
The Impact of Human Alienation on the Soul in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: Hester Prynne as a Case Study

L'impact de l'aliénation humaine sur l'âme dans *The Scarlet Letter* de Hawthorne : Hester Prynne comme étude de cas

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Abstract: *The present paper investigates the psychological effects of alienation as sin punishment on the human soul taking as a case study the character of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter which tackles the impact of alienation on Hester Prynne who bravely accepts her punishment and struggles to improve her life. Hester is considered in terms of physical and psychological descriptions through the lens of Nathaniel Hawthorne; then, she is analyzed according to the psychoanalysis theory. Through symbolic descriptions and allegorical expressions, The Scarlet Letter describes the inner side through the outer side.*

Keywords: *alienation, psychoanalysis, punishment, crime, sin*

Résumé : *Le présent article étudie les effets psychologiques de l'aliénation en tant que punition du péché sur l'âme humaine en prenant comme étude de cas le personnage de Hester Prynne dans The Scarlet Letter de Nathaniel Hawthorne qui aborde l'impact de l'aliénation sur Hester Prynne qui accepte courageusement sa punition et lutte pour s'améliorer sa vie. Hester est considérée en termes de descriptions physiques et psychologiques à travers le prisme de Nathaniel Hawthorne ; elle est ensuite analysée selon la théorie de la psychanalyse. À travers des descriptions symboliques et des expressions allégoriques, La Lettre Écarlate décrit le côté intérieur à travers le côté extérieur.*

Mots-clés : *aliénation, psychanalyse, punition, crime, péché*



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Marx's theory of alienation, as outlined in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (2007), identifies four dimensions: alienation from the labour product, alienation from the labour process, alienation from others and alienation from the self. According to Marx (2007), this theory relates to the estrangement of individuals from their human nature, caused by the stratification of society. In the context of labour, Marx positions humans at the level of animals, valuing them only for their physical capabilities, and subjecting them to the constraints of others. This results in a loss of daily life activities as well as a sense of determination solely to fill a physical gap imposed by the employer. The four Marx's dimensions of alienation are parts of the social capitalist principles; humans are either job owners or employees.

However, alienation in its broadest meaning is not only a social need, but also a religious and legislative way to impose law and principles. Alienation, emotional exhaustion, meaningfulness, person- job fit, lack of voice and lower level of welfare are Marxists' terms which seem to be related to ways of religious and law punishment in the puritan society. In a study led by Shantz, Kerstin and Trus (2013), it is stated that lack of voice, person-job fit and meaningfulness lead to alienation at work, and that emotional exhaustion and lower levels of welfare are its consequences. It is assumed that alienation as a way of dealing with lower classes, sinners or outlaws has negative impacts on the human being.

Yet, alienation, besides being negatively affecting people lives, it may have positive consequences. Our concern in this research is alienation as punishment not as a social class behaviour. Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), has used the term 'alienation' to refer to the way Boston Puritan people similarly treat the sinners and the criminals since they consider the sinner as a criminal who ought to be punished. Hester Prynne, the protagonist, was Boston's sinner because of committing adultery and giving birth to an illegitimate child. She was sentenced to three hours on the scaffold and a life time of wearing the scarlet letter on her chest. After the three hours of humiliation, Hester Prynne was alienated from society to find herself with her daughter, Pearl, living in a small cottage outside of the town.

Since then, the new life of Hester Prynne and her true being have got a totally different direction. The paper in hand tries to figure out if alienation as a way of punishment could have some positive effects on the punished person, Hester Prynne in this case. For this reason, alienation, then, may not only be a harsh punishment to Hester Prynne, but it may also reveal her true good character and will. *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is investigated through the author's choice of lexemes and their psychological connotations to end up with psychological descriptions of the inner side through the physical appearance. The present paper attempts to reveal the relationship between diction and psyche with reference to the connotation of alienation lexeme.

1 Karl Marx's Concept of Alienation

Capitalism came with the idea that the employee is stranger from the product they made. The employee sells labour not goods. Thus, alienation, according to Marx's (1844) view, is defined as the process of making the worker feel stranger to the products they made. This depriving treatment is what makes the employees feel like slaves who work for the sake of survival though the idea of alienation is not necessary to deprive the workers from their products. The merchandises' creation does not necessarily lead to alienation. It can lead to mutual satisfaction between the employers and the employees. The latter use their

craft to create an object that returns back with gains for the benefit of the employers whose enjoyment makes the employees feel satisfaction in turn (Christ, 2015).

Moreover, Rodgers and Rodgers (2015) note that the workers who are paid for their labours, not for the real product, have no right to ask for the real value of their work; the employer is the one who decides this value. In capitalism, the exploitation of workers reached the point that a worker does not create a product, but works for a wage to survive. The capitalist owns the product and the gains from that product. In other words, the proletarians sell their labour not the goods they create; the capitalist is the seller of those products, i.e., labour itself is a property that can be bought and sold. The waged persons are alienated from their product due to the fact that they do not own the product. The products' owner is the capitalist who owns the labour power, the products and all profit grown by the sale of those products.

Hence, Oliver (2015) believes that, according to Marx theory, the proletariat is prevented from any opportunity to practice their self-actualization. The proletariat is dispossessed from their autonomy. This leads the proletariat see themselves as a small meaningless part of a large bourgeoisie capitalist system. In a society led by a capitalist mode of production, workers are obliged to consider themselves foreigners from their product and strangers from humanity. Thus, the individual is considered as a mere machine. The proletariat is unable of determining their life and destiny. The capacity to direct actions and characters of these actions is prohibited for them. The proletariat is neither able to make relationships nor can own the products of his labour. The alienated individual is playing the role of an instrument because he can only fit the role of labour. For that role, Marx identified four types of alienation. According to Oliver (2015), a worker becomes alienated in four ways:

- a. Alienation of the worker from their product: The capitalists own the decision of the design and development of a production; they own control over every specific detail of the product even though its manufacturing is in the hands of a worker. The workers have no idea or control over what they are working on.
- b. Alienation of the worker from the act of production: Each worker has a mechanical and repetitive work to fulfil. This strips the workers from any emotional attachment to the goods and services they provide; thus, they receive no psychological satisfaction. They are forced to work for survival reasons.
- c. Alienation of the worker from their species-essence: The species-essence or 'Gattungswesen' of the employee is concerned with his or her instinctive potentials. In a capitalist mode of production, the individual has no identity and no possibility to enhance their situation as a result of being forced to sell their labour abilities as a product.
- d. Alienation of the worker from other workers: In capitalist mode of production, labours are considered as individuals rather than a constructive collective group. They are sold in what is called labour market; thus, workers compete to gain the employers' satisfaction. In this way, capitalism succeeds to alienate each worker from the others and guarantees their obedience.

From the perspective of Marx and within the context of capitalism, Horowitz (2010) believes that alienation is to submit one's control and to be estranged from an essential aspect of the self. A capitalist socioeconomic context imposes standards decreasing the value of a worker to a mere tool of product or service without any kind of control over their ability. Thus, the workers in capitalism work under the control of their objectification and commodification of their experiences and activities.

In short, according to Marx (2007), alienation prohibits the proletariat from having a chance to achieve self-actualization by eliminating their self-sufficiency and autonomy. Thus, the working class would see themselves as a small meaningless part of a large bourgeoisie capitalist system. Moreover, workers, in a capitalist led society, consider themselves as foreigners from the product they produce and strangers from humanity. Being a foreigner is a social alienation imposed by the capitalists on the proletariat.

2 The Puritan Alienation

Alienation is the feeling of being isolated or separated from others. According to Christ (2015), the concept of alienation has been introduced since 1840's by the German philosopher Karl Marx to refer to the capitalist principles and norms. Later, this concept has appeared in many writings such as the three novels by Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne to refer to the way outlaws and sinners are punished. These books deal with the alienation of female protagonists who suffered from isolation, meaninglessness and sadness. According to the theory of Díaz (1988), the theme of alienation is divided into three categories: alienation from place, alienation from society and alienation from the self.

2.1 Puritan Principles

According to Foster (1916), Puritanism is a religious reform movement whose role was to purify the Church of England in the late 16th and 17th centuries of leftovers of the Roman Catholic popery. In the 17th century, the puritan society was known for its moral and religious spiritual seriousness that touched their way of life. The church principles form their way of living and their relation to each other.

Foster (1916) considers Puritanism as a kind of Calvinism that emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the authority of the Bible. Inspired by the leadership of John Calvin, puritanism is based on the belief that the original sin and predestination are what control human lives, and that covenants or contracts are the base of Man's relationship with God.

Ahlstrom (2004) maintains that the migration of the pilgrims in the early 1600s to North America led to the establishment of a new Christian Commonwealth. The puritans disagreed with the Church of England about unnecessary hierarchy and rituals which distanced man from God because of the indirect communication with God imposed by the hierarchical scales. Hence, Puritans agreed on the following principles:

2.1.1 Calvinism

Ahlstrom (2004) claims that Calvin Protestant Reformation was inspired by Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by faith that emphasized the control of God over everything and everyone. This doctrine was based on the predestination doctrine, and on the fact that God decides the saved and the damned. The rescued are awarded salvation according to their faith rather than good deeds. The Protestant Reformation perceives God as Supreme in human affairs, Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnipresent. Thus, puritans' life was a search for the ways to honour God and to respect moral principles.

2.1.2 Original Sin

Ahlstrom (2004) insists on the idea of the original sin of human beings coming with the belief that being a human involves the idea of being a sinner. This idea is created by the disobedience of God by the original human, Adam. Accordingly, conferring to the book of *Genesis*, human are sinners too. The puritan belief of original sin is viewed as a harsh way to treat human beings because whatever good deeds they do, they will stay sinners in the Eyes of God and His mercy and salvation will only be donated according to His will.

2.1.3 Predestination

According to Ahlstrom and Sydney (2004), for the Puritans, God has planned everything before it happens. In addition, what is pre-determined by God cannot be changed or prevented by creatures. They also believe in God's unconditional choice of His creatures to get into heaven. Hence, the idea of predestination and unconditional choice is what makes the puritan consider evil as part of God's plan in life.

2.1.4 Covenants

Puritans believe that there is an agreement between God and His elect; they refer to it as covenant, and it touches three areas: The Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of Redemption. It is believed that God promises to guarantee eternal life for Adam and his offspring provided that they obey Him; this is what Covenant of Works means. The Covenant of Grace is an agreement based on faith and requires man to be responsible for his sins. According to the Covenant of Redemption, God agrees to allow Christ to take responsibility for man's sins.

2.2 Three Types of Alienation

According to Seigneuret (1988), alienation is divided into three basic types: alienation from place, alienation from society and alienation from the self.

2.2.1 Place Alienation

Seigneuret (1988) links place improvement to commercial renovation. Residential improvement follows commercial improvement, and both processes contribute to the threat of displacement for long-time residents of ethnic enclaves experiencing gentrification. Residents are concerned with cultural displacement. When newer residents and commercial establishments move into their communities, residents may experience a declining sense of ownership, control or belonging.

However, Fromm (1966) maintains that other long-time residents may feel safer thanks to the neighbourhoods' gentrification and what it brings with. Besides, local businesses play a role in gentrifying neighbourhoods and identifying two different patterns of long-time residents experiencing their communities as something alien to them—a phenomenon called alienation from place. The latter is considered as the product of social and cultural displacement. It may be improved by changes to a neighbourhood associated with improvement processes, a posteriori alienation from place and a priori alienation from place respectively.

2.2.2 Social Alienation

Ankony and Kelley (1999) believe that social alienation is a person's feeling of isolation and displacement from a group of which they believe themselves as part of either a friend, a family or a wider society. Thus, social alienation has its impact on social relationships affected by a high degree of distance between individuals or an individual and group of people in community.

The concept of social alienation has many discipline-specific uses. Social alienation can refer both to a personal psychological state of the individual itself (subjectively) and to a type of social relationship among individuals in the society (objectively). The individual state of mind is affected by social norms and behaviours.

2.2.3 Self-estrangement

Self-estrangement is the process of distancing oneself from one's own feelings and activities such as madness occurring in mental illnesses or as a symptom of emotional distress. According to Marx's theory of alienation (1977), a worker can feel self-estranged from their work, production and other workers. Marx (1977) believes that the heart of social alienation and its result are self-estrangement which could be defined as "The psychological state of denying one's own interests - of seeking out extrinsically satisfying, rather than intrinsically satisfying, activities." (Rokach, 2004, p.30). In other words, self-alienation is the feeling of being a stranger to oneself, or to some quality of oneself, or having a problem of self-identity. Post-modernism in particular has questioned the possibility to define what 'self' constitutes; Gergen (1996) argues that:

The traditional view of self versus society is deeply problematic and should be replaced by a conception of the self as always already immersed in relatedness. On this account, the individual's lament of 'not belonging' is partially a by-product of traditional discourses themselves. (p.125)

If the self is related to society, then it has a constitution that creates the meaning of 'self-estrangement' to replace 'social isolation'. Costas and Fleming (2009) suggest that although postmodern criticisms have criticized the concept of self-estrangement for essentialism and economic determinism, a Lacanian reading of the self may provide a value to the concept if adopted. This may present the concept of self-estrangement as a vague sociological concept as it may create a debate between humanism and antihumanism, structuralism and post-structuralism, or nature and nurture. Nevertheless, Seeman (1959) considers the concept of self-estrangement as an aspect in his model of alienation.

Self-estrangement is considered as the heart of social alienation. Marx (1977) believes that it is the final result of self-estrangement which is defined as the person's psychological state of self-interests' denial. It creates the feeling of being stranger to oneself or to some parts of it. It may create the feeling of not knowing the self or the self-truthfulness.

2.3 Alienation in *the Scarlet Letter*

The concept of alienation and the relationship between the individuals and their society can be viewed in different ways. Alienation becomes a reason behind human diversity despite the fact that people still do not believe in its benefits. Thus, alienation as a theme is employed by many novelists in their writings with different uses and benefits. Similarly, authors differ in portraying and expressing the meaning of an individual in society.

Hence, alienation is considered as a form of exclusion, a self-imposed act, or even the basis of a belief depending on each author. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the theme of alienation is used to portray Hester Prynne who was left behind the Puritan society which was known for its strict control over her actions and behaviours. Hester lost her identity when she ascended the scaffold; she became a walking symbol of her sin represented through the letter 'A' on her breast. In fact, Hawthorne's use of 'A' is significant in conveying the demeaning nature of alienation as the latter may not be used to be seen rather than to be depicted.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne was described as having changed her identity after wearing the letter 'A' on her dress: "It was whispered, by those who peered after her that the scarlet letter threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-way of the interior" (Hawthorne, 1998, p.64). For the town's people, Hester Prynne was no longer worth being part of society; the only way to let her live among them was to be a living symbol of her sin to remind her of her shame. Darrel (1992) states that Hester's alienation was not only a society-imposed punishment, but also an individual or self-alienation imposed by the sinner herself. Unlike Dimmesdale, Hester chose to accept her new identity as a sinner rather than hiding or denying it.

2.4 Hester Prynne's Alienation

The situation of Hester's isolation and alienation in Nathaniel Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* is the consequence of Hester Prynne's and Reverend Dimmesdale's commitment of adultery. Their sin resulted in the child's birth named Pearl. Hester Prynne, in such a situation, found herself alone with no will facing the harsh punishment. First, she had to spend three hours on the scaffold under public scrutiny. After the scaffold humiliation, Hester had to serve months in prison. Then, Hester Prynne had to attach a scarlet letter, 'A', on her chest the rest of her life as long as she was living in the town of Boston. Hester Prynne could have freed herself from holding that mark of shame on her chest by leaving Boston, but she had decided to stay and accept her shame and punishment. The letter 'A' signified the identification of Hester Prynne as an adulteress and as an immoral human being:

Thus, the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast—at her, the child of honourable parents—at her, the mother of a babe that would hereafter be a woman—at her, who had once been innocent—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. (Hawthorne, 1998, p.74-75)

This scarlet letter stressed to everyone who had witnessed Hester Prynne punished in that way to bear in mind that to sin can lead to alienation, isolation and humiliation. Hester's alienation was not for her committing adultery, but it was for her refusal to identify her fellow adulterer. On the scaffold, Hester had been asked to name her partner in her sin, but she refused to name him. Hester's blind heart by the love of Dimmesdale was the result of her choice to wear the letter 'A' on her chest and to stay in Boston holding the name of her partner in sin and the burdens of her shame alone. She chose to face the Puritan community just to be close to her love and the father of her daughter to picture the "impulsive and passionate nature" (Hawthorne, 1998, p.51) which was pure and natural in Hester what caused her to be lonely humiliated. Although the burden of adultery should have been shared between Hester and her fellow sinner, Hester might have a different point of view. On the scaffold, she said, "It is too deeply branded.

Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!” (Hawthorne, 1998, p.63). Thus, Hester’s courage in facing and accepting her punishment was out of love to her partner in sin and to her daughter. After accepting her new life, Hester became a living symbol of adultery and “woman’s frailty and sinful passion” (Hawthorne, 1998, p.74) in which everyone in her society from preachers and moralists to women and children might point her out. She was officially refused by her society to the point that “every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished” (Hawthorne, 1998, p.79) from the town. She was invisibly humiliated. Hester then had to get used to children doing rude gestures, to women gossiping around her, and even to strangers’ looking upon her bosom.

After the scaffold scene, everyone in Hester’s town knew about her story and started denying her deeds and participating in her punishment either by alienating her from their meetings or by insulting her whenever they came across her. In an attempt from Hester Prynne to hide from the eyes of her town’s people and to blend in her society to survive avoiding their eyes and rude words, she tried to change her appearance by changing her clothes, the way she wore and the style of her hair. She changed from having a beautiful and revealing appearance to plain and common one. Her only ornament she was obliged to reveal was her scarlet letter ‘A’ on her bosom “which it was her doom to wear.” (Hawthorne, 1998, p.78).

Hester used her needle’s skill in embroidering her scarlet letter that shone on her bosom to reflect a feeling of fear among young children and women instead of reflecting her shame. The scarlet letter became an immunity weapon to Hester that hid her true meaning. It became a support to her from the beginning until the end of the story: “This dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callus; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive to daily torture.” (Hawthorne, 1998, p.80)

Part of her punishment was to live outside the town with her daughter in an abandoned cottage away from all habitation. The curiosity of young children to see the scarlet letter and the woman who wore it pushed them to sneak up to have a look of the scarlet letter. Most of the time, these children who succeeded to catch a glimpse of the scarlet letter “scamper off with contagious fear” (Hawthorne, 1998, p.76) because of the effect of the scarlet letter which looked burning like fire. The fame and grace of Hester Prynne, her artistic needlework, and holding her shame with self-acceptance and self-tolerance were what burnt that curiosity and fear in the children.

Hester’ nice skill in embroidery was probably what saved her from dying out of loneliness. In her situation, no one would dare to show off by her side. Even though Hester was the most skilful embroidery woman in Boston, her skills could not intercede for her to embroider a wedding veil for any bride. For them, the white veil symbolized purity, and Hester’s hands were not pure. Hester was mainly alienated in this special area.

Bayn (1970) states that Hester’s punishment for adultery was accomplished in prison and at the scaffold; her alienation was the result of her insistence on concealing her partner in adultery. Hester was paying for her love for another man and hiding his identity. She could have saved her life and her daughter’s life from alienation by revealing her partner in sin, but she refused that choice.

3 Alienation Effects on Hester Prynne

All the imposed females' discrimination in *The Scarlet Letter* was presented in the state of Hester Prynne who was treated according to the Puritan morals and social values. Hester was punished for her adulterous relationship with Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale which resulted in an illegitimate child named Pearl. She received a kind of punishment that was more psychological than physical. She was obliged to wear a scarlet letter 'A' on her breast standing for Adulterer and to stand for hours on a scaffold in front of all the citizens of her community wearing that letter and holding her child. However, Hester's real punishment was not only this, but it was spending the rest of her life estranged from society, humiliated by old and young people and looked down by her community.

Hester's alienation in *The Scarlet Letter* was revealed through different aspects. First, alienation was exercised on Hester Prynne when she stood alone with her daughter, Pearl, for hours of humiliation in front of the Bostonians. After the scaffold scene, Hester was obliged to wear a scarlet 'A' on her breast for the rest of her life as a mark of shame. She kept wearing the letter 'A' on her breast without showing any shame of that; she had even embroidered it with all her skills of embroidery and art. She revealed her skills through good manners and embroidery. Furthermore, Hester was described as a witch who "saps the phallic power." (Hawthorne, 1998, p.297)

After the scaffold scene and the imprisonment, Hester alienated herself from women who were supposed to behave according to the Puritan norms and principles that imposed on them to underestimate and to contempt for Hester Prynne and her child. Another alienation to Hester was about to happen when the elders tried to take Pearl away from her because they asserted that either the child was conceived by the devil which involved having no morals, or Hester's sin would not help her raise her child with the Puritan good morals. Hester, in trying to keep her child, used the power of her fellow sinner and Boston's minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, to convince the other elders to leave her child to her custody. She succeeded to convince them to keep Pearl with her. Thus, her society assumed her to be a witch. Hester faced alienation from society. She was humiliated by old men and women as well as children who kept throwing stones on her and calling her with the worst nicknames.

However, those obstacles in Hester's life did not stop her from proving herself and her skills. After a period of time, Hester began to earn the respect of prominent people in the community. Her needle skills in embroidery opened doors for her; she was called after in weddings, funerals, ceremonies and the like to add her artistic touch to the dresses or table clothes or sheet. Later, she was asked for advice due to her sobriety and wisdom. Thus, a stranger seeing her scarlet 'A' on her breast might interpret it for 'Able'. Hester was sinful, but her acceptance of her punishment gave her strength and power to be in a better situation and position where everyone in her community respected her as an active woman in society, a woman who accepted who she was, what she had done, and the punishment she had deserved.

Conclusion

Marx's theory of alienation is related to people's estrangement from human nature as a result of a stratified society. However, in its broadest meaning, alienation is not only a social need, but also a religious and legislative mode to impose law and principles. It is a way to impose law and to punish the outlaws and disobedient citizens.

Yet, alienation, besides being negatively affecting peoples' lives, it is positively changing them; *The Scarlet Letter* is an example of that. The present paper showed that Hester Prynne was alienated from her society and was thus obliged to live in the dark forest with her child. Her new situation which was supposed to make her feel forsaken and afraid made the children feel curious about seeing her fascinating embroidered scarlet 'A' on her bosom, and everyone who approached her cottage out of curiosity felt afraid of being caught with her eyes. In addition, being a social outcast and supervised at the same time prevented Hester from taking care of herself; this was clear in the gloomy way of her clothing style which was changed after her punishment to hide any sign of seduction. By hiding any sign of beauty or feminine character, Hester was alienated from herself. Apparently, Hester lost her personal life; however, she won another reason for living which might be more important than her life itself; it was raising her child, Pearl; it was about revealing her motherhood picture, another positive side of alienation in Hester's life.

Alienation, as a way of punishment, does not always have a negative impact on the punished person; it sometimes helps emerge the good traits of that person and helps them get rid of the burden of the sin. The sinner may have committed a sin, but there might be some good character behind that person; alienation gives them another chance in life to clean their picture. In the end, what classify the person are not good deeds, but faith in God, and that might be what really gives Hester Prynne the power to safely move on.

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