

Original Article

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Narrative Empathy in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Received: 17 February 2023

Revised: 25 March 2023

Accepted: 08 April 2023

Published: 20 April 2023

Abstract - In order to better understand the research and analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's consideration of individual freedom and the Puritan law, this paper discusses the paradox of "Integration" and "Isolation" in *The Scarlet Letter*. This paper analyzes the main process of the characters' empathy from delaying to awakening and then to remodeling, which reflects the social conflict between individuals' free will and the Puritan law in 17th-century America. Therefore, Hawthorne's criticism of the conservatism of the Puritan society can be accurately conveyed on the one hand, and the other hand, the study illustrates Hawthorne's moderate reform position on the establishment of a benign Puritan community with "empathy" as the core, thus providing guidance for the contemporary society.

Keywords - Integration, Isolation, Narrative empathy, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*.

1. Introduction

When it comes to extra-marital affairs that incur moral condemnation in the 1850s, Narrative empathy plays a significant role in *The Scarlet Letter*. Unlike traditional romantic narration focusing on love and adventure, *The Scarlet Letter* empathically imagines the collision of the original and newly-released laws with Puritan immigrants from New England first entering the virgin lands of North America in the mid-17th century (Parrington, 1987). Although the novel secured Hawthorne's fame as an eminent writer as soon as it was published in 1850, the plot that Hester committed the crime of adultery and suffered from the denouncement around the scaffold showcases Hawthorne's unabashed freedom, suggesting that the private life was at tragic variance with the public world (Wineapple, 2003). Perhaps, *The Scarlet Letter* pays more attention to extra-marital affairs than guilt, as we have noticed in the past (Colacurcio, 1985). In order to deal with moral criticism and confrontation between integration and isolation, this essay discusses how the technique of "Narrative Empathy" is applied in the novel.

Empathy, an important concept in modern psychology, was introduced by the British experimental psychologist E.B. Titchener in 1909. Moreover, he proposed and replaced the aesthetician Theodor Lipps' term "Einfühlung" – "the aesthetic form of feeling into objects through self-actualization" (Lipps, 1979). It is worth noting that Titchener's 1915 exposition of the concept of empathy in *Beginner's Psychology* is embodied through the description of the reading experience. Titchener believes that readers have a natural tendency to feel what can be imagined while reading. Suzanne Keen further materializes narrative empathy, the idea that a reader's empathy for a situation described in a novel can be enhanced by its connection to a particular historical, economic, cultural, or social context (Keen, 2006). It can be thus seen that readers will automatically share their

emotions when reading the novel. Through the author's narrative empathy-- narrative situation and character identification, they will respond to Hester with much compassion, who committed the crime of adultery under strict rules and regulations in the novel, which just reaches the ideal state of attracting readers' interest and avoiding moral criticism.

This essay explores Hawthorne's methods for achieving an audience that would understand and, on some level, feel with his characters. I propose here that Hawthorne uses narrative empathy to promote empathic engagement with his characters and that he works to literalize the experience of narrative empathy by orienting his readers in both real and imaginary spaces, creating a "dynamic process" that centers on empathy delaying, empathy awakening and empathy remodeling, to convey his criticism on the conservatism of puritan society, and to show his moderate reform position on the establishment of a benign puritan community with "empathy" as the core. Hawthorne's characters are often deeply compelling in their own right, of course. However, by examining the role played by narrative perspective-taking in creating empathy for these characters, I posit that he turned to strategies other than the representation of characters' interiority to facilitate readers' connections. Exploring this conjunction between narration and empathy in the novel and surrounding texts also suggests that Hawthorne offers an alternative narrative practice in which subject-making—imagining interior life and emotions—is no longer the primary method of engaging empathy.

2. Empathy Delaying: Conflict between Individual's Free Will and the Puritan Law

As an observer of transcendentalism, Hawthorne viewed the New England Puritan law as separated from its British predecessor objectively and calmly. Hester, who



broke the taboo of Puritan doctrine, was a character symbol of the collision between morality and law in the New and Old Continents. As Frederick Newberry put it, the interruption of the historical record shocks the cultural memory of a people (Newberry, 1987). In *The Scarlet Letter*, the emotional separation between Hester, who committed adultery and the religious folk at first is not only the delay of empathy but also the tension between individual female freedom and Puritan law norms.

Firstly, at the novel's beginning, the conflict between individual free will and strict Puritan laws shows the emotional block between Hester, who pursues freedom and the religious folk who defend Puritan laws. In the scene of Hester's punishment on the scaffold at the beginning, there is a contradiction between Hester and the Puritan spectators. Hester, who commits adultery in pursuit of personal happiness and freedom, becomes the object of the trial of the onlookers. Hester, who wears the scarlet letter "A" on her chest, has to accept the cold eyes of the public on the scaffold in front of the large cell. The bystanders seemed to act as judges to judge Hester through public opinion. In addition, the cottage where Hester lived after her release from prison was located on the edge of the peninsula, far from the residential suburb of the town, and the remote distance prevented Hester from necessary social communication with the residents to some extent. Although Hester's exquisite needlework occasionally attracts sustenance from the neighbourhood's inhabitants, the heroine still feels a sense of incompatibility with society. Every action, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she comes into contact suggests, and often indicates, her exclusion [7, p. 69]. It can be seen that the humiliation and isolation of Hester on the scaffold indicate the empathic exclusion between the Puritans and Hester, thus resulting in the barrier of interpersonal communication.

In fact, the block of empathy between the novel's characters reflects the cruelty and indifference of the law in colonial New England. In addition to suffering from the emotional alienation and indifference of the Puritan residents, Hester also had to bear the multiple legal punishments of the state apparatus. The first and most hierarchical and punitive punishment comes from prison. At the novel's beginning, a prison is compared with a cemetery. The settlers of the new colony could not forget to set aside a virgin piece of land for a cemetery and another piece of land for a prison, which on the one hand, vividly suggests that the shape of the prison is similar to that of a circular cemetery, and on the other hand suggests that the prison is as dark as a cemetery. Looking back at the history of prison reform in the United States, it is not difficult to find that prison is an excellent place to isolate prisoners and reform their minds. In the early 19th century's United States, there were two distinct modes of prison: Auburn and Philadelphia. The former has no isolation restrictions, and prisoners usually gather together to work quietly during the day and use their cells alone at night. Quakers believed that the Oban prison's results were

ineffective and argued that criminals should reflect in solitude. So, the Philadelphia model, the fully segregated prison model, came into being (Sullivan, 1990). In the novel, the prison is the spatial basis for the Puritan governor to exercise his power over Hester, which reflects that the prison, as a place for prisoners, has the dual role of disciplining and punishing the body and spirit of Hester, "the Wild Rose", not only restricting personal freedom but also influencing her soul.

The second law came from the head of the colony, Governor Bellingham. In the novel, during Hester's public trial on the marketplace scaffold, Governor Bellingham himself sits in the seat, dressed in a magnificent manner -- not only in a great position, but behind the chair stand four guards with halberd [7, p. 51], and his costume was also grand and ornate, with a black feather in his hat, a lace embroidered cloak, and black velvet tights inside [7, p. 51-52]. The extravagant dress and high-minded style seemed to be a departure from the plain and low-key Puritan immigrants of early North America. Hawthorne's ironic intention was clear in the paper. In fact, Governor Bellingham did exist in history. Michael Colacurcio pointed out that Hawthorne shifted the historical timeline slightly when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* (Colacurcio, 1985). Hester, in *The Scarlet Letter*, first ascended the scaffold in June 1642, when Richard Bellingham became governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. However, according to Beverly Haviland, Bellingham was defeated by John Winthrop when he ran for governor in May 1642 because of a sexual scandal in which a man, a widower in his fifties, declared his marriage to a 20-year-old girl without a legal witness (Haviland, 2015). Bellingham's sexual scandal, in other words, showed that he had engaged in extralegal sexual relations with a woman young enough to be his daughter, comparable to the consequences of Hester's adultery. However, in the novel, it is quite ironic that Governor Bellingham became the judge of adultery and even became one of the good people who are holy and perform justice [7, p. 52].

The warder, the enforcer of the state apparatus, is the third law discipline. Under the colonial law of 1636, anyone found guilty of adultery was severely flogged twice: once on the spot of the court's judgment and once while awaiting the summons of law (Bradley, 1978). In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, on her way from her cell to the market scaffold to be interrogated by the crowd, is brutalized by the warder, although she does not describe the harsh whipping she suffered. When Hester was released from the door, she was greeted by the cruel warder, with his sword at his side and his staff in his hand, who then held the staff in his left hand and drew a young woman forward with his right hand by the shoulder. Law enforcement tramped on human dignity, evoking the grim dignity of warders as a symbol of the rigor of the Puritan code and the brutality of the law as a symbol of the cruelty of colonial law [7, p. 41]. In fact, Hester's adultery crime was caused by the misfortune of arranged marriage with Chillingworth. Although the heroine carried on the affair

out of natural nature, she did not get any understanding and sympathy from the law. She was greeted by harsh punishment and lifelong reform of wearing the scarlet letter. According to the English law of the 17th century, the young and beautiful Hester had no right to refuse when she married the old and infirm Chillingworth because, between 1566 and 1639, a series of decrees and declarations made it a criminal offence for a girl under the age of 25 or a man under the age of 30 to marry without the consent of her parents (Stone, 1977). Therefore, it can be speculated that when Hester married Chillingworth, who was as old as her father, under her father's arrangement in the novel, she was too young and ignorant to judge the love and marriage she wanted. So, when she met a brilliant young priest in the new colony alone, she was so excited that she could not help committing adultery. Hester, who was unhappy during her marriage, did not get long-term sweetness after falling in love with her lover, followed by endless punishment. Under the Adultery Laws of Plymouth in 1694, Hester would have to wear signs of A two-inch cut cloth and different colors on top of her arms or back throughout her life. If the offender is found not to be wearing the letters, he is promptly flogged in public (Ramsey, 1998). In contrast to the position of the scarlet letter prescribed by the Act, Hawthorne moved Hester's scarlet letter to the chest to illustrate the mental and spiritual torture of the punishment brought about by the violation of the law.

Therefore, the novel's beginning shows that the cold punishment in terms of the prison, the governor and the warder cause the narrator's empathic hysteria towards the prominent figure. Through the emotional estrangement between the characters in the novel and the harsh punishment of multiple laws, the narrator seems to oppose Hester, who is guilty of adultery, on the level of moral value. This disapproval of characters inhibits the reader's sympathy for Hester to some extent and thus leads to empathy alienation between the reader and Hester. However, this barrier of empathy is actually a deception of the narrator. On the one hand, it skillfully satirizes the hypocrisy of Puritan officials and reveals the difference in the effect of Puritan laws on different groups at that time. On the other hand, it tactically lays contradictions for the empathy awakening of the waist in the novel and enhances the integrity and aesthetic of the novel structure.

3. Empathy Awakening: Thaw of Rebellion and Conservatism

Suppose empathy hysteresis at the novel's beginning stems from the conflict and tension between individual free will and Puritan law. In that case, the middle part of the novel, Chapter 13, is a turning point in the narrator's empathy awakening. Richard Chase once regarded Chapter 13 of the novel as a feminist manifesto, alluding to an important change in Hester's image from an adulterous criminal to an industrious and capable "angel" (Chase, 1980). The main reason for this change is the reconciliation and integration of the two opposing thoughts of rebellion and conservatism. The empathy of the

characters, the narrator and even the readers for Hester can be aroused, and the wind vane of public opinion turns accordingly.

The awakening of empathy among the characters in the novel is reflected in the compromise of Hester's speech, behavior and dress, which moves the stubborn and conservative religious people and makes them put down their prejudices. In fact, Hester can be regarded as a good citizen for her alteration, so Hawthorne participates in a constant national myth witnessing American citizenship as an outgrowth of citizenship cultivated in colonial New England (Thomas, 2001). Faced with drudgery, Hester inherited the Puritan spirit of self-sufficiency and conscientious professionalism, never claiming to share in the privileges of the world, not even the humblest claims, but by the meticulous toil of her hands, which had earned her daily bread for herself and little Pearl (Baym, 1986). Although Hester is a subverter of societal laws, an apostate from the Puritan religion, she makes a silent effort to tackle the taboo (Gilmore, 2005). In public service, the heroine is very charitable, compassionate to poor people and victims, and often actively extends a helping hand. Whenever there is an opportunity to do good to others, she immediately recognizes her sisterhood with humanity. Hester's warm and kind actions softened the hard hearts of the previously paranoid public, and the glimmerings of empathy were cast on this harsh and hopeful American colony. In addition, in appearance and dress, Hester seems to have been gradually assimilated into the Puritan tradition. For example, she pretended to be austere and austere in dress, and her full head of rich hair was either cut short or completely covered by a hat, presenting a truly devout female Puritan image. Hester's change narrows the psychological distance from the Puritan immigrants and, to some extent, also changes her public stereotype of an adulterous criminal. The wind vane of public opinion about Hester began to turn. For example, the ordinary people who did not hold public office had almost forgiven the heroine's fault and even regarded the scarlet letter as a symbol of good deeds rather than a mark of sin. The novel, in brief, sustains a more vigorous reach of imagination, a more subtle instinct of humanity, and a more imposing splendor of portraiture than any of his most successful previous works (Ripley, 1970).

Secondly, the improved attitude of the narrator, or the implied author, towards the moderate and conservative revolution is also one of the reasons why the two forces of rebellion and conservatism in the novel can be dissolved and empathy can be awakened. As Marjorie Taylor points out, fiction writers are mostly more empathetic than the general public (Taylor, 2002). Therefore, Hawthorne is naturally empathetic when he portrays Hester. Combined with the social background of Hawthorne's creation of *The Scarlet Letter*, it was not difficult to find an amazing coincidence between the United States in 1850 and the colony in the 17th century where Hester lived. Both of them are in a period of fierce social change. The aftermath of the Red Revolution in Europe in 1848 and the radical

remarks of the United States, such as opposing dictatorship, liberating women and fighting for independence, aroused Hawthorne's attention and thinking about the status of women, which was well reflected in Hester's monologue thinking about women's independence and overturning the existing system in Chapter 13 of the novel.

Additionally, in the discussion of the seeming contradiction between Hawthorne's conservatism and radicalism, Greven compares *The Scarlet Letter* and Freud's *Dora*, proposing that both of them share a sense of normative gender standards and sexual propriety and Hawthorne's amazing attitude towards his transgressive heroine's desire (Greven, 2014). According to Hawthorne's moderate and conservative skeptic position, he has a positive attitude towards Hester's moderate side, which is mainly reflected in his narration in the middle part of the novel, when he starts to dissolve the opposition wall between Hester, who had previously acted more radical, and the traditional and stubborn Puritan immigrants. He then arranged for Hester to be released from prison in a series of mannerisms and dressed in a conservative Puritan tradition. It can be seen that in Hawthorne's eyes, Hester, who was initially isolated due to adultery, gradually transformed people's cold heart after serving the public with gentle acts of kindness. Thus, it can also be deduced that Hawthorne's Puritans are legalists, who are people of conscience, works, and narrow social conformity (Milder, 2009). The common mind among people broke the shackles of the rules and regulations, and Hester moved from the state of isolation from social emotions to the flow of interpersonal communication.

Moreover, through the empathy awakening of the narrator (the implied author), the empathy mechanism of the implied readers reading the *Scarlet Letter* can be aroused. The essence of literary emotion expression is to highlight the triggering effect of "empathy" on the mechanism of literary emotion through the internal connection between the implied author and the implied reader. This is why Patrick Colm Hogan is so concerned about the phenomenon of empathy; he believes that empathy can help us to make appropriate attention to the disadvantaged in society (Hogan, 2018). In the novel, Hester, who comes to New England alone and becomes an adulterous criminal, is a microcosm of the socially disadvantaged at that time. The narrator expects readers to participate in empathy by showing many uncertainties and ambiguities. The most prominent plot is Hester's change in public opinion. In the course of reading *The Scarlet Letter*, it is implied that the reader begins with curiosity and uncertainty about how Hester is being judged by Puritan immigrants who observe the market-stall punishment at the novel's beginning. Housewives almost unanimously disparage and insult Hester as a "bad woman", which implies that readers may have the same negative evaluation of Hester as the perceived target -- housewives in the crowd, echoing Jonathan Culler's "affective capacity" of "literary capacity". As a mechanism of

regulation that overrides individual emotional behavior, it is in sharp contrast to the "situational cognition theory" in the field of affective science, which focuses on individual response (Culler, 2002). In the midst of the novel, however, a man pleads for Hester, which can be seen as the relatively objective and neutral voice that transforms the target object implied by the reader's imagination, giving the reader some space to think calmly so that extreme emotion might be slightly cooled down. Then Hester walks out of the door and shows noble and dignified elegance, which makes the implicit reader's focus fall on the image of Hester as a Virgin. The previously anchor image of "slut" is gradually dissipated. After further developing the story, Hester won the general respect and sympathy of the public with seven years of good deeds, virtuous atonement and a lonely lifestyle, and also successfully aroused the empathy of the implicit readers. Under the guidance of the narrator's writing, they gradually plump up the previously vague and single image of Hester, and their attitude may be the same as that of the marginal characters in the narration. That is, although Hester commits adultery against the Puritan codes, her kind and gentle quality deserves everyone's respect and empathy. The emotional flow between the implied reader and the heroine begins. It can be seen that the process of empathy arousal of implicit readers during reading also confirms Wolfgang Iser's claim of receptive aesthetics -- uncertainty will summon and invite readers in the process of reading to attract readers to imagine, which is the charm of Hawthorne romance (Iser, 1978).

In short, the dissolution of the two forces of rebellion and conservatism is an important source of empathy awakening in the middle part of the novel. By serving society and participating in the community's activities, Hester actively turns her radical rebellion into sincerity and gentleness. This change opened up immigrants' stubborn and conservative mentality, and the two previously opposing subjects thus accepted each other, eliminated the state of mutual isolation, and moved towards interactive communication. In other words, the alteration in plot structure is not only caused by the implied author's awakening of empathy through narration but also inspires the implied readers to imagine, which reshapes the previous harsh and indifferent Puritan community.

4. Empathy Remodeling: Reconstruction of New England's Idea Homeland

The indifferent and conservative Puritan community is disintegrated and overturned through the narrator's empathic awakening so that a relatively tolerant and open Puritan community is reconstructed when Hester returns to her home at the novel's end. Specifically, Hester is punished and bullied in the market scaffold. Then she gains acceptance and respect by serving the public after her release from prison, which can be seen as her first time breaking down of isolation to integrate into society with an attempt to disintegrate the previous conservative Puritan community. In the end, Hester's departure from the Puritan

colony and her active return can be regarded as her second attempt to reconstruct the supportive Puritan community from isolation to openness.

What is a Puritan community? First of all, in the view of Ferdinand Tonnies, the Community is a social relationship of mutual support, comfort and performance of duties, which can also be regarded as an intimate and exclusive common lifestyle (Tonnies, 2011). It can be concluded that the Puritan community is an exclusive social group with religious belief as the link, Massachusetts Bay Colony as the geographical coordination and the implementation of the Puritan contract as the core. It cannot be formed without a sense of common purpose, identity and belonging, and the realization of these three elements is closely related to empathy.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of empathy in terms of affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Gladstein, a researcher of empathy psychology, proposed that cognitive empathy is the ability to recognize others' emotions and understand others' perspectives (Gladstein, 1983). On this basis, empathizing with the emotional feelings of others is emotional empathy. It can be seen that cognitive empathy focuses on the reasoning and judgment of emotional states on the rational level. In contrast, emotional empathy is the feeling and experience of other people's emotional states on the perceptual level.

In chapter 24, the reshaping of the Communist Party mainly focuses on the plot of Hester's return to her homeland. The narrator almost briefly describes Hester and Pearl leaving the colony for the other side of the ocean shortly after the death of the clergyman and the doctor (Person, 2011). Moreover, some years later, Hester should return alone to the remote cottage in Plymouth and voluntarily pick up and put on the scarlet letter she had long abandoned. After her return to the garden, the state of her life showed that Hester, even in her solitude, had often received Pearl's material and spiritual care, either from heraldic letters or from luxurious comforts. The emotional connection with her relatives can infer Hester's emotional state is calm, tranquil and happy. The narrator empathizes with Hester after returning to her hometown from the level of cognitive rationality based on letters and ornaments.

After the cognitive empathy comes into being, the narrator then sets a series of prosocial behaviors of Hester to integrate into society, such as often comforting women who are suffering from emotional tests and offering advice to people who are sad and confused. On the one hand, this reflects Hester's improved ability to empathize with the inner feelings and needs of those who seek help after suffering hardships. On the other hand, Hester's return to Boston and subsequent selfless devotion demonstrate that she is a good female citizen, confirming that empathy is significantly positively correlated with altruism, cooperation and donation (Laffrado, 2014). In other words, Hester's transition from isolation to social interaction

results from her enhanced empathy ability after accumulating life experience. At the same time, the higher Hester's empathy ability, the more active she can integrate into society and enjoy the happiness of interpersonal communication, and the more willing she is to help others, which reflects her spiritual pleasure and richness after returning to her home.

In addition, it is not until the novel's end that Hawthorne's hidden creative intention is gradually revealed in Hester's reconstruction of empathy. Sacvan Bercovitch points out that if we link Hester's return to her hometown at the end of the novel with the narrator's remark about Hester in the middle chapter together, we may see a paradoxical unity of opposites in the novel, which Bercovitch calls "the individual and society", "radical opposition and harmonious identity" (Bercovitch, 1993). Hester had left the colony disappointed and then returned to this land with compassion and benevolence, symbolizing her self-reconciliation and redemption. In fact, Hester's change of attitude was also Hawthorne's expectation of a "cooling down" of the revolutionary fervor in America in the mid-19th century. Fred C. Adams believes that the Puritans in the novel are bloodless because their blood has been spilt in building the colony and maintaining severe and persecutorial (Adams, 2006). So, Hester's choice to return rather than go far away to pursue a new and free life is both a reverence for the tradition of Puritan law and a preservation of the existing social order.

In the middle part of the novel, Hester's soliloquy reflecting on the condition of women, in which she feels oppressed and resentful, includes the following sentence: The man with the sword has overthrown the royal and the nobles [7, p. 138]. It alludes to Oliver Cromwell's Puritan Revolution in 17th-century England and then Hawthorne's focus turning to Puritan society in New England. Hester takes a view of the freedom of thought that is so common on this side of the Atlantic but which, if our immigrant ancestors have known anything about it, can have been considered more deadly than the evil represented by the brand of the scarlet letter, which shows the Puritan society's inhibition of radical liberal ideas, and also reflects Hawthorne's ambivalence about the pursuit of freedom. For one thing, Puritans from the Old Continent of Europe to North America found the New World like a "city on a hill", illustrating that Puritanism had its inherent elements of pursuing freedom and independence. For another, this process will inevitably produce violent revolutions and lead to social chaos.

Hence, in the end, Hawthorne arranges for Hester to return to Plymouth and deliberately lets Hester get out of the isolation and empathy retarding, showing Hawthorne's conservative political stance towards the revolutionary movement and the intention of opposing radical writing to reconstruct the New England Puritan colony as a home of emotional attachment.

5. Conclusion

The paradox of integration and isolation in *the Scarlet Letter* is constantly intensified in the conflict between individual will and Puritan law caused by the delay of empathy. Hawthorne uses romantic writing techniques to describe Hester's situation of isolation and integration, showing empathy can break the isolation and move to a democratic environment where Hester helps and communicates with each other and serves the community. Finally, a benign Puritan community with beautiful and selfless emotions as the bond can be built. Thus, the heroine's return to New England not only affirms the positive side of Puritan tradition to maintain social order

but also changes the radical and bigoted attitude of Puritan immigrants and rebuilds the image of the ideal home of poetic dwelling in the New World of North America. So, the study can provide research material and reference significance for promoting Hawthorne's study, and the advocacy of empathy can also guide contemporary society.

Funding Statement

This paper is funded by Graduate Research Innovation Project in Jiangsu Province, "Disease Narrative Research in Hawthorne's Romantic Novels" [KYCX22-1473].

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