



Effects of Catharsis with Special Reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter'

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ABSTRACT:

The Cathartic Effect of any literary piece of art can make a big alteration in the thinking and behaviour of an individual. The masterpiece created by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a handbook on human psychology and the pain and agony of the characters is not only uplifting the characters but also help in creating a vicarious experience for the readers by feeling connected to the characters bringing the cathartic effect which elevates the readers and purifies their deep seated emotions. The readers tend to associate themselves with the situations of the characters and in response are able to calm their emotions in the stream of thoughts that are in unison with the delineated characters.

Hypothesis: 1. Literature as a medium is capable of creating the Cathartic effect on the readers by depicting characters that have committed some sin and feel repentance.

2. The readers feel the effect for only a short period of time or only during the studying of the story.

Introduction:

"Catharsis, the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In [criticism](#), [catharsis](#) is a term used by [Aristotle](#) in the *Poetics* to describe the effects of true [tragedy](#) on the spectator. The use is derived from the medical [term](#) *katharsis* (Greek: "purgation" or "purification"). Aristotle states that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse "terror and pity" and thereby affect the catharsis of these emotions." Thinking is directly correlated to literature. Literature provides the framework for the society as well as an individual's thoughts, values, and beliefs. The literature in a language is not only available in the written format but it can also acquire a visual form (theatre), or can reach a person in the form of an orally transferred thought. This is a universally acknowledged fact that literature has the tendency to influence the mind and leaves an indelible mark on how the world is viewed and perceived by an individual. Thought is not only determined by the literature but it also provides the framework for an individual's conscious and subconscious thoughts.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* the narrator unfolds the captivating plot of the novel and in the process the characters are unveiled and the moral makeup of each character is revealed in the process. The novel tells the story of [Hester Prynne](#), who conceives a daughter out of wedlock and does not disclose the name of the child's father. She struggles to create a new life for herself and her daughter. She lives a life of humiliation, condemnation and shame for committing the sin of adultery. As punishment for the sin committed by her, she must wear a scarlet letter 'A' on her bosom which stands for "[adultery](#)". Containing a number of religious and historic allusions, the book explores themes of [legalism](#), [sin](#) and [guilt](#) in a Puritanical society which was very callous and unforgiving in the matters of morality. The main protagonist of the novel Hester Prynne is a powerful woman who showcases her strength and feminism even in the face of adversity, eventually triumphing in bringing about a positive change in the way she is seen by the society. She is a very strong character and the readers tend to see her strength in the way she painstakingly brings up her daughter by working as a seamstress, helping the needy within her limited means and still facing their scorn and hate in return. Hester has the aspect of a true tragic heroine who is 'more sinned against than sinning', who believes that she corrupted both the men in her life; degrading Arthur morally and converting Chillingworth into an absolute fiend in spite of his admirable qualities of kindness and love for knowledge. As popular and coveted is the complex plot, Hawthorne's literary talents excel within each paragraph. The thought process of the characters and their chosen path is laid bare before the readers and a sense of empathy is developed by witnessing their pain and suffering.

The character of Minister Arthur Dimmesdale (Father of Hester's child) is totally devoted to his congregation. The story of Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale recalls the story of [Adam and Eve](#) because, in both, an action results in expulsion and suffering. But when it is probed into, it also results in knowledge. For Hester, the Scarlet Letter A stands as a physical manifestation of her sin and reminder of her painful solitude. She contemplates casting it off to obtain her freedom from an oppressive society as well as the absence of God. "She wanted—what some people want throughout life—a grief that should deeply touch her, and thus humanize and make her capable of sympathy." Because the society excludes her, she considers the possibility that many of the

traditions upheld by the Puritan culture are untrue. The author very beautifully and systematically keeps the reader attached, whether in Chillingworth's words (Hester's Husband) which always have a hidden meaning, or in Hester and Dimmesdale's burst of joy before a tragic ending. In the sufferings of Dimmesdale, the reader finds a source to vent the deep emotions that are constantly gnawing at his heart from within. No one is aware of the pain of the Minister but he is constantly troubled by his sense of guilt internally. His Scarlet letter, unlike Hester's, is not visible to anyone but himself. The novel explores the idea that punishment or pain inflicted on someone is not going to change the character of a person inertly unless the strings of revelation of committing a sin are touched which in turn will affect the deeper sensibilities of the person and make a person undergo a drastic change. The readers can see that Chillingworth's misshapen body reflects (or symbolizes) the anger and malice in his soul, as he is constantly thinking of revenge and such emotions are only capable of making a person diabolical and unforgivable. Similarly, Dimmesdale's illness and involuntarily clutching his heart reveals his inner turmoil and self-inflicted suffering resulting from his unconfessed sin and sense of guilt. His depiction as a frail and weak person in contrast to Hester's strength and dignity, both physically and morally evokes a feeling of sympathy for his suffering. Throughout the story, he is supported both physically and metaphorically by the quiet courage and stoicism of Hester. The outward demeanour is the reflection of the condition of his heart as a result of his continuous torment and deceit. His character has an underlying streak of passion which he is forced to conceal owing to his exalted position as the reverend of a congregation. His act of adultery, although a result of his nature, brings him immense pain and suffering because of his inability to confess and lose face in front of the very people who worship him. His ambition and hypocrisy further bring about his downfall because he can see himself as the vilest of all creatures, even calls himself one but his congregation exalts his stature as a very empathetic, pious and godly man worthy of being worshipped. The readers can accurately gauge his radically altered demeanour when he briefly believes he can escape from Boston and start a new life with Hester without facing the consequences of his sin. All his temptations and impulses are brought to the fore on his way back from the forest, as if his moral code and dynasty had undergone a complete change.

Pearl, Hester's daughter is also a symbol in the novel, a living embodiment of the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom. She is a being in whose creation a great moral law had been broken, which makes her wilful, capricious and unamenable to rules. She is not only Hester's treasure and joy, the singular reason for her to live, but also the agent which constantly keeps her thinking about her road to retribution and redemption. She is born outcast of the society and finds herself at home amidst nature. She has a keen observation and understanding of the people and instinctively sees them as their true self. She refers to Chillingworth as 'the Black Man' and is inquisitive why the minister keeps putting his hand on his heart, but most of all, she has a strange fascination with shining scarlet letter on her mother's bosom. She lacks a father in her life and the scarlet letter 'A' has the connotation of 'Arthur' for her. She even fashions a green 'A' on her own dress with grass which greatly perplexes Hester about her capricious behaviour and future. She repeatedly asks if the minister will stand with her and her mother on the scaffold during daytime but her father does not have the courage to do so. And ultimately when he does in his last moments, a spell is broken and she accepts him wholeheartedly. At that time, she ceases being a rebel against the society and becomes a part of it.

Roger Chillingworth is the antagonist, the diabolical force in *The Scarlet Letter*. He is a doctor, with a great propensity for learning in different fields such as alchemy and herbs. He arrives in Boston two years after Hester and witnesses her public shame on the scaffold with the infant in her arms. When Hester declines to name her lover, he vows to find him and bring him to justice, and asks her to keep his identity a secret. He is then assigned to restore the ailing minister Dimmesdale's health and starts to live with him. Their discussions regarding the maladies of the body reflecting the soul agitate Dimmesdale and he keeps a watchful eye, probing him about the same. While keeping a façade of treating him, he keeps digging mercilessly into the deep, dark recesses of his mind and heart. He resolves to punish Dimmesdale for his sin and gets sucked into the vortex of revenge and torment. A man who had been devoted to knowledge his entire life becomes a Satan incarnate to fulfil his revenge on Dimmesdale. His degradation and fiend-like aspect during the course of the story arouses a feeling of terror and heartlessness. When the sole aim of his life is thwarted by Dimmesdale's confession and death, he soon loses his will to live.

The cathartic effect can be explained as the person listening or reading the story feels the same emotions as the characters of the literary work. "The interpretation generally accepted is that through experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectator's own anxieties are directed outward, and, through sympathetic identification with the tragic [protagonist](#), his insight and outlook are enlarged. Tragedy then has a healthful and humanizing effect on the spectator or reader." Throughout the novel, characters either achieve or fail to achieve feelings of empathy for their fellow humans. Both Dimmesdale and Hester achieve greater compassion because they have suffered, and are able to gather the sympathy of readers for the reason that anyone irrespective of the fact that he is as good person is still capable of making mistakes. This ability to show empathy makes Hester and Dimmesdale highly sought after within the community. As Aristotle has stated in *Poetics* that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse "terror and pity" and thereby resulting in catharsis of these emotions in a readers which tends to uplift and humanize them. Dimmesdale becomes popular as a minister of great reputation, and as the novel reaches its culmination, Hester is the woman of wisdom, "people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble." Roger Chillingworth, on the other hand fails to emotionally captivate the readers due to his callousness and diabolical treatment of Dimmesdale.

Conclusion:

Those characters who have corrected themselves and in the process have risen are capable of attaching their sentiments with the masses meanwhile, characters like Chillingworth and Governor Bellingham fail to show any streak of empathy as they are always looking forward to find faults in other people and judging them. Bellingham's suggestion of separating Pearl from Hester is a reaction of his thinking that as Hester has committed a sin, she is incapable of raising a child. Both Hester and Dimmesdale argue that the child can learn from her mother's mistakes, but Bellingham shows judgement rather than empathy. But when the people develop a changed attitude towards Hester, the realization is that the change occurs when innately good

characters rise above the flaws and become more knowledgeable and as a result also tend to elevate others surrounding them. In the novel, Hawthorne has connected the experience of suffering resulting in empathy which further suggests that tragic events or good characters with flaws are capable of lending meaning and value and cathartic effect which can permanently change the outlook and lead to a “positive change in a person’s life”

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