



## The “Able” Hester and the “Inhuman” Cristina in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Lives of the Saints*

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### Article Information

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### Abstract:

Published in 1850, Hawthorne’s masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter* tells a story of Hester Prynne, who irretrievably breaks the law of Puritanism by giving birth to a girl through an affair with a local respectful priest named Dimmesdale and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity independently. Comparatively, *Lives of the Saints*, begins Nino Ricci’s trilogy centered on the experience of a southern Italian family in Valle del Soles before its emigration to Canada. Different from the other two novels, it focuses on the first seven years of Vittorio, living with his mother Cristina and his grandfather. The central plot of *Lives of the Saints* is the snakebite that Vittorio’s mother Cristina receives on her leg while she is in the

stable of her father’s house, whereas later she is proved to be engaged in an adultery with a man, which is seen as a “pernicious and contagious illness”. This essay will explore the existential elements of the reaction to adultery of the two protagonists Hester and Cristina in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints* with some core concepts of existentialism to investigate that whether Cristina is the “Canadian Hester” with the great awakening.

**Keywords:** *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lives of the Saints*, existentialism, awakening.

### Introduction

As a distinguished representative of American romantic writer who is deeply influenced by Puritanism, transcendentalism, and mysticism in the later 19th century, Hawthorne is regarded as one of the founders of American literature. Since its publication, *The Scarlet Letter* has been appreciated by numerous distinguished writers and critics that it was far more a personal success, but the declaration of culture independence of America, which becomes the proof of an emergent distinctively American literary tradition. There is numerous research of *The Scarlet Letter* including several contemporary responses by Henry James, George Edward

Woodberry and D.H. Lawrence related to the approaches of literary criticism.

Almost all literary critical skills are used in Hawthorn’s research, including many other reviews focused on Hawthorn’s aesthetic theory, political views, Puritanism, and transcendentalism. For instance, Fay Elanor Ellwood explores the parallels between the characters in *The Scarlet Letter* and Bible. According to him, Hester is “Boston’s own suffering servant”, like “the enigmatic figure from the book of Isaiah” (108). Ariel Clark Silver proclaims that Hester’s moral growth is the movement from male to female salvation and American woman is established as “her own source of divine wisdom, power, retribution, and



force” in terms of the feminism and its historical value (107). Through a comparison of Hawthorn’s opinions with other transcendental writers at the same time, including Emerson’s *Nature*, *Self-Reliance*, and Thoreau’s *Walden*, Kevin Jones focuses on the use of isolation and his transcendentalist thoughts.

The research in China on *The Scarlet Letter* further broadens connotations of the novel. Despite the interpretation from the perspective of feminism and ecofeminism, there emerges research on its landscape, wilderness, and ethic. For example, Liu and Zheng explore the images of forest and wildness appearing in *The Scarlet Letter*, giving them dual meaning of the contradiction between good and evil, which reflects Hawthorne’s contradictory mentality towards the wilderness (108). Ren and Wei propose the archetype as it is an established form, a typical image, hiding a collective unconscious shared by human beings under human consciousness and personal unconsciousness (123). Yang Gexin analyzes the ethical predicament of Dimmesdale about the concealment and confession of the adulterous affair (101). To sum up, *The Scarlet Letter* has always been the object of literary research.

Compared with *The Scarlet Letter*, detailed analysis from various perspectives reflected in *Lives of the Saints* are relatively few. The present research is principally in light of the mythical symbols, spatial theory, ethnicity of Canada, and feminism. Primarily, Michela Baldo explores the central image—the evil eye or malocchio as a fundamental and pivotal role to the novel’s narrative construction from the perspective of mythology and post-migrant experience. As a symbol that has appeared in the works of a number of Italian-Canada writers but “for most its role has been limited”, and rendered by Ricci as *lu malocchin*, Michela holds that it represents the pain and violence of the behavioral rules and boundaries imposed on women’s flesh to expose the implications of traditional patriarchal and nostalgic narratives based on women’s sexuality (Baldo, 2012). Besides, inspired by the question “Where is there?” raised by Northrop Frye in *Literary History of Canada*, Judit Molnár analyzes the “idiosyncratic nature” of these particular places mentioned in the text by virtue

of the notion of “place.” Through the analysis of the harshness of the landscape surrounding the village, the myth, superstition, and folklore of the stable, the “self-contained world in itself”—the hospital, the school and the house, and the pastures on the mountainside “where Vittorio meets his friend Fabrizio”, Judit suggests that *Lives of the Saints* as “place-dominated narrative” demonstrates the interrelatedness of time and place within Vittorio’s identity formation (Molnár, 2015). Coincidentally, Amanda Mullen sheds light on the space and places in the text both personal and communal, whereas she argues that it’s a process of “forging an authenticating mythology” to combine Italian’s immigrant experience with Canada’s national narrative to establish their place, and she concludes with Ricci’s ambivalence that he emerged by declaring that it’s “neither here nor there” (Mullen, 2004). In addition, with a view to its narration, Rosalía Baena digs the ethnic identity of Canada through the double perspective, including the adult narrator and “the focalization through the boy” (Baena, 2012).

However, the study of *Lives of the Saints* in China is even scarce. Yao Yinghua compares Cristina with Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* in terms of their partly similar plot and shared theme “adultery.” According to her, Cristina is characterized as a rebellious heroine, a “divine sinner” against the fusty convention, superstition, and patriarchal ideology. Yao thinks highly of the novel as the “Canadian Scarlet Letter”, which demonstrates its literary value and status in Canadian literature, though in a general way. Therefore, the existed study of *Lives of the Saints* is inadequate possibly due to peripheral status of Canadian literature under the hegemony of western centered discourse.

## Results and Discussion

Kierkegaard proposed that one’s awakening and awareness of self is signaled by “anxiety”, when the “natural man” is in a state of “innocence”, the spirit is “dreaming”, but makes itself known through the vague presentiment, the sense of “the possibility of possibility”. Hester’s

independence of moral growth is the process of the intensification of spirit breaking through from its dream-state.

In the beginning chapters, Hester failed to achieve tranquility after the adultery with Dimmesdale due to the strict principles of puritanism, she has also lost herself in the “finite”, facing malicious judgment from others, feeling horrified, depressed, and confused. However, she fortified herself by standing on her own feet and breaks the chains of Puritan principles, and that’s where she sees “the possibility of possibility”. Primarily, in face of public’s accusations and insults, Hester was seemingly calm and arrogant that she “repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character” from the jail, then stepped into the open air “as if by her own free will” (73), whereas her heart was overwhelmed by the boisterous scene and humiliation from the public and the letter “A” so that she held the infant closely to her bosom “as that she might thereby conceal a certain token” (74). In addition, standing on her pedestal, Hester’s inner fear arose that “all other objects in the visible world seemed to be vanish” when she recognized her husband in the crowd through “a fixed gaze” (88), which would have been “more terrible” than any torture she had suffered. Hester was lost in the “finite” under such an inescapable environment where no alternatives exist. Though she presented as a brave, fearless heroine who refused to say the father’s name with “cold and stern” (96) voice, “the faculties of animal life remained entire” while her spirit could only “shelter itself beneath a stony crust of insensibility” (98). According to Kierkegaard, individuals who in the “finite” seek for safety and security by assimilating himself into social, institutional, or familiar networks. Hester later was caught in a predicament of lifelong shame and burden of life, including her daughter and herself, and she determined to “convert the scene into a kind of lurid triumph” by virtue of “the combative energy” (110) with the needlework, which became the fashion.

Jayasimha praised Hester’s awakening and awareness of feminist thought in the process of her moral growth (Jayasimha, 2014). However,

Hester’s awakenings evolved into the source of anxiety on the other hand. After nearly seven years of isolation and loneliness, she developed a strong character that was independent of others and of religion and culture. She was “self-ordained a Sister of Mercy” (230), and the letter “A” turned into “Able” with her women’s strength. Being “our Hester”; “the town’s own Hester”, she was separated from the Puritan values, and began to concern “the whole race of womanhood”, questioned that “was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?” (236). Nevertheless, the firm rock of the systems and ideology of the society and her limited individual capability make it “a hopeless task before her”. Though such awareness emerged methodical plan, the unpracticality made her heart “had lost its regular and healthy throb”, and Hester wandered in the dark labyrinth of mind between “an insurmountable precipice” and “a deep chasm”. The plight between the finite: her inadequate capability, and the infinite: the awakening towards women right intertwined into her source of prevalent anxiety. In a word, Hester is a synthesis of opposites of the finite and the infinite, in Kierkegaard’s words, “the limited factor” and “the expanding factor”.

Compared with Hester, Cristina in *Lives of the Saints* has presented an inhumanly calm since the beginning of adultery with the man with “luminous blue eyes” in the stable (12). She guided Vittorio to disguise her affair with an accident of biting by a snake. When grandfather and Di Lucci were hurrying down the terrace steps and were able to take her to the hospital, she was “sitting calmly on the stone beach” (15), or even leisurely that as if nothing happened. During the process of “stopping the blood” by pulling the shirt tight on her leg, her eyes were still “bright and alert” (17), and even she was smiling when her ankle began to swell visibly. After this event, there was a pervasive silence within the house due to the belief that the bite of snake would bring misfortune and Cristina’s pregnancy. The silence had invaded the house “the very walls, the floor, the splintered table, seemed to have grown strangely distant and mute, as if guarding some secret themselves”

(57), and Cristina herself “withdrew into shadowy silence” (74) as well that even Vittorio found that there are “no words now to bridge the silence” (74) but “silent meals” (74). And this sort of silence even extends to the end of the story. Unlike Hester, she didn’t contend for herself throughout the text. Cristina was not stuck into the dilemma of the finite and the infinite, for adultery for her merely signifies rumors from the village and disharmony of her family, instead of disgrace and shame or even uneasiness when “all the doors and windows are open except for those of Cristina”. Though she wrestled with Maria after knowing that Vittorio was bullied by Maria’s son, Vincenzo, it should be taken as an act of motherhood, an act of instinct, instead of “the great awakening”, and the instinct becomes Cristina’s “infinite”.

Both Hester and Cristina are alienated from community. Existentialists regard “alienation” as the fundamental state of human existence. Sartre states that individuals who are in an absurd and meaningless world full of uncertainties and contingencies may alienate themselves, and they may seek to establish relationships whereas usually be disappointed. Nietzsche claims that a great man should have “the ability to extend his will across great stretches his life and to despise and reject everything petty about him, including even the fairest, ‘divinest’ things in the world” in Will to Power. The two protagonists were in the state of alienation in different forms.

To begin with, Hester’s alienation is reflected by the geographical estrangement. As a stranger with unpardonable sin, she lived in “a small thatched cottage” on the outskirts of the town, which had been abandoned because of the sterile soil (113). Her double alienation, alienation from the town in geographical sense and from Dimmesdale, becomes the chance of her freedom of choice, that is, the transformation of the letter “A” into “angel”. The alienation becomes the basic motif of her “freedom of choice”. In contrast, Cristina’s alienation, which externalized as her silence”, is in a passive form. Her “inhuman” (77) calm within the silence surpasses the notion of reason or rationality for she never “rants, raves or rambles” (24). Cristina was the “embodiment of the Derridean Cogito”

due to the unsharp distinguishment between reason and madness (Derrida, 1978). According to Derrida, the Cogito is not the watershed of rationality and madness, and reason is “madder than madness”. The existence of Cristina can be seen as a revolt against, and a threat to the superstitious tradition, but not the Canadian Hester in feminist sense.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Hester’s anxieties originate from the plight of the puritan morality and her adulterous affair, and the determination to awaken the whole race of womanhood and her limited capability, which allows her to strive to achieve “possibility of possibility” and her moral growth. Through Hester’s tenacious sense of “freedom of choice” and her rebellious behaviors, it is certain to argue that *The Scarlet Letter* has presented the feminist consciousness. By contrast, though they share the same theme “adultery” and similar plot, it is inappropriate to define that Cristina in *Lives of the Saints* is “Canadian Hester Prynne”, for her anxiety partly arises from the bully of Vittorio, and the instinct shouldn’t be taken as an indication of awakening.

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