growth and Resilience:** Hester takes responsibility for her acts and endures public shame and rejection instead of covering her adultery. Her scarlet "A" has a societal dark spot associated with it. But Hester wears the letter with honour as a sign of her confession of guilt and amplification to accept the outcome. Even after facing harsh criticism and rejection from her community, Hester seems to be resilient. She keeps her endurance and lives an estimable life. It elucidates her inner strength and resilience to bear the public humiliation while maintaining her self-dignity. As a result of Hester's punishment, she is forced to live alone. Her isolated life turns into a period of self-examination, and it makes her stronger.

When a person is aware of his or her own mistakes, s/he can solve them very easily. For this, he needs self-realization. Hester Prynne accepts her sin and tries to become a good person. Initially people do not support her. They ignore her and are unhappy with her. But when she realizes her sin, she solves it in her own way. People observe those things, and they accept her gradually as a part of their society and consider her a good soul. According to Wellborn,

When he falls into error and comes short of his dream, he is not, however, defeated necessarily, for he has a way of escape: facing and recognizing his sin without over-burdening himself with guilt, being penitent which also involves acceptance of punishment; confessing his sin, accompanying the confession with some kind of petition for reconciliation. The characters in the novel, who were willing to follow this path, experienced moral growth and reconciliation to those from whom they had felt rejection. Furthermore, they gained a fuller understanding of themselves, their fellowman, and God [14].

**Reinterpretation of the Scarlet Letter:** Hester Prynne's character can be examined in a different way from the novel. Because the novel traditionally presents Hester, the hidden nobility of Hester needs to be found out. Hawthorne presents the scarlet letter of Hester as a symbol of sin and shame, but the reinterpretation of the scarlet letter explores Hester's resilience in the face of societal accusation and adversity. Due to the restrictions of Puritan society, Hester tries to maintain her decency and sense of self-assurance. She may need to be examined for her actions, positive self-image, and capacity for self-confidence. In the novel, we

can see many examples, like her behaviour, choices and interpersonal interaction, which prove Hester's durability and rejection of social norms. Furthermore, this perspective also contradicts conventional interpretations. In the novel, Hawthorne presents Hester as a more complex and multifaceted character who is depicted with more empathy and complexity. It might also be assumed that Hester's determination relates more broadly to the novel's issues of integrity, restitution, and gender dynamics. Hester shows that her scarlet "A" does not symbolize adultery; it stands for Angel. At the end of the novel, most of the people also realize the real meaning of the scarlet letter from Hester Prynne.

The movie *Nowhere* [15] shows the courage of a pregnant woman. A young pregnant woman tries to flee the carnage of war in a dystopian period where a totalitarian ruler has gained control of Spain. She is leaving her country with her husband, Nico. But unfortunately, they are separated and try to deal with their situation. The container of the ship where Mia hides herself is floating in the ocean. In the container, only Mia has survived. She gives birth to her child, Noah. She fights every time in the container. She thinks that she is not as strong as her husband, but when she faces this situation, she realizes her power. She somehow manages her food from the ocean and also controls the container. At one point, she feels that she cannot survive, but she does not give up. Her willpower is so strong that she changes her situation. She realizes that, except for Nico, she is also capable of doing anything. At the end of the movie, she survives and saves her child as well. She is a wonderful woman like Hester Prynne. Hester also takes care of her daughter alone. She does not get any help from anyone. She realizes her power and shows everyone that a lonely woman can take responsibility for someone with full care. According to Pennell, "Hawthorne continues to develop a context for Hester's character throughout her interaction with the community at large and with its officials. While those in power focus particularly on Hester's lack of fitness as a Puritan parent, the wider community slowly changes its view of her and its interpretation of the letter A's signification" [16].

**Defiance of Social Norms:** Hester Prynne is seen to take on all the challenges and resist social expectations and conventions. Society does not accept those people who break the norms of society. It takes a great deal of action against those people. When Hester silently faces societal judgment and condemnation, particularly for her adultery and bearing a child out of wedlock, it shows her defiance of the rigid social norms of her Puritan community. Society wants a sinner to live in a way that society will decide. However, Hester lives according to her principles. It reflects her inner strength and resilience. Society makes her imprisoned in her world, but she makes her world beautiful with her daughter Pearl. She has done such work that people are forced to think of her as part of their society. A sinner never thinks that he can convince others and again become a part of society. Hester has done a great job by doing the same. She knows is the sinner very well, but does not confess his name. She keeps it secret and, alone, faces all the cruel judgments of her society. She has the great power to tolerate everything and gives good care to her daughter. Women can do anything for the sake of love. They are always ready to sacrifice their lives for their loved ones. They never think of themselves. They try to make others happy and think about how they can manage everything. Hester shows that she is not exceptional. She tries to become both father and mother to her child Pearl. She makes her a strong girl like her. In the end, she proves that by breaking the rules of society, she displays her courageous character to the audience. She proves again and again that she is not like a weak woman who is afraid to face judgement rather she is like that type of a woman who can confess her guilt and correct it by herself. According to Sara, "She contradicts feminine traits of weakness like crying. She always holds her head high" [1].

**Conclusion:** The overwhelming resilience of Nathaniel Hawthorne's main character, Hester Prynne, is evident throughout the novel. She stands out as a beacon of strength in the face of harsh criticism and reproach because of her steadfast commitment to her principles. Hester's consciousness serves as a poignant reminder of personal agency and people's ability to persevere in difficult circumstances. Hester's story reveals the enduring importance of concepts such as moral courage, penance, and achieving personal freedom, while also illustrating the complexities of human nature. In short, Hester Prynne's resilience is a powerful testament to the unwavering determination of the human spirit. It encourages readers to contemplate her transformative capacity for endurance and self-reliance. Through enduring public shame and demonstrating maternal devotion, emotional strength, acts of charity, respect, and personal growth, Hester Prynne proves to be resilient throughout the challenging journey depicted in *The Scarlet Letter*.

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