

The Scarlet Letter and New England's Witchcraft Beliefs

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Abstract: The witch trials and the mass execution of women branded as witches throughout the 17th century New England were meant to serve an ideology designed for the world the Puritans were attempting to create. The Puritan witchcraft beliefs are inextricably related with their religious and social world-view as well as with their negative image of woman. Witches were the most powerful symbol of human evil—seductive and threatening to the moral and social order. Witchcraft has compelled the attention of a long and almost continuous line of American writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne being one of them. *The Scarlet Letter*, set against the background of the 17th century Puritan New England, deals mostly with the guilt-ridden aspect of human psyche and the Puritan society's unredemptive doctrine of sin and punishment. However, the frequent references to witches, to the Black Man in connection with the dense forest, to the historical witch figures like Hutchinson and Hibbens, connect the novel with the dark episode of the Puritan witchcraft. The constant presence of the witch in both physical and spiritual forms throughout the novel shows that Hawthorne refers to these supernatural beings not merely as a passive element of his novel's plot, but rather as a strong component of the historical context in which the story of the novel unfolds itself. It makes the novel an even more authentic document of the Puritan era. My paper attempts to explore, in the context of *The Scarlet Letter*, the much condemned yet an inseparable chapter of the New England history—the witchcraft beliefs and how they had justified and at the same time subverted the Founders' vision and their goals.

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the 17th century New England. The effectiveness of the novel arises from the rich particularity with which Hawthorne explores a definite historical phase of society as well as the fates of individuals in it. The Puritans demanded a qualified surrender of selfhood to society in the service of the vital and holy work which had brought them to the New World. This work involved an expansion of the Christian faith into new geographical territories and, more importantly, a perpetuation of it through the recreation of truly biblically ordained forms of worship and communal life. In the backdrop of the novel, we have on the one hand characters like Governor Bellingham, John Wilson and Governor Winthrop—historical figures upholding the moral framework of their universe and on the other hand Mistress

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Hibbins—the incarnation of devil, causing spiritual disorders in the people. Though her character is not very significant as regards the plot of the novel, she is connected with one of the most important chapters of New England history--the practice of witchcraft. The witchcraft trials were modes of Puritan repression and disciplining acts which they used to apply to uproot evil from their soil. The dark forest, the Black Man and Mistress Hibbins do not only create an antithetical gothic world to the world of the Puritans, but also form an integral part of the historical context in which *The Scarlet Letter* is set.

Witchcraft played a critical role in shaping and maintaining the social structure of New England. It implies a deeply ambivalent ritual which caused violent struggle within women themselves and also went against women. Witchcraft signified rebellion against God as witches were believed to transfer their allegiance from God to Satan. The Biblical tale of Adam and Eve's fall from grace was at the core of the Puritan belief that woman was evil. Eve was in many ways the archetypal witch. The New England witchcraft is mostly concerned with ideas about women, fears about women, with the place of women in society, and with women themselves. Though some men were executed as wizards during the period of massive witch hunting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was mostly women who were generally condemned as witches and most of those who died in the name of witchcraft were women.¹ Witchcraft has compelled the attention of a long and almost continuous line of American writers beginning with the Puritan minister Cotton Mather and proceeding through Nathaniel Hawthorne, Arthur Miller and John Updike.²

The social and ideological process that transformed women into witches in New England was a belief on the part of both the townspeople and the religious and secular authorities that these women posed serious threats to the society. They were thought to commit two dangerous trespasses: challenge to the supremacy of God and challenge to the hierarchy of the society. Witchcraft was associated with old age, frightful ugliness and female wickedness on the one hand, with youth, beauty and female sexual power on the other. Witches, in New England, were human beings with superhuman powers. For the clergy and the members of their congregations, the primary threat was the relationship between the witch and the Devil. It was a common belief that witches entered into a contract or covenant with Satan – exchanging their natural subjection to God for a diabolic subjection to Satan. Known as heretics, witches were enemies not only of society, but also of God. When confronted with witches in New England, ministers in particular worried about the Devil's success in recruiting people to help destroy Puritan churches. The clergy, by virtue of the power of the pulpit and their access to both the press and the secular authorities, had more opportunities to insist on their view of witchcraft as Satan-worship. Anything from Sabbath breaking to overt repudiation of ministerial authority to blasphemy could be interpreted as a sign of

witchcraft. Witches were social and spiritual deviants whose attitudes and behavior were antithetical to the moral universe of their culture.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the 'bitter-tempered sister' of Governor Bellingham, Mistress Hibbins is called a witch. Her presumed alliance with the Black Man gives her insight into the sins of both Arthur and Hester. She even tries to tempt them to sign the Black Man's book. After leaving the mansion of Governor Bellingham, where she had gone to plead for Pearl's custody, Hester meets Mistress Hibbins who invites her to a midnight meeting of witches in the forest: "Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I well-nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one"(116)³. What prevented Hester from signing the Devil's book was her maternal responsibility for Pearl. Hibbins also tries to tempt Arthur while he was coming out of the forest after meeting Hester: "But at midnight, and in the forest, we shall have other talk together"(209). This character is based on the historical figure of Ann Hibbens who was executed for witchcraft in 1656. Ann Hibbens's case offers a clear view of the two versions of witchcraft at work in New England. She had been excommunicated from the Boston church sixteen years before her witchcraft trial, not for witchcraft *per se*, but for her obstinate challenge to religious, secular and familial authority. When her neighbors denounced her for supernatural activity and specific malevolence, she was officially branded as a witch and was brought to the court on witchcraft charges. Hibbens was executed for being an enemy of both New England society and the Puritan faith.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the forest is depicted as the abode of Satan, or the Black Man. It's the Devil's opposing citadel to the moralistic Puritan society. Here, the witches gather in quest of newcomers to their kingdom. It is believed that this "Black Man" haunts the forest, gets people to sign their names with blood in his heavy iron-bound book and then puts his mark on their bosoms. Pearl asks Hester whether the scarlet A is the Black Man's mark on Hester. Under Pearl's questioning, Hester even confesses that "Once in my life I met the Black Man . . . This scarlet letter is his mark!"(177). Hester too is equalled with a witch in the novel, like many other women of the 17th century who were, in one way or the other, condemned for moral or social disobedience. She shatters the Puritan image of ideal womanhood by incarnating the two sins generally linked with witches: the seduction of man (her adultery) and the failure to serve man (her refusal to comply with the institutional authority of Puritan society). The forest scene is the climactic as well as the antinomian moment when all conventions are subverted as Dimmesdale subordinates himself completely to Hester and she sees her sin of adultery as an act of 'consecration'. In yielding to Hester's proposal for escape, Dimmesdale, says Hawthorne, had in effect, made a bargain with Satan as the witch lady Mistress Hibbins suspected: "Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to

what he knew was deadly sin”(209). The change in the minister generates a spiritual collapse, which brings about the disintegration of his personality. He is swept by immoral impulses like uttering blasphemous words to an old respected deacon of his church, tempting a young virgin with a look and a word, teaching wicked words to some Puritan children, and exchanging oaths with a drunken Spanish sailor. So here we see that Dimmesdale’s apparent transformation, which neither suits his usual self, nor conforms to his orthodox morality, is interpreted as his surrender to the Devil who has taken possession of his soul during the forest walk.

Another figure that is constantly referred to as Hester’s historical ancestor in *The Scarlet Letter* is Anne Hutchinson. She was one of the central figures behind the antinomian controversy.⁴ Her outspoken theological views, her personal assumption of religious leadership and her spiritual assertion had aroused the hostility of many of the colony’s leading men. The weekly meetings she held in her house attracted many of the Boston citizens, and she criticized the theological authority enjoyed by the clergy. Hutchinson’s interpretation of Puritan doctrine allowed women a vastly enlarged sphere of religious activity. During the course of her civic trial, her adversaries reminded the authorities in a number of ways that her behavior was “not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for her sex.” By 1637, Hutchinson was brought before the General Court, and later before the Church itself, to defend her actions and her views. By 1638, she was accused as a heretic, excommunicated from the church, and ordered to leave the colony for good. Thus the threat she posed to the Massachusetts theocracy by her liberal thinking earned her the label of a witch.

Anne Hutchinson, the embodiment of a new spirit of freedom and a new awareness of social power, serves as Hawthorne’s model for Hester Prynne. That’s why she is compared with this historical figure in the very outset of the novel. She possesses the same prophetic ability, same rebellious character and the same moral courage to challenge the Puritan theocracy’s dominant assumptions about ‘visible sanctity’. Hawthorne writes: “She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter”(159). Her desperate recklessness on the scaffold, the flagrancy of the embroidered letter ‘A’ which, though meant to be a symbol of humiliation, was rather displayed as a token of pride, her ‘haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed’ (60), her denial of the established code of law seem deliberately to recall Anne Hutchinson’s defiance. She, in fact, “might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect...might have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment” (159), but is obliged to cherish the “germ and blossom of womanhood” for the sake of Pearl.

Like Hutchinson, we see Hester assuming the role of a spiritual counselor in her community towards the close of the novel: "Women, more especially—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought—came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy!" (245). The Puritans begin by turning Hester into a sermon and a living symbol of sin, and she ends by nullifying their entire world of oppressive sanctity. Her seven years of "outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation" towards a doctrine of personal freedom which every orthodox Puritan judged a more serious threat to public order than adultery itself. Being an outcast, and with her own judgment of social institutions, she neither seeks nor is allowed a full place in it. The New England society claimed to have based itself on the highest principles of moral idealism, but turns out to be utterly lacking in the elementary Christian values of love and compassion. Its mission of regeneration is in reality a mask for repression and intolerance. Hester envisions a world where "a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (245). To achieve this end, the "whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (160). She realizes that to create a new order, there must be a new moral consciousness, which is not attainable in a world divided against itself.

So we see that the Puritans' belief in witchcraft is inseparable from their ideas about women and their larger religious world-view. The witch was both a negative model by which the virtuous women were defined and the focus for Puritan version of Evil. One of Hawthorne's forefathers, Judge Hathorne participated in the infamous Salem Witch trial in 1692. But he was also one of its severest critics. The portrayal of the Puritan society with its austerity and bigotry reflects Hawthorne's contempt for injustices done in the name of piety to sustain the essence of the Puritan ethics. The references to witches in *The Scarlet Letter* not only bring out some historical facts about the practice of witchcraft in the 17th century, but also show, though not very elaborately, its significance in the construction of the Puritan social order.

Notes

- ¹ The number of people executed as witches during the witch hunting years is only guesses; too many records have been lost or destroyed. However, William Monter's figures (based on 5362 accusations) put the proportion of females among the accused as just about 80%.
- ² Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* & *The Scarlet Letter*, Miller's *The Crucible* and Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*.

- ³ This and other quotations are taken from the Signet Classic Edition of *The Scarlet Letter*.
- ⁴ A belief that God's gift of grace relieved Christians of responsibility for obeying the moral law of the Old Testament. It also claimed a personal illumination of spirituality.

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