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HESTER PRYNNE AND THE FOLK ART OF EMBROIDERY

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During Nathaniel Hawthorne's time, the folk art of embroidery was popular and intricate in New England. Georgiana Brown Harbeson cites an example of "a band with more intricate stitchery, showing animals, birds and flowers..."¹ a piece of needlework which was conducted in Hawthorne's hometown, Salem, Massachusetts. As folk art, embroidery became more popular and more mature in the nineteenth century; "needlework generally during the early nineteenth century became a form of relaxation and an expression of art" (Harbeson, p.58).

Living in such a folk atmosphere, Hawthorne, as well as his literary work, was undoubtedly influenced by the art of embroidery to some extent. In fact, some of his female friends were also engaged in this profession. Hawthorne admits in the introductory part of *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Custom House," that he discussed the art of embroidery with ladies who were familiar with it.² No wonder he could tell the "wonderful skill of needlework" of a piece of red cloth he found in the Custom House. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne devotes a whole chapter to the relationship between needlework and his heroine, Hester Prynne (Ch. 5, "Hester at Her Needle"). Obviously, Hawthorne is interested in the world of embroidery and tries to express it through the art of his literary work as seen in *The Scarlet Letter*.

As embroidery has always been associated with women, needlework in *The Scarlet Letter* is mostly related to the heroine, Hester Prynne, both for the purpose of shaping her character and as an expression of her inner being. A keen-eyed reader of *The Scarlet Letter* would find that the use of embroidery in this novel is by no means a coincidence. The symbolic meaning it carries not only helps the reader understand Hester's character better, but it also provides a clearer picture of a broader world in Puritan society.

Upon her first appearance, Hester Prynne, a beautiful young woman of the New England colony, condemned for her adultery, is identified with the scarlet letter "A," which she embroidered with wonderful skill: "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold threads, appears the letter A" (p.57). The letter with its fantastic features is created as something one would not expect to see among the Puritans. The significance of Hawthorne's description of the scarlet

"A" is exposed to the reader when the letter is applied and related to the character of the heroine, Hester Prynne. The attractive and artistic letter "A" identifies itself with the beauty, vigor and perfection of Hester: "The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful regularity of features and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" (p.58). Similar to the finely embroidered "A," which shines like gold, Hester's glossy hair gleams under the shining sun.

While the features of the letter "A"—"scarlet," "fine," "elaborate," "fantastic" and "gold"—already betray the restrictions of the community which deprives of diversity, Hester's characteristics indicate her rebelliousness against the rules of the Puritan society. Her hair is "dark," "abundant" and "glossy"; her face is "beautiful," "rich" and "impressive." The hair symbol is very significant in this novel. The forest scene relating to Hester's hair tells symbolically not just of her vitality and passion, but of her rebelliousness against the society as well, "By another impulse she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulder, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features" (p.223).

In folk ballads, the theme of letting her hair down indicates that the woman is ready to make love. Under the strict moral confinement and with the severe punishment upon her, Hester is likely to commit another "sin." In a society in which beauty is besmirched, vitality is smothered and true love is condemned, Hester stands out as a rebel. The contrast between her perfection and the ugliness of the society is therefore revealed through the identification of the heroine and her art work even at the beginning of the novel.

Hawthorne subtly melts Hester and her art. While Hester appears to be a fancy to the unfamiliar eye, Hawthorne tells the reader that even people who had known her were astonished, not just by her physical beauty, but by the beauty with which the embroidered letter creates and shapes her (p.58). Without the letter, she wouldn't be as astonishing as she was. The letter makes her a goddess-figure. Thus, significantly, through folk art, Hawthorne establishes his heroine as a form of art in herself. In that sense, the letter "A" stands for "Art".

To say that Hester is art is neither exaggerating nor far-reaching. By relating the art of the scarlet letter to Hester, one finds Hawthorne's intentional description of Hester as eternal art: "It (the scarlet letter) was artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous

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luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony" (p.57). The latter part of this sentence shows Hawthorne's emphatic implication: the art of the beautifully embroidered letter is timeless. Like the scarlet letter, Hester herself is a pure form of art that reaches and extends beyond her own time. "Hester is ladylike, too," Hawthorne continues, "after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace which is now recognized as its indication" (p.58).

Through the identification of the character with folk art, Hawthorne shows that embroidery has become a part of the heroine, Hester Prynne. This merger could be understood in several ways. First, needlework is the occupation with which she identifies herself. Second, embroidery is closely and significantly associated with her daughter little Pearl, who is also physically and spiritually a part of Hester. Third, needlework has become a means of expressing herself to challenge the Puritan society.

Condemned by the Puritan world, Hester has to live apart from the rest of the community. To survive, she takes up her old and familiar profession of needlework. Thus one of the functions of folk art—its practical use—comes in. Like other folk art, needlework at first primarily functioned for the daily use of people; later it developed into the art of embroidery for decorative and beautifying purposes. In the wilderness, Hester makes dresses for herself and her daughter to keep away the severe cold of the New England weather. Symbolically, Hester tries to prevent the "coldness" from the Puritan society to keep herself and little Pearl "warm."

Because of her wonderful skill in needlework, "there was a frequent and characteristic demand for such labor as Hester Prynne could supply" (p.89). Hawthorne reveals that Hester's needlework was requested for all ranks in the Puritan world: the Governor, the minister, military men, babies, brides, and even the dead. It is used as clothing as well as decoration. Here, Hester's needlework realizes its dual function—practical and artistic as most other folk art does.

Hester thus is identified as one of the seventeenth century folk characters because she mastered the folk profession of her time. As discussed earlier, because of its practical and decorative functions, embroidery became an important and popular occupation in which almost every woman was involved. Hester, however, outclassed the rest of the females in her community in the field of embroidery and thus

became an important folk artist. Therefore, her work was redeemed and demanded more frequently in spite of her moral "misconduct."

The identification of embroidery as folk art with Hester Prynne herself is also seen through Hawthorne's treatment of the scarlet letter and little Pearl. Significantly, the scarlet letter is always attached symbolically to little Pearl, who is a part of Hester both physically and spiritually. Pearl does not appear without the companionship of the scarlet letter. As many scholars of Hawthorne indicate, little Pearl is more of a symbol than of an actual human child. She functions only in the shaping of Hester's character.

Pearl is always identified with the letter: "[she] was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life" (p.102). In dressing Pearl, Hester spends more time and takes special care in the way that she mimics the color and embroidery of the letter. For Hester, Pearl is her creation, part of her body. In fact, throughout the novel, the mother and the daughter are inseparable.

Nina Baym tellingly comments that "she (Pearl) is both something that the mother produces deliberately and something that reflects the mother despite herself. More particularly, she reflects the mother's deed that gave her life."³ Little Pearl always expresses what the mother wishes to. When Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband for whom she has no love, enters her cell in the prison, "Hester Prynne had immediately become as still as death, although the child continued to moan" (p.77). When Hester is so upset upon seeing Chillingworth, little Pearl appears to reflect what Hester feels and even plays the role of her mother.

While Hester is severely restrained outwardly by the Puritan society, the vitality and vigor of her inner being is reflected by little Pearl, as by the scarlet letter. There are many incidents in the novel describing little Pearl as expressing "the feminine and passionate impulses that the mother must repress in this Puritan world" (p.105). Significantly, Hawthorne describes Pearl's dresses as associated with imagination, spirit, youth, gaiety and fire. Outwardly Hester conforms to the laws of the Puritan society; yet Pearl's dresses reveal that Hester is not really changed in character but that she continues to be rebellious against the society she lived in.

While the character of Hester is identified with the folk art of embroidery, Hester, in turn, uses her artistic means to express herself, as other folk artists do. Harbeson says that embroidery has always been "the means of poetic and philosophic release for women who had no other outlet for their idealistic yearning" (p.xxxvii). Similarly, Hawthorne states in *The Scarlet Letter*: "women derive a pleasure,

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incomprehensive to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needlework" (p.91). When it comes to the case of Hester, Hawthorne continues, "To Hester Prynne, it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore, soothing, the passion of her life" (p.91).

Whether it is really an expression of "soothing the passion of her life" or not is an ambiguity, which is characteristic of Hawthorne. The assumption that it might be a "stimulant" to the passion of her life could also be true. Nevertheless, Hester's using embroidery as a means of expressing her inner self is obvious. Being isolated from the rest of the world, Hester relies on her needlework solely. While she made her own dresses out of the "coarsest materials and the most sober hue" (p.90) to express the "atonement" for what she had done, in her deeper mind she longed for freedom and true love. Again this yearning is reflected by the clothing of little Pearl; "her mother...had brought the richest tissues that could be procured, and allowed her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore before the public eye" (p.97). Hawthorne describes them as "gorgeous robes." Therefore, the art of embroidery has become an outlet of Hester's free and passionate soul.

Hester's world of needlework also functions to prevent her from being isolated. In other words, needlework has become her means of communication with the outside world. Confined to the wilderness with her little Pearl, Hester has only needlework to accompany her. Being a woman of passion and love, she is unable to stand the harshness of isolation. She needs a way to express herself in the public. Just as in the scene of her first appearance, where she makes the scarlet letter herself and puts it on her dress, she later makes embroidery for people of different social status to remind them of her social existence. She makes dresses not just for the poor. Even the hands of the "sinful" woman can make the gloves for "pure" men of power in the Puritan society. Therefore, Hester is exploiting needlework as a means of expressing her challenge to the inhuman world.

While Hester's challenge to Puritan society is seen through the piercing of her needle, embroidery here also carries the implication that the atmosphere of Puritan morality is overwhelming. Both at the beginning and end of the novel, Hawthorne writes explicitly that Hester has to wear "the coarse, dark-colored garments" to conform to the morally strict society. In fact, the Puritans themselves also wear the same kind of clothes, which, they believe, represent their "purity." Anyone who does not obey their rules is not pure and therefore is punished: "It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful

child, whom her parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping post" (p.53). Hester does not obey, and she is punished.

Thus it is fair to say that embroidery is Hester's personal art and the poetry of her needle. Through the folk art of embroidery, Hester's character is vividly revealed. She is not only identified with the folk art, but also exploits it as a means of expression to reinforce her character. She is not just a rebel from the Puritan society, but an art form that is everlasting.

Hawthorne's careful and precise use of embroidery in *The Scarlet Letter* offers a direct glimpse into the relationship between the character, Hester Prynne, who is performing the folk art, and the reader, who is familiar with it, as folklore often does when used in literature.⁴ Evidently, the choice of needlework as Hester's occupation is a conscious decision chosen by Hawthorne whose purpose is to provide the reader with a tool to look into the character. Therefore, the art of embroidery in this novel functions as the background for the understanding of the heroine, Hester Prynne.

NOTES

¹Georgiana Brown Harbeson, *American Needlework* (New York, 1838), p. 34.

²Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York, 1967), p. 33.

³Nina Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* (Boston, 1986), p. 56.

⁴Swann Steven Jones, *Folklore and Literature in the United States* (New York, 1984), p. vi.