

**The Limits of Sexuality: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*
And Other Literary Victims**

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Abstract

This article delves into the nuanced portrayal of sexual limitations within Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional work, *The Scarlet Letter*. Through the lens of psychoanalytic theories focused on Sigmund Freud's concept of the return of the repressed, it explores the intricate web of societal norms and personal desires that shape the characters' experiences of sexual passion. Furthermore, the article examines the ethical quandaries surrounding the sexuality of significant characters like Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne, and Roger Chillingworth, all residing during the Puritanical era. By juxtaposing Hawthorne's narrative with other literary victims such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Kate Chopin's *The Storm*, the article's relevance lies in its exploration of timeless themes surrounding sexuality, societal norms, and personal desires, shedding light on ethical dilemmas across historical eras.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Psychoanalysis, Puritanism

Introduction

Precisely twenty-five years after Hawthorne left Bowdoin to become a writer, he published his first successful novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, in 1850. Popular appeal they had enabled its creator to open "an intercourse with the world" and to achieve fame. The novel manifests in exact measurements the conflict between forces of passion and repression in the human psyche and society. The role of sexuality in Puritan New England has been a topic of extensive scrutiny and debate. Age-old

interpretations of Puritan society as sexually repressed and, in turn, the term 'Puritanical' been equated to repressive accelerated American culture. Bodies and sexual instincts were significant to their understanding of social order. They celebrated sexual passions in contexts like that of a marriage, where it was believed to build up love and fellowship.

In contrast, sex was considered 'unclean' when it was performed outside the sphere of legal marital bondings. Thomas A. Foster summarizes the prevailing thoughts of that era as one in which "procreative aims and sexual pleasure were compatible; indeed, within the confines of the legitimate union." Puritanism became a synonym for sexual repression. As Edmund Morgan's revisionist study pointed out, the Puritans were far from being the sexual prudes that hostile literature made them out to be. At the same time, Hawthorne incorporates a 'Puritan voice' into his narrative. However, the narrator also wants to acknowledge the motivation and inner feelings of the characters, which provoke them to break the conventional Puritan community.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the enslavement of women to the point of sexuality, including biology, which blatantly denies their fundamental freedom. The Handmaids were required to be submissive to sexual intercourse with their commanders monthly in the hopes of begetting children; sexual passion was denied, and love no longer existed. The impregnation society depicts the disregard of women's sexual impulses under patriarchal ideology. Women's sexuality should only aim to procreate and satisfy men's sexual desire. Women are just the inferior objects that society forms. In Puritan times, we do find a similar kind of mindset where women should only enjoy sexual pleasure for reproduction purposes. Thus, the adultery of Hester Prynne is seen as a sin by Puritan society and not as a natural overflow of sexual passion that a woman may have.

In his book, "Repression Vol. XIV," Freud added that repression's real meaning lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance from the conscious. Breuer and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*(1895) focused on traumatic memories of events occurring during adult life. This led him to formulate the seduction hypothesis, where sexual repression in adulthood is a sexual seduction during childhood. Return of the Repressed happens when the defense mechanism fails. Lacan interpreted the concept of repression in the form of structuralism and linguistics.

We must consider the presence of desire and understand it as a typical human symptom. Repression involves an inability to acknowledge the need for discipline; Whitmontt explains that repression "is the act of shutting our eyes to avoid the suffering of discipline.". He says that repression will always call forth a compensation counteractivity of the unconscious, which will, through the backdoor, power upon us the very thing we are trying to repress. Repression has been described as a keystone of psychoanalytic theory.

Dr. Mandal, in his book *Jacques Lacan: From Clinic To Culture*, writes, "Freud put the id, the repressed wishes/desires(structured as signifiers) and parts of the ego and superego within the domain of the unconscious. Castration is therefore a "symbolic lack of an imaginary object" involving the repression of the child's desire to epitomize the imaginary phallus. In Lacan's 'Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual,' the Oedipus Complex is said to occur 'around four years of age and involves a fantasy of castration, the sublimation of reality, and the repression of sexuality, all of which help situate the individual within the social order.' (Clarks)

Dr. Mandal also added," It is also to be noted that the repressed and the return of the repressed are the same things; that is, there is no repressed before the 'return of the repressed.'

Sexual desire is repressed in the classical Freudian sense because the first sexual impulse was directed towards the mother and had to be repressed due to paternal prohibition. From the psychoanalytical point of view, we get a possible hint of Dimmesdale's and Hester's repressed sexuality, which resulted in the outbursting emission of passion in the form of adultery. The cause of the repression and consequences of the repression(return of the repressed) in their action proclaim the validity of the psychoanalytical theories.

The ever-charming character of Arthur Dimmesdale has been one of the victims of sexual repression. The superego and id conflicts have made this character's best possible manifestations. The id and all kinds of desire are like human beings, and these instincts are considered wilderness and suppressed by Puritan society. Dimmesdale stands as a holy minister in front of the eyes of local governors and country people. We must consider him to be a flesh and blood masculine figure who has specific aspirations, desires, and also sexual inclinations towards women just as a healthy, young man has. However, in the society where he lived, he is supposed to undergo and obey certain Calvinist moral ethics, which eventually directs a Reverend to suppress specific natural desires, mainly when the question arises about sexuality. Dimmesdale was obviously in a dilemma; on the one hand, his consciousness, reason, and morality prevent him from sexual activities, and on the other hand, his id orders him to fulfill his desires, disregarding the moral ethics of his time. Chillingworth calls the minister's "strong animal nature" incompatible with his ideal self. Dimmesdale's animal self is not fully triumphant. Libidinal impulses have become strong, and it has made Dimmesdale more aware of a buried self that opposes his religious values. In the recent past (2011), we found a case that happened in Zambia where a Catholic Father(Father et al. of Saint Lawrence Parish Catholic Church) was accused of adultery by the wife of a police officer. Such cases are a high-

class and relatable example of how the priests fulfill their repressed sexual desire, and it is also a direct reference to the return of the repressed, as mentioned earlier. Dimmesdale is described as a "young clergyman, who had come from one of the great English universities...affected them like the speech of an angel". Arthur Dimmesdale was also ambitious and was highly reputed for his sacredness and Puritanism in his society. He, too, wished to maintain the standard that he had, even after committing adultery. His lack of control over his repressed sexual passions led him to a major downfall, as it has been the same in the case of Hester but in a different way.

American novel *The Catcher Of The Rye* by J.D Salinger throws a direct glimpse into a better perception of repression. The novel pictures Holden's obsession with women and inability to make up with them, leading him to establish a more frequent casual relationship with the opposite gender. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, perversion and concealed sexuality in his life are scattered in the narrative. Mr. Antolini's sexual touch when he visited his English teacher was a shock for him in the early stages of his life. This kind of incident in the primal stage of a child makes him sexually repressed, and henceforth, this overt repression is always returned in the form of his attitude or daily life activities. Holden states in his monologue how he loves to watch erotic games that were held in a hotel room between his neighbors. This proves that the repressions of our lives are bound to return to us in any given form, and it sometimes becomes unavoidable even if the castration process of an individual is successful.

The Scarlet Letter puts up a passionate, feminist heroine, Hester Prynne, who goes against the sexual repression and hypocrisy of theocratic Puritanism. Hester was that challenging figure who belonged to the Puritan society only in her physical state, but from the angle of her mental progression, she was far more advanced. She, too, repressed her

sexuality to a certain extent for a specific period, but as soon as she got the chance to fulfill her desires, she did not turn back. She grasped the opportunity and also had the potential to challenge society and loved a clergyman. She was the one who transgressed the Puritan codes and the social order of the Puritan community.

Kate Chopin's short story "The Storm" highly depicts the traditional patriarchal notions and sexuality to be a negligible aspect of women's lives. However, Chopin boldly addresses the need to fulfill women's sexual desires. The story vividly details an extra-marital sexual encounter between Calixta(wife and a mother taken from our usual life)and Alcèe amidst a raging storm. Chopin maintains a non-judgemental stance by refraining from moralizing the sanctity of marriage or the sin done by Calixta. With the ignorance to condemn Calixta's action and acknowledging the importance of sexual impulses in a woman's life, the story "The Storm" has a solid feminist tone.

Interspersed in this somewhat coded description of the encounter are quite vivid details about Calixta's body and the sexual encounter. Chopin writes about her lips that, in a manner accessible to be tasted, as well as her round, white throat and breast. The candidness of Chopin's language is revolutionary; sex was considered outside the woman's sphere of knowledge or concern during her time. In being boldly candid about sexual relationships, especially those outside the sanctity of marriage, Chopin appropriates and connects the traditionally male domain of sexual desire to female sexuality. Chopin validates the point that woman has the right to know and appreciate their bodies, experience physical pleasure, and celebrate these experiences.

Throughout the story, Chopin tries to inverse the traditional gender roles, specifically regarding sexuality. Calixta is a willing participant in the sexual relationship rather than an innocent victimized maiden, just like Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Chopin questions the traditional gender roles and challenges the repression of female sexuality, and also she dares to undermine the institution of marriage. She writes of Calixta during her sexual encounter with Alcée: "Her firm elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright was like a creamy lily that the sun had been welcomed to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the universe. This claim suggests that Calixta's conjugal life with her husband is less than satisfactory; furthermore, in being sexually unsatisfied, Calixta is deprived of something inherently important to her. "Birthright" is a powerful word indicating that women's bodies are as capable and desiring of physical pleasure as men's are. This is far different from the traditional idea that the woman's body was the repository for male sexual desire and that sex had an entirely procreative purpose for women. These expectations about sex in marriage are disadvantageous to women, for under these restrictions, they cannot actualize the pleasure that is their "birthright." If Calixta is thus unsatisfied in her marriage but enjoys this exciting and fulfilling encounter outside of marriage, what is Chopin saying about marriage? It is an unnatural arrangement or event that aims to limit women's opportunities for sexual fulfillment also implicitly in other significant facets of life as well.

With a connection to *The Scarlet Letter*, the bodily description of the protagonist Calixta depicts her as an erotic, sensual woman who has the power to seduce a hard-molded masculine figure just like we find the physical appearance of Hester Prynne in the novel- "figure of perfect elegance on a large scale," dark and abundant hair, sun-glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam." Her complexion is rich, her eyes are dark and deep, and she has the perfect outer appearance that would raise men's hormones. Although "The Storm" has a feminist tone in the narrative, still the depiction of women is quite misogynist and succumbs to societal expectations. In the story "The Storm," we find Calixta sewing a cotton

sheet, just as similar to Hester carrying out her embroidery skills in the novel.

Women in the archetypal feminine have been mostly exiled. As Whitmont pointed out, a woman must be good, chaste, nurturing, and receptive in the androcentric world. Women like Hester Prynne break this nutshell, and henceforth, she is excluded from society. She has been a part of the nonconformist side despite her gender, and this shows that she perhaps transgressed herself to a masculine figure in the novel, like Calixta in "The Storm." Also, we need the opportunity to claim that the societal moral direction of repression is gender-biased. Puritan Community believes in the policy of self-denial and giving up individualism regarding passions and choices. It motivates us to repress the dark qualities of human nature, which Hawthorne has very successfully hinted at in his novel. We could not sympathize with Hester as she is a proto-feminist character who dares to fulfill her passions; we only wish to be like her, even in this contemporary society. She is neither victimized nor a solid rebellion against Puritan beliefs. However, we may consider her a woman who follows her conscience and acts according to her individualist belief system's right path.

Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" manifests the social expectations binding Victorian women and their sexual desires. Browning very efficiently challenges the conservative Victorian mindset in his portrayal of Porphyria. The patriarchal society of Victorian England suppressed female outbursts of emotions and sexuality. "murmuring how she loved me {...} and give herself to me forever" suggests that Porphyria is entrapped in the passive feminine role that society expects her to deal with. Porphyria's sexually forward behavior is demonstrated in the wild imagery, "her smooth white shoulder bare" which challenges the preconstructed ideas that women were to inhibit their sexuality and establish their value based on their chastity. The

church's role in instilling the age-old values regarding female submissiveness is portrayed in the biblical allusions, "And yet God has not yet said a word!" emphasizing society's expectation of women.

The bringing of physical comfort and intimacy, suggestive of mutual physical contentment, is experienced by the male, however, as sexually seductive: the reiterated "and" records his escalating rapt attention to the woman's progressive undressing, her attempt to rouse him first by calling his name, and then by offering "her smooth white shoulder bare ."At the "gay feast," bare shoulders are a socially sanctioned display of marketable female beauty. In the secluded cottage, Porphyria's shedding of the garments that connect her with that world and her apparent humbling of herself ("kneeled," "stooping"), literally letting down her hair as she offers a supportive shoulder, seem to denature and deflect desire into a maddening display of the social dutifulness that separates her from him. The act of violence shown is the victory of the id over the moralist superego and the realistic ego. Browning, in his poem, broke the idea of taboo that bound sexuality in Victorian society. The whole scene of the strangle of Porphyria could be a portrayal of the repressed desire of her beloved to have her forever in his life, even if she is dead, and certain insecurities in their relationship may have caused this. The imagery of the cottage in the poem and the cottage of Hester hold a similar significance.

Throughout Hawthorne's body of work, including his short stories and novella, there is a strong connection between artistic production and repressed sexual longing. Most of Hawthorne's artists repress their desire because of social circumstances or lack of courage to express them, and therefore, they channel those emotions through their artistic efforts: Women tend to derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil and work of the needle. To Hester Prynne, it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, her life's

passions." In *Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne creates "fantastically embroidered with gold thread ."The narrator makes a clear connection between Hester's art and her sexual passions. Hester does not fulfill his artistic interests for livelihood but for surging out her inner repressed desires. Like Hester, Dimmesdale also finds a channel to purge his passions through religious oratory.

Pearl is fundamentally the 'Child of Nature' significantly comparable to the "Romantic" Child of Nature described in Wordsworth's Lucy poems. She is "the scarlet letter endowed with life" in appearance and function. Like the scarlet letter hanging to Hester's breast, Pearl is constantly reminded of her sin and redemption; the child is her punishment and reward. For if Pearl is identified with the lawlessness that Hester has embroidered around the letter, she is also identified with the law within, which determines that Pearl must, in some way, be Hester's penance. Nina Baym defines Pearl as Hester's id who seems to act out her unconscious rebellion against the unjustified process of Puritan law and punishment.

Hester conforms to the standards of her society, while Pearl embodies the "flesh and blood" acting out the repressed fantasies of rebellion. Without Pearl to act out her unconscious desires, Hester might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson. The repeated allegorizing scenes show Pearl representing Hester's unconscious desires. Pearl's behavior is one of the few outlets for expressing Hester's repressed feelings, like her embroidery. Not surprisingly, Pearl's behavior, as representative of Hester's repressed and unconscious urges, is seen as malevolent by the Puritan community, given the Puritan's systematic repression of inner desires and passions.

Pearl allows Hester to grow imaginatively and philosophically. Pearl is not only the proof of the sin for which Hester has been cast out of her society; she is also a source from which Hester imbibes identity.

Seeing her unconscious repressed emotions played out publicly in Pearl, Hester's identity takes on a greater complexity. Like Pearl, who behaves as though she could "be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime, Hester realizes that "the world's law was no law for her mind" – at least not the law of the Puritan world. an essential part of Hester's self that cannot be repressed is her daughter, Pearl. Like her mother, Pearl "could not be made amendable to rules." Carton mentions that Pearl defines the "limits of Hester's freedom and power." Without Pearl, it is suggested that Hester may have been an active reformist in "undermining the foundation of the Puritan establishment" or a "prophetess" or perhaps the foundress of a religious sect." In one sense, Pearl defines Hester as the little girl who abandons all forms of law; she manifests wilderness just like Hester did in the novel. Hester knew the consequences of committing adultery in a Puritan society, but still, she does go out of the box. Moreover, perhaps this is what our ego drives us to do: go beyond society's limits and quench our desires' thirst.

Roger Chillingworth is the character that stirs up all the other characters in the novel. He can be defined as the main culprit of the sexual repression and also a victim who suffers through and through. Impotence, as it does adultery, makes the "dark necessity" of *The Scarlet Letter* proceed, and surprisingly, the impotent man is the father of all events. Reading the novel moves our focus to the character, Roger Chillingworth, who satisfies the tradition of the classic stereotype of the impotent man. This older man marries a young wife, just like the marriage between Roger Chillingworth and Hester Prynne. *The Scarlet Letter* – a renowned tragedy that is known for the guilt of adultery, sin, and defying Puritan traditions proceeds from the marriage of a young girl to an impotent man as much as it does from adultery.

Older men, particularly those married to young wives, have been

ridiculed throughout literature- mercilessly – as especially prone to impotence. Robert Burton reinforces the stereotype in his 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. He defines impotence as a man not able of himself to perform those duties which he ought unto his wife and notes that the disorder is most evident in older men, those who are cold by nature and married success plenis, to young wanton, sexually active wives.

The history of reactions towards impotence as it got disclosed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century English and colonial materials with which Hawthorne was known to also places the exchanges between Hester and Roger Chillingworth in an exciting light. Even in the early Catholic Church, impotence was one of the few grounds for annulling marriages. In *Magnalia Christi Americana* from the Cambridge Platform of 1648, Cotton Mather reveals that of the six recognized grounds for divorce, impotence heads the list: "incapacities, and insufficiencies which utterly disappoint the conferred ends of marriage." In the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne makes an oblique reference to the issue of impotence by Overbury murder. In the chapter "The Leech and His Patient," an old man claimed that he saw Chillingworth "under some other name...in the company with Doctor Forman, the famous old conjurer, who was implicated in the affair of Overbury". This association made the readers wonder if he indeed was acquainted with Forman, for Overbury had died mysteriously after objecting to the divorce of Countess of Essex, who charged with her husband's sexual impotence. The linkage of sexual and literary impotence in "The Custom-House" is everywhere present in its language: the Platonic ideal of union that once was whole, the narrator's loss of manhood, and the phallic town pump.

In Eliot's and Hemingway's writings, we know a dichotomy between the world and community cultivating age-old rituals and Western society. The authors refer to the two microworlds to analyze the

role of men in society and the 20th century's loss of masculinity. A central motif of male impotence is shown in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. The exact nature of the injury, which sexually incapacitated Jake Barnes, the narrator of the novel, was a part of the mystery; Jake was "wounded...in a rotten way and flying on a joke front like the Italian". Jack had been wounded in quite a different way, and his testicles were intact and not damaged. In a letter to Philip Young, Hemingway "indicated that his model was a young man whose penis had been shot off but whose testicles and spermatic cord remained intact."

After marrying Hester, a young wanton woman, Roger Chillingworth, a man of science and physician, moved away to pursue his studies. Such a decision shows his lack of interest in his wife and also his inadequate sexual impulses. This also can be interpreted differently: his queerness and homosexual identity. The relationship between Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth can be analyzed from the queer perspective too. In Puritan society, heterosexual men in the prerogative position need to maintain the traditional way of sexuality. Men in Puritan times had the desire to create a bond with another homosexual man and also realized the need to maintain a subtle balance between homosexual and heterosexual so that relations should appear heterosexual to society. Roger Chillingworth allows his love for Hester to deviate into a homosexual love for Dimmesdale but still joins the heteronormative trend of the mainstream American way. We are not sure if Chillingworth was homosexual, but if it is the case, then we can be sure of the repression of his sexual impulses, which would have been claimed as something 'abnormal' by the Puritan community. Chillingworth's falling for Dimmesdale not only in terms of being his physician but also showing love and intimacy makes it somewhat clear that Chillingworth was homosexual. Being a man, and therefore occupying a higher status in society, does not affect his sexual impulses. His sexuality, just like

Hester's, also got suppressed under the conventions of mainstream trends and traditional thought processes.

For Hester, the sexual impotence of Chillingworth when they were united and his absence for several years made her fall for Dimmesdale's masculinity, and he had been a pillar to quench her unfulfilled sexual desires. Chillingworth's profound interest in knowledge and career growth is praiseworthy. However, for a marital union, it is highly depressing for a young woman like Hester, who had certain expectations from the wedlock. It is the failure on Chillingworth's part not to be able to satisfy Hester's demands and desires. Thus, the immense repression of her sexuality came out in an enormous form of sexual desire towards men. Her so-called 'lust' and desire for a sexual partner is henceforth justified.

Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne treated Puritanism in many of his works and presented it as a symbol of repression in society and himself. The sexual encounter forms a *donnée* of the novel, which was neither an attempt to disobey the social laws nor moral rebellion; it was only a fulfillment of momentary desire and passion to follow an individual's conscience. The novel gives a widened breathing space to the readers to come out of the Puritan beliefs and to follow their hearts. Hawthorne's sterling attempt to create characters that juxtapose the usual Puritan community members makes it more daring and persuades the readers to re-question the validity and scientific justification of these firm beliefs. It would give us a vast number of territories to research the relevance of the novel and the other literary texts staging sexual repression in the contemporary era, where we claim to have developed ourselves into modernized, liberal, and free-thinking social animals.

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