



ISSN 0976 8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

OCTOBER 2019  
VOL. 10 | ISSUE - 5

10<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## Recycling the Cultural Past in Select Early American Narrative

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**Article History:** Submitted-15/09/2019, Revised-05/11/2019, Accepted-06/11/2019, Published-20/11/2019.

### **Abstract:**

Hawthorne abounds to New England's valorization and European heredity of sanctity. He always entwines himself between the acceptance of promises in 'virgin land' and the cultural legacy of England. In such a contradictory exuberance, he formed the Christian based novel *The Scarlet Letter* that sustains the conflict of innocence and adolescence which incorporates the wilderness of American and European forefathers' ethnicity. As he, initially, states in the 'The Custom House' introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* of his earliest paternal ancestor in Americans William Hawthorne, as one who 'had all the Puritan traits, both good and evil' but the rhetoric emphasizes William and his son John negative while consistently attributing positive to whom they have opposed. Hawthorne includes several iconic example of Christian images and diction in this context. Novel itself, in spite of considerable ambiguities, frequently reinforces these contradictions. The present paper enquires 'how Hawthorne is fascinated with the deeply embedded new visions of New England and the European civilization so called heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems, specific artifacts.' It, along with such contradictory attachment of Hawthorne, will study the novelist in a tiresian framework of new, desirous, and imaginative 'mind' and inactive and obsolete 'body'. To investigate such parallel, the paper deepens into the socio-cultural and psychological insights of the novelist and characters.

**Keywords:** Narrative, History, Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter.

Culture is hereditary. We inherit it from our predecessors. Culture itself is an ambiguous term. (Sir E.B. Tylor). In simple term, culture denotes social behavior, life style, rituals, and conventions of a particular community. It functions with the perception of distinguishability and empathy. Theorists have defined 'culture' in innumerable ways. Margaret Mead evaluates it as "learned behavior of society or subgroup." It reflects knowledge, art, beliefs and customs of any community. Earlier it was being considered as a

practice, later, it started including the economic foundation, the specific development and importance of human relations. Therefore, Raymond Williams speaks out of culture as which “includes organization of production, the structure of the family, institutions. The culture has its own history. Historical past decides the future of the present and experience gained from past efforts gives birth to the new ideas and ultimately rituals. (*Culture and Society, 1985*)”. Clifford Geertz advocates that stories told by ourselves for ourselves are emblematic cultural enterprise. Finally, it covers broad level of areas of practices, experiences and endeavor of human in society. These practices form a social structure that directs and promotes the class cultural discrimination of superiority and inferiority i.e. the knowledge and power relation (Michal Foucault).

The present behavior of human being is grounded on the past experiences (Haley). Past, present and future all remain in a circular notion. Current social, cultural, religious and economical beliefs are constructed on the past experiences. In other words history contains the record of old age which had passed in human civilization. T.S. Eliot in *Burn Norton* writes;

Time present and time past

Are both present in future

And time future contained in time past.

Most of the human civilizations have impregnated their development by retelling, reconstructing, questioning, interpreting and revising their socio- cultural history. These are crucial issues that form an outline for civilized society. They investigate the history and culture of present time what is called ‘historicism’. It replicates ‘history of culture’ and ‘culturality of history’ (Stephen Greenblatt). This amalgamation of past and present has been specific phenomena in all the literatures of the world. This was crucial in the formative age of the new established civilization known as the New England/America.

The assumption of present lies in the past. The people of European countries who migrated to the New England had a notion of ‘*New Jerusalem*’ that was based on Thomas More’s concept of ‘Utopia’. On one hand, the new land was full of wilderness, savagery, and barbarism of native Indians, on the other hand, this ‘virgin land’ had a lot of possibilities for development. It was a small settlement of ‘grim faced sour and peevish’ Puritans who could not accept the challenge of European authorities. Their language, life, rituals, traditions and

other conventions were set according to the circumstances of New England but somewhere, they could not forget their wealthy and inheritable past.

American civilization passed various stages of slavery, plantation, emancipation, reconstruction, migration, urbanization and caste discrimination as well. History of America is replete with parallel contradictions that occurred between White Americans and Black Americans. These contradictions glowed up into ethnical rather than racial differences. Apart from that, it invented the complex double consciousness, socialized ambivalence and double vision of old and new world. Jefferson in his essay *Declaration of Independence* (1776) asserts that the first settlement (1620) to freedom, the migrated Europeans shaped themselves in geographical land called 'frontier' "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" ( Turner, *Frontier and Thesis*) and cultural environment of New England. But the restive domination of Puritans over the indentured slaves extorted the conscience of the poor men and women to provoke themselves against the vicious domination of White Americans. Unlike the first emigrants from European countries and indentured slaves, the African people were the only group to be deprived of from their old world social and cultural behavior.

The new settlers in America recount their historical tradition to manifest the contemporary life in New England. They use traditional images, symbols to promote the old American culture and its structure in seventeenth to twentieth century. This paper enquires "how the specific idea of historical culture is demonstrated in the specific genre called popular culture and great / classical literature in the contemporary period"

Early American writers were very much infatuated with their past and its prosperous civilization. Their mind setup in New England was contemporary but somewhere, their past was alive in their unconscious mind. They also demonstrated their mythical beliefs that function in a specific socio- cultural context of new settlement period in New England. These authors have exposed diverse groups of Americans who intend to examine their still functional past by outlining popular and great vision of American history that came to alive in their arts, literature, political and commercial enterprises.

Obviously, these strategies were found prominence with the emergence of middle class readers specially slaves, and with the production of 'popular culture' (Adorno, *The Culture Industry*) like advertisements, or the sale of huge historical souvenir. This compelled

the American settlers and the scholars as well as the historians to reconstruct the vision of America in this wilderness. The historians and the scholars captured the mind of middle class readers by offering them 'lesson of history' to access the political, religious and socio-cultural conditions of native Americans or their emigrant forefathers to New England. Finally, we can argue that past provided a huge open-ended resources for intellectuals and artistic representation. Not only this but these historical materials also explored "how American interpreted their history as commercial journey, emotional and psychological journey, political and religious phenomena in the particular context of existing time" James F. Ryder elucidates the value of symbols used in the bestselling novels, popular films and television series. They have adopted the historical theme of "the wild west". The paintings, photography, architecture, glorified the past and promoted the present that embodies the value of industrial capitalization that embellishes the birth of nation to the time. Apart from these biblical images, myths, folk traditions, natural arts also could be used to understand "how the past could be used to shape the cultural concern of contemporary American life." (John Shelley).

Moreover, literature helps in creating the episodic past of American civilization. John P. McWilliams suggests "writers have transformed a minor historical incident into a sizable literary accomplishments romance, psychological fiction, poetry, librettos and plays." The incidents used in these narratives reflect migration, emancipation, miscegenation and usurpation of legal authorities in New England. Most of the narratives have nostalgic elements which looks back to old England that accomplished them in the Puritan America. The significance of mythology of frontier has been significant in reconstructing and conceptualizing the American slavery, racism and Christian domination. It averts intellectuals from their culture and conscience of relativity of social knowledge of New England.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), a profound writer of his time, was born on July 4, 1804 at Salem, Massachusetts. He was the only son of Captain Nathaniel Hawthorne. The occupation of his father had great impact on the psychology of Hawthorne. He chose sea, and fishing for the exploration of various difficulties of fishermen in most of his works. He was much fascinated with the occupation of fishing in the sea and it enforced him to pen his experiences into artistic form. His literary career started as a story writer. In college time Hawthorne started writing short stories. In his historical and allegorical tales, he had tried to explore the harsh influence of the Puritans on the guilty conscience of New England. Before writing *The Scarlet Letter*, he transcribed many stories and tales. But it was *The Scarlet*

*Letter* that strengthened him financially and earned him a good position in the family and the literary world. Other notable works were *Twice Told Tales* (1837) and *The Marble Faun* (1860). He grounded his position in the literary circle of Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau and Alcott.

*The Scarlet Letter* is a novel that deals with history, Christianity, sin and suffering, cruelty of Puritan and the condition of emigrant Europeans in the newly found civilization. Contemporary critics like Michael Dunne, Savon Bercovitch, Charles Swann, and Nina Baym in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* look at *The Scarlet Letter* as open ended text in which there is a recurrent dialogue between the past and the future. James T. Field professed that Hawthorne's brooding imagination was "intense and single in its stress on the dark, the somber the gloomy (p.21)".

Hawthorne was very much influenced by the historical romance of Sir Walter Scott. He himself wanted to reconstruct the colonial past of New England. His beliefs towards the New England Puritans was very fright and serious. He scrutinized the cruelty, and intolerance of seventeenth and eighteenth century New England. Therefore, the characters like Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth are ultimately alienated from the common society of the New England. Hester Prynne was suffering from her marriage with an old man. After marriage, Chillingworth left Hester in Amsterdam and flew away from there. Hester's adulterous affair was the result of sudden connection with community of Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale alienated from himself therefore, he was described as 'something dim and, something fading'. Hawthorne's portrayal of his characters in the novel has a deep connotation. It refers the newly found American civilization. Hester is dark, beautiful and "a rich, voluptuous Oriental" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 105). Her dark eyes and dark hair strongly demonstrate Old American civilization. Dimmesdale has come to the New World from the Old sophisticated European World. He is the embodiment of the revolutionary people against the authority of church in Europe and migrated to New England. He has been describe as "a young clergy man who had come from one of the great universities, bringing all learnings of the age into our forestland. He was a person with a white, lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes". (*The Scarlet Letter*, 56). The use of darkness to elucidate the significance of wilderness and dullness is the narrative's powerful implication in the novel. The colors used in the novel signify the Old American continents and their physical condition.

Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne both are entwined in the past and the present of the American civilization. The narrator's compliments for Dimmesdale is "it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for newly gathered people of God"( 299).

Q.D. Leavis a leading culture critic of his time, in her celebrated essay "*Hawthorne as Poet*" says "he was writing a kind of mythic prophecy about the great cultural change involved into shift from old world to the New( Richard Chase, 75). Herman Melville refers him "this great power of blackens is derived from Calvinistic sense of innate depravity and origin sin" (ibid). Hawthorne's ancestors, as he mentioned in *The Custom House*, were from old England countries. Therefore, his mental development took place in the atmosphere of Christian values, ethics and beliefs. The last chapter of the novel contains "we are born sinner" that gratifies his old cultural beliefs in his forefather's day. A parallel instance, we come across in the opening lines of John Milton's *Paradise Lost, Book I*

Man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into world and all our woe.

In the colonial New England, the stories of ghost, the belief in supernatural element and fairy tales were the distinctive part of the settler's culture. The narrator draws the attention of his readers towards the folk beliefs of the mid-seventeenth century New England. Miss Hibbins is a witch-lady who is supposed to be an agent and emissary of devil. Henry Chorley has suggested that the use of fantastic and supernatural was done in a most judicious and artistic manner in order to bring out the life of mid- seventeenth century New England in all its primitive and specific particularity. There is no doubt that Miss Hibbins is an authentic product of folk beliefs at the time of settlement of New England. There is a touch of legend in Miss Hibbins who is definitely a throwback to the remote past. She belongs to past that is dark, mysterious and irrational.

The historian Francis Jennings asserts that the "so called settlement of American was resettlement, a reoccupation, of land made waste by diseases and demoralization by newcomers." The migrated Puritans were self-conscious who made great efforts of recording their experience in new world. They created the context for the emergence of new American culture and literature and popular/classical culture of early Puritan migrants of the new world from the Old world.

Henry James comments on the paradoxical world of Hawthorne's fictional arts as "it is an elaborate and comprehensive depiction of everyday life, and *The Scarlet Letter* could present life of colonial New England in all its starkness and precisely. It is Hawthorne ability to evoke the life and folk beliefs of city of Boston in colonial New England that made him foremost American novelist of his time"( *The Art of Novel* ) Somewhere, the character of Hester Prynne portrayed by Hawthorne symbolizes the subjugation and emancipation of the women in American colonial society. Mary P. Ryan in her *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Time to Present*, (1975) argues that gender discrimination overflowed in New England because the structure of the family was shaped by colonizers and even male domination was central in society. The men and women worked separately in different forms and women were responsible for domestic works. Hester came with her husband to the Massachusetts Bay. Her husband left her alone and therefore, Hester felt unsecure and got a sense of security under the emotional and physical attachment with Arthur Dimmesdale. Authority's behavior with Hester was cruel and fatal. They made her stand on scaffold wearing the letter "A". They tried to seize her daughter Pearl from her. Their cruel punishment and harsh judgment led the emigrant women to their death. Anne Hutchison was born in 1591 and migrated to Massachusetts Bay in 1634. She realized that women were to be excluded from colonial affairs, she began holding meeting for both religious and secular affairs. Her revolutionary efforts brought her into confrontation with the authorities and she was convicted to be banished from colony. She was exiled and murdered by Indians. The novelist has created Hester in the same framework. When the novel opens, Hester is described as "lustful and adulterous" woman. At the end of the novel, she is hailed as 'mother of charity' and death of her lustrous life makes her pure.

*The Scarlet Letter* incorporates the traumatic disastrous experiences of author in colonial American society. It advocates for the cultural enterprises that were prominent in New England colony. The writer validates the rituals, socio- cultural and economic values in the so called new formative age. It constructs a parallelism in the characters of Hester Prynne, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth subsequently in sin suffering, confession and ultimately redemption in death or liberation. As author claims that his forefathers have been English migrants from European countries, the novel investigates the critical conditions of indentured laborers and slaves controlled by White Americans. He bifurcates the society into slave and master group. Hester's redemption, of course, comes long after her adulterous encounter with Dimmesdale; and their union-which outcomes in the formation of a new entity altogether is



symbolized by their equally assimilated coat of arms and realized in the person of Pearl. Heraldic tradition dictates that when noble, wealthy, or powerful parties marry, their coats of arms be divided and rejoined to form a new coat of arms. In a sense that is what has happened in *The Scarlet Letter*, but significantly, the device has been formed out of the recent past-not an historical or traditional past which, as in the case of Hester's father's coat of arms, has degenerated into a symbol of "antique gentility" and therefore has no meaning for the present. Seen in this light, the world of Puritan New England has given Hester and Dimmesdale a chance to shape their destiny with their own hands. And even though their new something very different from the equivalent, at least it endures a relation to the past that is comprehensible and meaningful

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