



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**ON THE WITCH IMAGE OF HESTER**

Xu Xian, Tang Enping

*(School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University.)*Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10211>**ABSTRACT**

As the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester has received a lot of attention. Literary researchers have always considered her to be a strong and rebellious female figure. Although Hester shares many traits of witches, few scholars have paid attention to the witch image of Hester.

Hester's witch image plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*. In order to enrich the interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*, this thesis provides the factors that influenced the creation of *The Scarlet Letter*, and analyzes the witch image of Hester from two aspects. Firstly, the thesis constructs the image according to the characteristics of the traditional witch possessed by Hester and then deconstructs that image by presenting the characteristics which transcend the witch image.

Since no previous study explicitly mentioned the witch image of Hester, it would offer a completely new perspective to the research of Hester. Hawthorne was trying to convey two things through Hester's witch image. For one hand, people should face the history of the Witch Trials and the suffering by women. For another, women who are defined as uncommon should refuse the stereotype.

Keywords: *The Scarlet Letter, Witch, Hester, Deconstruction*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter is a well-known and classic novel written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Its interesting images and symbols in the story are worth thinking about and exploring.

The story takes place in the middle of the 17th century North American colonies of New England. A beautiful young woman, Hester, was sentenced to wear a scarlet letter "A" which means "Adultery" on her chest since she had been giving birth to a baby when her aged husband Chillingworth was deemed to miss. Although being convicted and punished for adultery, she was reluctant to divulge the name of her adulterer, Dimmesdale, who is a young and beloved priest. After knowing the secret, Chillingworth stayed by Dimmesdale's side as his doctor every day and tortured him psychologically under the guise of treatment. Finally, unable to bear the torment of being guilty secretly Dimmesdale made a confession that he was Pearl's father and died in Hester's arms.

As the saying goes, "A benevolent sees benevolence while a wiser sees wisdom." Scholars have made diverse interpretations of the novel from various perspectives. Most of them are in agreement that Hester is a positive female character with avant-garde feminism. Such views are reflected not only in the studies of characters, but also in the studies of the symbolism of the scarlet letter "A".

It's universally acknowledged that Hawthorne's ancestor is tight with the Witchcraft Trials closely. So the witch images are familiar in Hawthorne's works. When it comes to the witch image in *The Scarlet Letter*, Mrs. Hibbins comes to our mind first.

However, compared to the witches in the trials, it's easy to find that Hester, the heroine of the novel, has in common with them. It's quite worth deliberating the relationship between Hester and the definite witch, Mrs. Hibbins. Though Hester is highly similar to a witch in some ways, there's very little study on the witch image of Hester, both domestically and abroad.

It is commonly known that people should be faithful to their marriages according to the law and mortality, especially women should at that time. So Hester was no doubt defined as a negative female image in the novel. Those immoral women who have frivolous behaviour disobeying the norms, were called witches. And Hester logically should be a witch but she has never been defined on the contrary while sharing so many negative traits with witches in the traditional sense.

This thesis intends to start with the influences on the creation of *The Scarlet Letter*, and deconstruct the witch image of Hester from the two aspects. One is the traditional witch characteristics in town people's eyes while the other is a transcendent witch containing 19th century female characteristics as Hawthorne hopes. The findings should not only make a contribution to enriching the interpretations of Hester, but also help readers to understand the novel better.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Scarlet Letter is a masterpiece of the 19th-century romantic novelist Hawthorne, which occupies an important place in American literary history. The novel has been highly regarded since its publication in 1850. And for a long time, the studies of interpreting it have never stopped. At different



times, researchers have adopted different theoretical methods to study it from different perspectives. So the various interpretations of this work also make the *The Scarlet Letter* more timeless.

By combing through the literature of the past two decades, the research of domestic scholars on *The Scarlet Letter* mainly focuses on the following aspects.

To begin with, there are lots of studies from the perspective of feminist criticism. Hester is a strong and unyielding woman in the history of Western literature, and has always been the focus of academic attention. Scholars generally believe that Hester was a great woman with a rebellious spirit and the courage to break free from the shackles of Puritanism and society. Jing(2011) has studied the connection between nature and women from the perspective of eco-feminism: the oppression of women in a patriarchal society is the oppression of nature by human beings. However, two scholars, Ji and Meng(2004), take a different view, and by studying Hawthorne's depiction of female figures, they point out that Hawthorne promoted and affirmed the dominant patriarchal ideology in society at that time.

Additionally, it's also a novel which covers lots of symbols. Scholars studied the use of symbolic techniques in works from several aspects, such as the title of the work, the meaning of the characters' names, the portrayal of the characters, the image of the forest and other scenes, and even the Christian prototype. They tried to interpret the diversity and contradiction of the symbolic meaning of the works, and further explore the ideological roots and philosophical connotations of the works. Among those, the meaning of the scarlet letter "A" is one of

the hottest spot for research. Most studies believe that the meaning of "A" is twofold, symbolizing the union of angels and demons: it embodies the positive meaning of love and daring to rebel in Hester. But for Dimmesdale it is a negation of hypocrisy and cowardice. And Ding (2016) started from the image of wilderness, witches and elves, and discovered the contradictions of the deep meaning contained in the text of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Moreover, some scholars studied it from the perspective of Psychology. In scholar Jiang's research(2018), she used the identity theory in psychology to interpret the explicit witch character Mrs. Hibbins in *The Scarlet Letter*, exploring this character image from three aspects: the typical of alienation, the pursuit of self-identity, and the contradiction and conflict between self-identity and social identity, providing readers with a new perspective for the interpretation of this novel.

Last but not least, some studies have made researches on Hawthorne's creative intention. Que(2020) once analyzed Hawthorne's real intention of writing *The Custom-House* from the political and historical backgrounds of the novel's creation, the commercial background of its publication and the moral obligation attached to its theme. As far as he concerned, Hawthorne fictionalized the source of *The Scarlet Letter* and recounted it in an autobiographical text in order to convince readers of the authenticity of *The Scarlet Letter*. And the reason why Hawthorne striven to place himself in the editing position of the long story is to avoid possible moral accountability. And Sun(2020:222)'s opinion that though *The Scarlet Letter* explicitly reproduces the cultural landscape of colonial New England, the novel's focus is on



Hawthorne's era, and the work aims to reflect New England in the mid-nineteenth century in a meandering way.

Foreign scholars have also studied *The Scarlet Letter* very deeply, but most of the research is relatively focused on the content of the novel and the analysis of writing techniques. In the early days of research, the research of foreign scholars basically revolved around adultery and religious belief in the content of the novel. In the middle and late stages, it is mainly the analysis of symbolism in the novel, and the analysis of Hester's character in feminism.

Asfia (2015) points out the transformation of the meaning of the red letter in the text, from the first shame to the last courage. Hasan, Mustafa, and Abdulrazzaq (2022) relate to 19th-century American social issues and explain in their research the reasons for Hawthorne's use of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as its background and origins.

In the past, there have been many studies on the image of Hester, but there has been very little research on the witch image of the Hester. Except for a few sentences mentioned in the paper by scholar Ding Lijuan, there is little research on this topic at home and abroad. This article will base on the analysis of character images in the study of European and American literary traditions, and use deconstruction theoretical methods to point out that the heroine Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* is different from the traditional witch image in previous studies.

Through careful study of the book *The Scarlet Letter*, it's not hard to find that the characteristics of its heroine, Hester, are highly similar to the characteristics of the witches in Salem's witch trial.

Combined with the background of Hawthorne's creation of this work, Hester is Hawthorne's extremely ingenious metaphorical witch. Hawthorne skilfully uses Hester's witch image to satirize the hypocrisy of the Puritans and the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, while secretly selfishly giving Hester some characteristics that surpass witches. This project aims to point out Hawthorne's metaphor in *The Scarlet Letter*, the image of Hester's witch, not only to help readers interpret Hester's character in *The Scarlet Letter*, but also to analyze the persecution of women brought by Puritanism and patriarchal society.

3. THE BACKGROUND OF *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Before discussing the image, it's essential to explore what influenced the creation of *The Scarlet Letter* first. There are at least three main factors involved in order to explore this issue.

To begin with, Hawthorne had grown up with female elders in his boyhood mostly. Inevitably, all of these women had influenced him to varying degrees.

Secondly, it's hard to lose sight of Hawthorne's family history about Witchcraft Trials in Salem. Salem-born Hawthorne must be affected by the notorious historical Salem Witch Trials during his writing. In particular, one of his ancestors is a judge in the Salem Witch Trials in 1692, which is said to be the vital reason that impelled him to change his family name.

Lastly, what Hawthorne tries to convey in the novel is closely related to the American historical context in the 19th century.

This chapter will make a detailed interpretation of the ingredients above.



3.1 HAWTHORNE'S EARLY LIFE

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem in 1804. His childhood was miserable because his father died when Hawthorne was only four years old. Hawthorne's mother, Elizabeth Clarke Manning, was left to be a single mother with three kids. What's worse, his father left them little property since women at that age had no legal right of inheritance. From then on, Hawthorne had to spend his boyhood in his mother's extended family with his two sisters.

Due to living under kinsfolk's roof, Hawthorne grew up surrounded by many female families, who had been little Hawthorne's first-handed resource of literary material, loyal readers and supporters, sometimes strict critics and even productive co-authors. And Hawthorne's aunt Mary Manning was uneducated but helped him to be a college student in the family.

Hawthorne's mother, Elizabeth Clarke Manning, was highly cultivated by reading. But she had to rely on her relatives financially for living after her husband's death. The cruel fact manifested that it was not an age that knowledge reshapes destiny for a woman but an age when women couldn't live without the mercy of men. Besides, according to the few records, Elizabeth was discarded and despised by society at that time because of her pregnancy out of wedlock. Though being so hard, Elizabeth still shouldered the responsibility of taking care of her children.

It's not hard to find that Hester and Elizabeth are in common in many ways. So the scholars once supposed that Hawthorne depicted the character Hester, who was denied and cast away in the

patriarchal society, inspired by his mother's life experience. And Li (2019:1647) once suggested that the factors above can illustrate the reason why Hawthorne speaks highly of maternity in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne's elder sister Elizabeth Manning Hawthorne, as Nina Baym suggests that she was conceived before her parents' marriage, was an enigmatic and sensible woman. The precocious Ebe was able to walk and talk at nine months, according to her mother. Since she could read and write at a very early age, Ebe was sent to school with Nathaniel Hawthorne after her father's accidental death. Ebe did well in studies and even got appreciation from teachers.

But just as Moore(1994:1) mentioned that "she even then did not work hard at what did not interest her". She's a special girl differing from peers, who dislikes chores and resents the guidance given by the Mannings in her adolescence. Sophia Peabody Hawthorne once complained that her sister-in-law poorly helped her with housework in a letter to her husband.

Nonetheless, Hawthorne appreciates his elder sister a lot. He had commented that Ebe was much superior to him both in general talent and of fine cultivation. And he attached high importance to Ebe's suggestions and opinions about what he wrote. He always read his tale to Ebe and sometimes urged her to write for the magazine. It can be said Ebe plays an important role in leading him to be an intelligent and sophisticated writer. She seldom went to church or talked aloud there because she never forgot what her ancestors did to the witches. Hawthorne shares the same attitude to the ancestors with his elder sister.



It's also worth noting that the Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* may reflect a few of Ebe's qualities, such as the tall height, dark and abundant hair, and she is "little accustomed to measuring her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself"(Hawthorne,2009:103).

Hawthorne went back to Salem after his graduation. Then he got married to one of the women from Peabody family in Salem, Sophia. Mrs. Peabody and her three daughters, Elizabeth, Marry, and Sophia were all cultivated in literary career as the women in the Hawthorne's. They were also radical feminists and educators at that time. Their independent and advanced feminist and transcendent ideas greatly influenced Hawthorne in some ways.

And surrounded by so many active, talented and supportive females, Hawthorne subtly felt the positive power of these women. He saw the women's experience with his own eyes. No wonder that he would create the independent female character Hester to criticize the oppression of women of the patriarchal society.

Puritanism is also a significant element in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne grew up in a Puritan family. Instead of lavishing praise on Puritans, Hawthorne exposed the hypocrisy of Puritanism in the novel. Hence it must be strongly connected to his ancestor's participation in the Witch Trials in Salem. And there's no doubt that Ebe's attitude to religion has influenced him.

3.2 HAWTHORNE AND WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN SALEM

When it comes to the study of Hawthorne, his ancestors' history with witchcraft trials in Salem should never be neglected. The history is approximately one of the reasons why there are so many witchcraft elements in his works.

The Salem Witch Trials of 1692 were a really dark time in American history. During the hysteria, more than 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft and 20 lost their lives. According to recorded history, John Hathorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's great great grandfather, was one of the first judges to be involved in the trials, which is said to be a shame that Hawthorne would never forget.

And the content below will be interpreted from two aspects: the Witchcraft Trials in Salem and its influence on Hawthorne.

3.2.1 WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN SALEM

The notorious witchcraft trials in Salem were started by two girls who suddenly fell ill with a strange disease in January, 1692, which made them begin some abnormal behaviors, such as presumptuously screaming, seizures without reasons, always in a state of mental trance and mysteriously muttering incantations. Subsequently, the girls in town who were inseparable from them developed the same symptoms one after another.

At first, a doctor was called to examine the girls. But he was unable to find anything physically wrong with them. Since there is no medical basis for these signs and horrible behaviors, the doctor had speculated that the girls were bewitched and



influenced by Satan. And people at that time were convinced of it.

Shortly after, two of the girls were forced to name the women they believed bewitching them. These three poor and innocent women, Sarah Goode, Sarah Osborne and a slave named Tituba who worked for Reverend Samuel Parris, were accused of witches and arrested soon.

As they fit the traditional profile of witches in line with what townspeople knew, they were under attack on all sides in no time. The three women were tortured to extract confessions, and local judges investigated them. Though Osborne and Good's insisted on their innocence, Tituba confessed to seeing the demon who appeared to her.

Tituba's confession didn't blow the trial over but triggered the mass hysteria and the hunt for more witches in Salem. It also silenced any opposition to the idea that the Devil had infiltrated Salem. In the same month, four more women were accused and arrested.

In the weeks that followed, other townspeople came to testify that they had been hurt or had seen some of the villagers' bizarre appearances. Because the search for witches continued, many different people were charged. It has been recognized that only confession can avoid going to the gallows, and that this is the only way to respond to complaints from friends and relatives.

Wu(2013:5) once summarized the processual chronology of the Salem Witch Trials, 1692 in the table below:

January	Fits and seizures begin in adolescent girls of Salem Village.
February	Physician diagnoses witchcraft as the cause of the fits; three are accused by the girls and imprisoned.
March	Preliminary hearings begin, last until May.
April	More are accused as witches; accusations, fear increase rapidly.
May	New governor (Phips) sets up Court of Oyer and Terminer to try to accuse witches; scare spreads to other villages.



June	First "witch"---Bridget Bishop--- was hanged on June 10 th .
July	Five "witches"---Sarah Good, Rebecca Nurse, Susannah Martin, Elizabeth Howe, and Sarah Wilder---were hanged on July 19 th , fifty imprisoned in Andover.
August	Five "witches"---Procter, Burroughs, John Willard, George Jacobs, Sr., and Martha Carrier---were hanged on August 19 th .
September	Last hanging: eight "witches"---Martha Corey, Mary Easty, Alice Parker, Ann Pudeator, Margaret Scott, Wilmot "Mammy" Redd, Samuel Wardwell, and Mary Parker---were hanged on September 22d; one pressed to death

At last, the tragedy finally ended in May 1693 after Phillips granted amnesty to all suspected witchcraft detainees and ended all trials. The Salem Witch Trial resulted in 19 people being hanged and 1 being crushed to death by a pile of stones.

3.2.2 THE INFLUENCE OF WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN SALEM ON HAWTHORNE

The tightest connection between Hawthorne and the Witchcraft Trials is that Hawthorne's great great grandfather, John Hathorne, had been one of the most fervent prosecutors in the witches trials. Hathorne played a central role in the crusade to execute 20 people suspected of witchcraft in 1692. But that wasn't Hawthorne's only connection to the Salem Witch Trials. An accuser named Sarah Phelps was John Hathorne's great niece. And Hawthorne confessed that John inherited the persecuting spirit from his father, William Hathorne, who sentenced a Quaker woman to a brutal public

flogging is a bitter persecutor, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches in his first preface, *The Custom-House for The Scarlet Letter*. Moreover, as their representative, he always takes shame upon himself for two ancestors' sake, and prays that any curse incurred by them.

There's another controversial event that Hawthorne added the extra letter "w" to his surname. It's considered the strongest evidence that Hawthorne tried to distinguish himself from his ancestors and distance himself from families with a disgraceful history by doing so. Researchers have long valued the influence of Hawthorne's family history on his fiction writing. And until recent years, scholars have argued that many of Hawthorne's stories and novels like *The Scarlet Letter* were his expression to question or sometimes criticize the thoughts and actions of his ancestors. (Pennell, 2018) Even some critics have maintained that Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, among other similar works



are atonement for the sins of his ancestors. However, as Sun(2020) once argued, Hawthorne's true motive for changing his surname has not yet been documented.

There's something which can be sure is that Hawthorne was deeply influenced by what his ancestors did in the Witchcraft Trials since he was really ashamed of the huge trauma caused by John. Hawthorne's attitude to that is clearly shown in *The Custom-House*. And Hawthorne, who grew up in a Puritan family, of course would be influenced by original sin. He firmly believed that the brutal actions of his ancestors were his invisible birthmark. As a Puritan, he atoned for the sins of his ancestors and did not escape atonement.

3.3 THE CREATION BACKGROUND OF THE SCARLET LETTER

What prompted the creation of *The Scarlet Letter* is not only closely related to the author, but also the conflicts in the historical background.

In mid-19th-century New England, the Democratic Party and the Whig Party were engaged in a fierce struggle for power. Hawthorne secured a position as a customs officer with the help of his Democratic friends. The salary of a customs officer greatly relieved the stress of his life for fostering two kids. However, with the Whig victory in 1848, Hawthorne fell victim to the party struggle and lost his post.

After Hawthorne's dismissal, the family's financial situation plummeted. But thus having a great deal of autonomy, Hawthorne decided to devote to literary creation for his family's

subsistence. In such a situation, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne once explicitly mentioned that the novel was inspired by his discovery of the story of the scarlet letter and Hester in the autobiographical preface to *The Scarlet Letter*. Stressing the serendipity of the discovery of the piece of cloth embroidered with scarlet letters, he claimed that his *The Scarlet Letter* was based on a manuscript of his 18th-century predecessor, Mr. Pew, which recorded a historical fact and that he himself served only as an editor of Hester's story.

The Scarlet Letter took place in colonial North America in 17th century. And outbreak of witchcraft occurred throughout Western civilization including New England during the 17th century. Hawthorne did create an explicit witch image Mrs. Hibbins who contained all the traditional traits as people know in the novel.

However, the setting is in 17th century but the author wrote it in 19th century. The time Hawthorne brewing his writing of *The Scarlet Letter*, was also the time the Feminist Movement rose up. At the same time that Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, the first Women's Congress coincided with New York. Feminists raised the issue of equal property rights for women and men, noting that women are legally dead once married at the congress. They proposed that women should work equally with men in order to get rid of their dependence on men from an economic point of view.

Inspired by some radical feminist advocates, particularly by Margaret Fuller, an influential feminist theorist and his wife Sophia Peabody's friend,



Hawthorne luckily accessed the most profound feminist ideas. Therefore his mounting awareness of women's rights gave rise to his new sensitivity to women's right.

In his life, he was surrounded by lots of intelligent and excellent female who were under the oppression of patriarchal society. Witnessing the injustices and hardship on women, Hawthorne gradually began to express his view for women in his works.

4. A TRADITIONAL WITCH IN TOWNSPEOPLE'S EYES

Traditionally, witches are defined as bonkers who play corpses or control the weather. They are the opposite of God, who have frivolous behavior such as singing, dancing, drinking or excessive fornication. However, according to the research, the so-called witches in history are mainly people of different religions.

And the traits they shared can be simply generalized as follows. Firstly, witches are immoral for having behaviors that differ from religious norms. Secondly, they are thought to be someone with "witchcraft". Actually, those are some intelligent women with little knowledge, including previous female scholars and some female folk healers. Anne Hutchinson, the prototype of Mrs. Hibbins, is one of the typical instance, who was banished for holding different views with Puritanism. Thirdly, the witches are always widows, spinsters and the alienated female. Excluded by society, they become the minority in that their voices of defense themselves were drowned out while being accused. Additionally, people believe that the witches tempted by the Devil

will make a pact with him. Lastly, as soon as the females are accused of witches, they will be despised and tortured by the whole community.

Being abandoned by townspeople, Hester had always been unfairly oppressed by the secular. She carries many traits like traditional witches, such as lustful, carnal, immoral, having "witchcraft", alienated and so on. But Hawthorne has never mentioned the witch image of Hester. And there's only an explicit witch, Mrs. Hibbins, in the novel. Considered alternative, she was also alienated. Both of them are completely negative examples for women in town.

Hester is an implicit witch who combined traditional traits with nineteenth-century feminine characteristics. The reason why Hawthorne does not set her as an explicit witch is because it can provoke more thinking when her identity as a hidden witch is discovered. And the construction of the witch image of Hester is essentially to reappear the essential physiognomy of the intellectually talented but oppressed women known in history.

4.1 THE IMMORAL WOMEN

In New England, the Puritans who oppressed in England finally established their ideal theocracy. They pursued harsh moral dogmas, preached asceticism and condemned the pursuit of earthly pleasures. Then they turned to persecuting those they considered heretical. Chai(1994:212) summarized the moral standard and code of conduct advocated by Puritanism: loyalty, humility, strictness, honesty, and diligence. And puritans attach high importance to loyalty, which is fundamental and essential. Maintaining a high degree of religious piety was the



most basic requirement of Puritan life. Although it was not exclusive to Puritans, loyalty is far more important than other virtues.

Hester Prynne is a young woman married to old Chillingworth. She had an affair with Dimmesdale and gave birth to Pearl. Therefore, in the Puritan society, there's no doubt that Hester is an immoral and guilty woman.

To begin with, as a married woman, Hester doesn't keep her loyalty to her husband. And her desire to love does not correspond to asceticism of Puritanism. Hester's adultery with Dimmesdale is the manifestation of the immoral sex. "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable", said in *The Malleus Maleficarum*(1971) which was regarded as the standard handbook on witchcraft. People believed that those lustful and carnal women would be lured by the Devil and make a pact with him. And those immoral women would become witches. So as far as Puritanism concerned, Hester was tempted by the Devil and became a witch.

What's worse, she gave birth to the baby Pearl, conceived with Dimmesdale. And her rejection of telling the name of Pearl's father is also thought to be an action against Puritanism. Her adultery totally runs counter to the norms of Puritanism. Therefore she's sentenced to wear a scarlet letter "A" meaning adultery.

It seems that Hester is excluded by holding different views with Puritanism. However, she fully accepted the punishment and wore the scarlet letter "A" all the time.

4.2 WOMEN WITH "WITCHCRAFT"

"The witches" in Witchcraft Trials are always some intelligent women with little knowledge, including previous female scholars who hold different views to religion in the mainstream and some female folk healers.

For a long time, witches were the only physicians of the common people. Mastered extraordinary medical knowledge in practice, they were loyal allies of women, treating them with some diseases which were ashamed to seek help from male doctors. It is these qualities and talents that were appreciated by nineteenth-century historians turned them to "witches". And their valuable talent was seen to be "witchcraft" that were questioned and denigrated in the era in which they lived, and even led them to inhuman torture.

And the prototype of Mrs. Hibbins, Anne Hutchinson, was one of the victims who suffered from religious persecution. Her criticism of the Massachusetts Puritans for what she considered to be their narrowly legalistic concept of morality and her protests against the authority of the clergy resulted in her being sentenced to banishment. Although Hutchinson was never accused outright of being a witch, the delivery of a deformed, stillborn infant to one of her female associates in 1638 was interpreted by the Puritan fathers as the Devil's work.

Hester's "witchcraft" is her exquisite embroidery. And she does not only be skilled in needle but also rely that on living. Hawthorne titled the fifth chapter of the novel's turning point "Hester at Her Needlework", and devoted a lot of ink to praising Hester's needlework generously, which is



particularly meaningful for Hawthorne, who rarely writes in a nutshell.

“She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold”, Hawthorne wrote in Chapter 5. She even embroidered on the A, which represents shame.

As same as the women with knowledge, Hester's embroidery enables her to be independent, which is totally opposite to patriarchal society. As Chen(2007) proposed, needlework is Hester's tool for self-expression and self-knowledge. And her handiwork became what would now be termed fashion at a time. People were crazy about her handiwork but their attitude to her was very similar to their attitude to those “witch” who had helped them. They wore gloves with her exquisite embroidery but looked down to the producer with disdain.

4.3 THE ALIENATED WOMEN

The dominant similarity between Hester and the witches is that both of them are the alienated women.

As Corey(2003) once proposed that those accomplished women in particular have been targeted for persecution, especially educated women and physicians, although the elderly, insane and demented are also easy targets for accusations. For a long time, these women have been always alienated from the society for they were special. It was generally women whose behaviors or economic circumstances affected to a greater or lesser extent

the social order and customs of the time. Some of the defendants had a history of criminal motives, including witches, but others were devout worshipers and people of high standing in the town.

The explicit witch, Mrs. Hibbins, has high social status because she's the governor's sister. However, this did not help her to escape the fate of exclusion.

Hester is excluded from the society because of adultery. And Mrs. Hibbins is excluded for her weird actions but her situation is much better than Hester for her status is higher than the former's. The novel describes that women in town make harsh judgments about Hester, but there is no criticism of the witch, Mrs. Hibbins. Just as Jiang(2018) once suggested that Hester Prynne's alienation is dominant and Mrs. Hibbins' alienation is relatively recessive.

These two women are typical women who do not submit to authority and strive to find themselves. But what they pursuit such as love and self-identified are definitely opposite to the ideas in mainstream at that time. As a result, they are alienated and isolated like those “witches” who have their own critical thinking.

4.4 THE WOMAN WHO MADE A PACT WITH THE BLACK MAN

In 17th century Massachusetts, people often feared that the Devil. They believed that the Devil was constantly managed to find ways to infiltrate and destroy Christians and their communities. As a devout and strongly religious community living in near isolation in the mysterious New World, the community of Salem had a heightened sense of fear of the Devil. And witches are supposed to be the ones who make pacts with the Devil and became the



servant of him. Hester's affair with Dimmesdale can be defined as the evident that she is a witch seduced by Devil because of her insatiable carnal lust.

Prejudices against women are deeply rooted in religious traditions because they believe that women are the daughters of Eve. *The Bible* describes their association with Satan, identifying them as a people who are easily tempted by the devil and governed by desire. In a patriarchal society and the tradition of Puritan attention, they preferred women to play a role of submissive obedience. Therefore, when women show their wisdom and seek development different from what they demand, they will think that these women are aliens, bad women who have been seduced by the devil to contract with the devil.

In addition to the explicit witch Mrs. Hibbins, the people who go to the forest the most are Hester and Pearl.

Nash(1973) once mentioned every creature not under human control was declared wild, with negative connotations of rampant, barbaric, and dangerous. And forests refer to the unknown, vast, undeveloped, mostly beast-infested rather than inhabited areas of the New World of the United States. It may be frightening and hesitant because of its primordial mystery. And at that time, the forest was considered the place where devil existed, and also where witches made pacts with the devil. From the Puritan perspective, the wilderness was an evil, uncivilized place that lured people away from the purity of religious beliefs. The impression can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition of rejection of the wilderness, which led the first New England settlers in the 17th century to have

preconceptions about the wilderness, coupled with the threat they faced from the natural environment.

As He(2022) concluded that the Boston Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* believed that religious purity and unforgivable sin, and Puritan society and uncivilized forests, were binary opposites. When Hester was on the verge of losing custody of her daughter, she had to choose to meet the "black man" in the mysterious forest. And "Black man" is a common term for the Devil that circulated in the 17th century.

As Ding(2016:13) proposed, "Forests are the source of evil". In Hawthorne's writing, the forest is like a dim stage, and the whole work presents a sense of mystery and fear in this atmosphere, allowing readers to experience the depth of evil in reading. Such as, Chillingworth emerges from the dark and gloomy forest at the beginning of the novel, Hester meet her lover Dimmesdale secretly in the dark and terrifying forest, Mrs. Hibbins and the black-faced devil fulfill her promise in the darkness of the forest.

Actually Hawthorne give the hint of about Hester's witch identity. Hester was already a witch since she had already made a pact with the Devil. The scarlet letter on her chest is exactly the sign of the Devil. In the chapter 16 "A Forest Walk", Hester admit the fact that she made a pact with "Black Man" under Pearl's questioning. And she believed that the dark, mysterious forest was in keeping with the wildness of her nature, and that her sin and shame were "roots" deep in the soil.

4.5 THE OPPRESSED WOMEN

Whether Hester or Mrs. Hibbins, they stand for all the women being oppressed. Especially the witches in history, they couldn't argue with the



charges they were forcibly put on. And whether they admit their crimes or not, they cannot escape from social oppression.

The three poor and innocent women, Sarah Goode, Sarah Osborne and a slave named Tituba who worked for Reverend Samuel Parris, were firstly accused of witches and arrested. As they fit the traditional profile of witches in line with what townspeople knew, they were under attack on all sides in no time. The three women were tortured to extract confessions, and local judges investigated them. Though Osborne and Good's insisted on their innocence, Tituba confessed to seeing the demon who appeared to her: "sometimes like a pig, and sometimes like a big dog." What's more, Tituba testified that Good is a witch complicit.

Tituba's confession didn't blow the trial over but triggered the mass hysteria and the hunt for more witches in Salem. It also silenced any opposition to the idea that the Devil had infiltrated Salem.

Although the afflicted girls were the main accusers during the trials, many historians hold that the accusations were more like acts of revenge owing that the girls' parents had instigated them to accuse the special ones in the town. And such seemingly outrageous charges have rarely been refuted, which resulted that more than 200 people were jailed and 20 innocent people were killed.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scene of the trial of Hester reappear the torture in witch trials. Hester is forced to confess her companion's name. That's similar to "the witches" interrogated by the names of his companions in the trials in 1692.

Being abandoned by townspeople, Hester had been always unfairly oppressed by the secular. Hester, after admitting the fact of her adultery, no matter how hard she tried to help the townspeople, no matter how beautifully her embroidery, even until the meaning of the scarlet letter on her chest changed, she was not recognized by society. Hester's image perfectly shows that in a patriarchal society, women who violate the rules of patriarchy cannot be recognized and are always oppressed.

The most sobering thing is that the upper class law enforcers and religious figures at that time were all Puritans who fled to North America because of persecution. Like the people who persecuted them, they could not tolerate people who seemed to be different from them. This idealistic insistence on purifying one's own heart and purifying the world can in an instant become a terrible motive force for the brutal persecution of heretics.

5. DECONSTRUCTION OF HESTER'S WITCH IMAGE

Why Hester has so much in common with the witches but Hawthorne never mention that her image of witch? It's quite worth wondering why Hawthorne didn't make Hester as an explicit witch while she has so many similar traits with the witches.

Reread the novel carefully, it can easily find that Hester has lots of transcendent traits. Hester is never defined as a explicit witch by the author clearly. And that's quite so ingenious that Hawthorne can put some traits which belong to women in the nineteenth century. She carries many of traits as traditional witches, but there are many more things about her that go beyond witches of the 17th century.



Therefore, rather than being a traditional witch, Hester is more of a transcendent witch as Hawthorne hopes.

Deconstructionism is advocated by the French philosopher Derrida. As he pointed out, deconstruction is first and foremost a challenge to the dominant Western philosophical tradition. What the deconstructionists need to do is to reverse the primary and sequential relationship between each pair of concepts in order to achieve the purpose of "deconstructing this binary opposition"(Derrida, 1972). Regarding the metaphysical paradigm of binary opposition, deconstructionism argues that the latter is not inferior to the former, but at least of equal status and the same reason for existence".

And in Derrida's opinion, deconstructive reading is primarily concerned with some definite relation in the text that has not been noticed by the author. The relationship between what the author claims and what he does not assert but is expressed by the linguistic patterns he uses. For binary oppositions in literary texts, one of the tasks of deconstructionism is to subvert the asymmetrical concept of binary opposition or hierarchical order in the text in order to achieve the dissolution of logocentrism.

Hawthorne must also be distressed since he does not only want to reappear the appearance of the oppressed witch through Hester but also selfishly want Hester not to have the same end as the witches. So he never mentioned her as a explicit witch after constructing her witch image and then deconstructing that.

Hawthorne create the character Hester with his sympathy to the witches in Witchcraft Trials. While

using Hester's experience to recreate the misfortunes encountered by witches, he also used it to expand his imagination and depict a witch with characteristics that surpass those of seventeenth-century witches.

It can also be said that Hawthorne tries to speak for "the witches" who suffered from patriarchal society and puritanism in the sixteenth century through Hester, who has the characteristics of nineteenth-century women. And deconstruction of the witch image of Hester is essentially to interpret what Hawthorne tries to convey for the women who suffered from Puritanism and patriarchal society.

This chapter will provide how Hawthorne deconstruct the witch image of Hester from three aspects.

5.1 REJECTION TO BE DEFINED AS A WITCH

The explicit witch Mrs. Hibbins is seen to be the emissary of Devil who guide the people to join the gathering of the Devil abandoning faith and law. The sign that Hester refuses to be defined as a witch is her refusal to Mrs. Hibbins. Mrs. Hibbins had invited her to attend the gathering three times.

The first time is that she invites Hester to visit her garden in Chapter 8. When Hester came to the governor's hall for the custody of Pearl, Mrs. Hibbins invited her to visit the garden. But since she was given custody of Pearl, she refused Hibbins's invitation. Thus she luckily avoid the trap. And in the following, after Hester and Dimmesdale make agreement to flee with Pearl to Europe, Hester encounters Mrs. Hibbins. And Hibbins suggests they go to see the Devil but Hester refuses again. The third time, Hester turned down Hibbins' instance to be the Devil's servant.



As Ding(2016) and He(2022) pointed out, the forest is not only the place Hester met “Black Man”, but also the place she pursuit for freedom and herself. Unlike the Puritan strongly biased imagination of the wilderness, 19th-century American attitudes toward nature were in a transitional state. As the city grew, strict Puritanical norms did not coincide with people's quest for self-liberation. Just as the forest kept Hester and Dimmersdale away from Puritan persecution, it naturally became a temporary refuge from the hustle and bustle and constraints of modern society, and people's stereotypes of the wilderness were gradually shaken. In *The Scarlet Letter*, when Hester takes off her hat in the woods that suppresses her nature, she reveals a long-lost bright and gentle smile, and her own femininity and youthfulness are all recovered from the imprisonment of puritanism, which is exactly Hawthorne's demand for freedom in 19th-century American society through the wilderness.

If Hester accede to the witch's invitation, she will be an explicit witch without any question. However, the author does not want his heroine to have the bad ending as the poor witch. What's more, Hester is a female who sticks to herself. She has never taken the scarlet letter off and never been depressed no matter how hard she has been through.

From her rejection, it's not hard to conclude that she doesn't want to be defined as a witch. And so does Hawthorne. When she found herself and freedom in the forest, Hester refused to become servant of the Devil in the forest. That's totally different from the witches who enjoyed themselves under section of the Devil. What the author really

tries to convey is Hester is not a witch but an assertive woman.

There's another evident of her rejection to be defined as a witch. Because of the crime of adultery, Hester was forced by those in power to wear the scarlet letter “A”, a symbol of shame, on her chest, to carry a baby in her arms, standing on the execution stand in public and being judged by the men in the authority. When they used sermon-like language to induce her to say the name of her accomplice under the pretext of saving Hester's soul, in order to punish the sinners who committed the great commandment and purify society, Hester boldly and resolutely replied: “I do not say!”

Admittedly, later in the Witch Trials, it has been recognized that only confession can avoid going to the gallows, and that this is the only way to respond to complaints from friends and relatives. People proved their innocence by accusing others. Otherwise, they would be accused of being witches. And this kind of thing seems absurd and inconceivable afterwards, but almost no one can escape at that time. And everyone will consciously or unconsciously participate in mutual persecution as if they had taken Ecstasy.

However, unlike them, Hester did not reveal Dimmesdale's name to the Puritan society in the end.

5.2 HER DIFFERENT ENDING COMPARED WITH MRS. HIBBINS'S

It can be clearly found in the novel that Hester has a different ending than Mrs.Hibbins'. In the ending of the novel, Hester though still not being recognized by the society, she finally live in the suburbs on her own by insisting on being herself. And



Mrs. Hibbins, though her brother is the governor of the town, her final end is death.

Mrs. Hibbins is executed for practising witchcraft about a year after Dimmesdale's death. And her death shows how merciless Puritan society had become in the name of piety and propriety: the governor would even order the execution of his own sister. In fact, Hibbins is miniature of some witches being accused by their own families in the Witchcraft Trials.

Mrs. Hibbins, though always keeps being herself, has never done anyone a favor in the novel. She approached Hester because she reckoned that Hester would join in her gathering for they were in the same situation being isolated from the society. Of course she's women who is not afraid of the worldly gaze and managing to be herself.

According to Wu(2011)'s study that religious persecution in New England was carried out in two main ways: the execution of witches and the expulsion of those who hold different religious views. Like most the witches at that time, once the identity of witch is exposed, her ending would be bad ending mostly. And Hester, holding different views with Puritanism, firstly was alienated by the society. Generally, townspeople changed their views on her though Hawthorne didn't describe directly. Hester was helpful, often exchanging money from embroidery to help the poor. Those who once condemned her cast admiring eyes on her. Gradually, the scarlet letter took on a different meaning in the minds of others, representing Hester's high embroidery skills and kindness to his poor compatriots.(Guo, 2018) She is like an angel sent by

God to bring infinite spiritual strength to the people of the town.

According to the study of Que(2010), Hawthorne had practical obstacles in writing *The Scarlet Letter*. And the family of four was desperate, "even to the point of not being able to afford lighting candles and the whole family going hungry"(Fang, 2008:24). Because he desperately needed payment for *The Scarlet Letter* to support his family, he even created the preface *The Custom-House* to avoid the political risks posed by the book's controversy. And that's probably why Hawthorne deconstruct her witch image.

Hawthorne hopes that the heroine can be alive and owns a different ending than the witches in history. The difference between their ending strongly expresses Hawthorne's hope to Hester. Hester deserves a happy ending because she tries so hard to help others and be herself but not only being selfish or begging for recognition of others. She's very similar to the female folk healers who was killed by being accused of the witches. But in the novel, Hawthorne gives them a second life.

5.3 SELF-IDENTIFIED WOMAN

Tajfel introduced the concept of social identity, which refers to an individual's knowledge about his or her belonging to a social group and the emotional and valuable meaning he or she has because of his or her membership in the group. Just as Wang(2008) concluded that social identity is about being a group. Relatively, self-identity is the individual's perception of oneself including the perception of one's own consistency in time and space and the awareness of



one's own differences with others. Jiang(2018) once compared these two concepts to two sides of a coin.

Hester is a obviously self-identified woman who does not pursuit social identity. It's very ingenious that Hawthorne does not make her a explicit identity of witch but set her a as a woman being excluded for adultery. Like Hibbins, so does Hester has a lot of traits which are opposite to the religious, political, cultural and other aspects of society during the American colonial period.

In fact, in a patriarchal society, men refuse to give women equal economic rights, not just because they want to own all their wealth and refuse to claim women a share. Rather, because men have long realized that while women gain economic independence, they will no longer be satisfied with falling under their wings, and will strive to seek independent ideas and a broader world.

However, Hibbins is always the servant of the Devil. She relies on the Devil mentally. On the contrary, Hester is the servant of herself. She turns down to be others' servant and never thinks to beg for social identity though she has been so hard.

As Woolf(1929) emphasizes, for a woman to write a novel, she must have money and a room of her own. Hester supported herself and her daughter through embroidery, which led to her intellectual and financial independence. Embroidery allows her to use her creativity. And she always firms in her choices and never regret. Even she ends up living alone in the far reaches of the town.

American society in the 16th and 19th centuries did not have a "room of their own" for women. And men trapped women in the big room of patriarchal

society. Women in the 19th century struggled to get their own rooms. Hester here stands for the women in the 19th century who knows what they want, sticks to themselves, and struggles for what they pursuit.

6. CONCLUSION

The Scarlet Letter concretizes history in the interweaving of truth and fiction, turning cold historical records into touching stories of flesh and blood. Hawthorne's attitude to Hester is ambiguous although she's an immoral woman. On the one hand, Hawthorne condemns her adultery. On the other hand, Hawthorne gave his sympathy for Hester and dissatisfaction with the Puritan society.

The witch image of Hester enriches the meaning of *The Scarlet Letter*. And Hawthorne makes good use of metaphor in the novel. That's also the reason why so few scholars and readers have been able to spot the witch image of Hester.

To sum up, Hawthorne, in his novel, portrays a woman who violates the accepted female morality of the time, ostensibly repenting in order to reintegrate into society. But actually, Hester was just being herself. Even if she had not committed adultery, her virtues would not have disappeared. Hawthorne appreciated that she had certain characteristics of a feminist or a powerful woman he was familiar with. In his endorsement and criticism of Hester, Hawthorne seems to be looking for a middle ground to escape, where he has the space to maintain his independent personality without violating the existing legal canons in society. But the space for this compatibility does not exist in reality. The restraint and suppression of human nature by society in order to maintain centralized order is always in opposition



to the individual's pursuit of complete freedom. But as far as his work is concerned, it is through the creation of this contradiction that Hawthorne makes the work more ambiguous and deeper. The warmth of the heroine's attitude and the inconsistency of the imagery description reveal the author's point of view. He first constructs Hester's witch image, and finally, completely deconstructs and subverts it.

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