



A Study of Agoraphobia in the Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorn

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Abstract

The core objective of this paper is to argue the term agoraphobia and apply it to Nathaniel Hawthorne's superb work, *The Scarlet Letter*. This novel is an imaginative piece of literary work written in the age of Puritanism to exhibit the reality of social, cultural, and religious struggles of that age via the performance of characters. A phobia is a sort of fear that each character possibly faces explicitly or implicitly throughout the novel's story. It is of many sorts, and agoraphobia is one of them, which simply carries the meaning of being scared of the marketplace and crowded areas. Hester Prynne is one of the characters of *The Scarlet Letter* who is frightened and is socially banished because of her disgusting deed, adultery. The symbol of "A" was hanged on the chest of her daughter, which was the outcome of Hester's adultery, causing her to have a non-stop psychological pain that separated her in a way that she saw death in every moment of her life. She was dehumanized and deprived of whole social contacts, events, and activities while her partner, Arthur Dimmesdale, had a missing identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Agoraphobia: Meaning

It is derived from the Greek word (agora) for market. The expression "agoraphobia" carries the meaning of "fear of the marketplace" (Durand, 2003). Agoraphobia has been used as an expression for Shopping centers, public transit, supermarkets, restaurants, theaters, and other crowded places or places where extended queues exist, as well as traveling long distances without having companies are considered as common agoraphobia triggers (Barlow D. H., 2002). It is not expected that other daily activities that cause resembling interoceptive experiences are eluded as agoraphobic conditions. They are eluded because they are accompanied by physical symptoms or feared physical sensations. Activities requiring physical movement, such as dancing, heavy weight lifting, aerobic exercise, and running upstairs, should be eluded as they cause physiological arousal. Some phobias have resulted in indoctrinated behavior. Others are conditioned to the individuals. Research is being carried out to have a better understanding, find solutions, and improve coping techniques for different kinds of problems. The prevalence of phobias is a problem that makes those who experience them disabled somehow. (Michels, 1985)

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Westphal first used the term in 1871 to refer to a fear of and avoidance of public settings; nonetheless, the condition was not widely acknowledged until the late 1970s (Barlow D. H., 2002). The DSM-III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980, was the first edition to recognize the diagnosis of agoraphobia. Then, it was thought that the basic diagnosis was agoraphobia, with or without recurring panic attacks as a comorbidity (Mennin, 2000). A diagnosis of panic disorder is now considered a main diagnosis and can be made with or without agoraphobia since the DSM-III-publication (APA, 1987). (Williams, 1976).

More particularly, agoraphobia is an expression used in the medical community to refer to the fright of open areas existing in an overcrowded place or exiting a secure site. It scarcely happens to somebody to have a fear like this from birth; vice versa, trauma is what leads them to experience this sort of fear. Whether the traumatic experience occurs early in life or when the individual is considered elderly, this behavior frequently has a long-lasting impact on the person. Fewer than 25% of people with agoraphobia, who may or may not also experience panic episodes related to their agoraphobia, seek medical attention even though it is a common disorder among Americans. (Barlow D. H., 2002).

In the story of *The Scarlet Letter*, a vivid agoraphobic discourse comes up due to the damage in yet another unparalleled way__ one that is more related to the preponderance of people. When somebody acts in a corrupt or immoral way, they are mostly overcome by a strong sort of feeling of guilt and shame resulting in their misconduct because they are scared that not only themselves but also the people they care about will be affected by their dishonest behaviors or misconducts, and that is the actual meaning of agoraphobia. In the age of Puritanism, morality was given attention more than any other life aspect. If any member of the community happened to commit an act of immorality, he or she would be banished in every possible way from the course of life. After Hester Prynne had committed the adultery, which, of course, was regarded as highly immoral conduct, she was nearly cast away and ejected completely by the community and banished from every sort of social activity, and this led her to be extremely agoraphobic, as if she was destined in hell by all means. What draws attention here is that based on sex discrimination, the community's decision to punish included the female. The male was neglected. (Durand, 2003)

Inner Conflict

Hester Prynne is packed with agoraphobic senses, which is why she is wearing a dress with the scarlet letter "A" embroidered on her chest, indicating her mood as being extremely unreasonable. Even though she appears arrogant, she undergoes unutterable grief whenever people raise and severely criticize her shocking, immoral act of adultery. It seems her heart has been thrown onto the street, where people should walk on it firmly until it is crushed. Hester, on the other hand, is full of sorrows as the narrative conveys to the reader that a victim never conceives how much pain or grief they undergo while they are being persecuted or harassed; the worst is still to come later on, and the pain will be more severe and destructive. (Batra, 2012)

The characterization of Pearl is yet another exemplification of the perceived strain and ostracization between the self and society. Pearl is depicted as the Puritan society's firm and tough moral code. The known fact is that Pearl, by no means, is involved in adultery, yet the community regards her as the fruit of that disgusting act. The society unbelievably neglects her. She is an excessive, agitated, and immature young lady. She is different from other children due to some sick aspects of her personality. She is characterized as a "born misfit of the infantile world" by Hawthorne. (Hawthorne, 1850)

Unintentionally, Pearl is characterized to represent the Puritan society in this novel. She eternizes her mother's maltreatment by her innocent questions and games. She never

allows her mother's past to be some ancient action. She never quits thinking about it and crawling for answers. The novelist portrays Pearl's behavior towards her mother as an instance of Puritan society via Hester's speech: "She is my happiness! She is my misery! Nonetheless! I'm still here thanks to Pearl! Pearl corrected me as well!" (Doren, 1966).

Agoraphobic Character/s

One of the stories of never-ending contention between individuals and society is *The Scarlet Letter*, which vividly features and intertwines the repeatedly observed theme of appearance vs. reality. The story starts with a prolonged introduction clarifying how the story came to be composed. The anonymous narrator worked as a customhouse surveyor in Salem, Massachusetts. He found a bunch of papers in the customhouse's causality, among which was a manuscript bound in a crimson, gold-embroidered piece of cloth shaped in "A." The document, which was the work of a former surveyor, described events that had happened nearly two hundred years before. When the narrator mislaid his customs post, he decided to make up the events described in the text. The finished work is *The Scarlet Letter*. (Salami, 1999)

Boston, a Puritan colony at the time, was the chosen location to launch the story (Fox, 1991). Hester Prynne, a young mistress, is brought out of the local prison holding Pearl, her baby daughter, in her arms, putting the scarlet letter "A" on her chest. A man in the crowd informs an elderly spectator that Hester is being chastised for adultery. Hester's husband, a scholar who was considerably many years her senior, had sent her to America ahead of him, but he never made it to Boston. It is thought that he is at sea. It is obvious that Hester has been having an affair while waiting for her husband to come, the tangible proof is that she has already given birth to a child in the absence of her husband. The consequence of her wrongdoing is the scarlet letter, public humiliation, and maltreatment, but she will not divulge her lover's name. Hester's absent husband, who is now a physician and goes by the name Rugar Chillingworth, is the elderly spectator. Crawling for revenge, he moves to Boston. He is committed to keeping Hester's identity a secret and informs no one else who he is. Years pass, and Hester can make a living as a seamstress. Pearl grows to be a rebellious, headstrong youngster. The neighborhood evades them, and they reside in a modest cottage outside Boston. Authoritative members from the community try to set Pearl apart from Hester, but with the help of the youthful, well-spoken pastor Arthur Dimmesdale, the mother and naughty daughter are able to stay together. (Barlow D. H., 2000)

On the other hand, Arthur Dimmesdale appears to be vanishing and has an unusual cardiac condition that might be related to psychological tenseness. Chillingworth pledges to the sick minister to take care of his patient around the clock and finally moves in with him. Chillingworth has a goal behind his action. As soon as he moves in the riddles of Dimmesdale's mind with questions to see what he can pull out from his mouth, he believes there could be a tie between the minister's serious pain and Hester's secret. One afternoon, while the minister is taking a nap, a mark on the sick man's chest draws Chillingworth's attention, which strengthens the doctor's doubt:

"I will keep thy secret as I have his," said Hester. "Swear it!" rejoined he. And she took the oath. "And now, Mistress Prynne," said old Roger Chillingworth, as he was hereafter to be named, "I leave thee alone; alone with thy infant, and the scarlet letter! How is it, Hester? Doth, thy sentence bind thee to wear the token in thy sleep? Art thou not afraid of nightmares and hideous dreams!" "Why dost thou smile so at me?" inquired Hester, troubled at the expression of his eyes. "Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest around us? Hast, thou enticed me into a bond that will

prove the ruin of my soul! " "Not thy soul," he answered with another smile. "No, not thine!" (Hawthorne, 1850)p70)

As it is obvious, Hester says to keep this secret, although she knows that society will blame her first, and her daughter will pay the price of her immoral misconduct. As Dimmesdale does not seem to recover from his psychological hardship and even getting worse, he forms new sorts of self-punishment. Meanwhile, Hester has been kept clear of the mockery of the neighborhood because of her altruistic efforts and modest humility. When Pearl has grown to be about the age of seven, she and her mother are heading home from visiting a patient on their deathbed. They come across Dimmesdale, who is striving to repent his sins by hanging himself from the town scaffold. The three of them held hands as Hester and Pearl joined him. The next day, Dimmesdale refuses to thank her as Pearl asks him. A meteor leaves a slight red "A" later in the night sky. Hester decides to step in as she sees the minister does not seem to recover from his condition. She goes and asks Chillingworth to stop escalating Dimmesdale's self-punishment. (Harding, 1990)

Hester arranges a meeting with Dimmesdale in the woods because she lacks awareness of society and is an agoraphobic character, knowing that Chillingworth has probably surmised that she plans to reveal his identity to Dimmesdale. The ex-lovers decide to leave for Europe so that they can have life with Pearl as a unified family. They will get on board a ship leaving Boston in four days. A sense of relief overcomes both of them, and Hester removes the scarlet letter and lets her hair down. Having taken off the letter, Pearl, a young lass playing around, cannot recognize her mother. Right before the day the ship is supposed to depart the port, the whole town gathers for a holiday event. Dimmesdale delivers his most thrilling sermon ever. Meanwhile, Hester discovered that Chillingworth knew their plan and had made necessary arrangements to travel on the same ship. (Connolly, 1970)

Dimmesdale inspects Hester and Pearl; he sees them in front of the town's scaffold as he exits the church following his lecture. At full tilt, he climbs the scaffold accompanied by his lover and daughter to make a public confession, disclosing a permanent scarlet letter engraved on his chest. Pearl kisses him as he swoons and passes away. Chillingworth comes to die a year later without succeeding in carrying out his plan of retribution. Nobody knows about Hester and Pearl's next destination when they leave Boston. Hester goes back to Boston alone after many years, still sporting the scarlet letter, to reside in her former dwelling and continue her philanthropic activities. Pearl, who is now in the golden cage with an aristocrat from Europe and started her own new family, writes to her now and then. Hester is laid to rest beside Dimmesdale's departing life.

Her fantasy was somehow affected, and, had she been of a smoother moral and intellectual fiber, would have been still more so by the alien and secluded agony of her life. Walking to and fro with those little footsteps in the little world with which she was outwardly bound, it now and then appeared to Hester. (Hawthorne, 1850)(p79)

Hester Prynne could not join the society and always tried to be out of sight. Her fear led her to this point, which is known as an agoraphobic sense. The cause that obliged her to stay hideous was owning a girl from unhealthy grounds, which became a sign of the shameful misdeed in her past. Everyone in the town where they lived knew the letter "A" on her chest. For her, it was a spiritual hell to live in. They had no way forward or backward. (Webster, 1993)

"Thus, the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast...as the figure, the body, the reality of sin" (Hawthorne, 1850). Hester's dismissal, shame, and distaste were the consequences meted out by the Puritan community since they saw her as a serious malefactor. The components of the society did not pay attention to one ironic fact. The irony rests on the notion that Hester's and Dimmesdale's sins differ.

Because Dimmesdale committed the same act of fornication as Hester, he did not receive any sort of punishment from society if Hester was exiled for it. "I must appear with you, your mother, and your grandmother before the judgment seat," Dimmesdale commanded. Our rendezvous, however, will remain invisible to this world's sunshine. A common belief among Puritans in the 17th century was if an individual wanted to be closer to God, they were obliged to get closer to someone particular. (Haque, September 2016)

CONCLUSION

The Scarlet Letter targets the appearance and reality just as it explores the concepts of good and evil throughout the work. As it says at the end of this novel, it was clarified that Hawthorne attempts to create an image in the mind of the reader that the Puritan age is a negative segment of the past if compared to freedom, and led to a kind of phobia to overcome the targeted society at the time which is called agoraphobia, being scared of public or crowded places. Hester Prynne, afraid of showing up in the crowds because of what she has committed, the adultery with Dimmesdale, obviously represents the agoraphobic character in the story. The whole population regards adultery as a crime against the state. Ironically, it is demanded to reveal the secret and, so, increase confusion by putting on the letter "A." Hester, on the other hand, chooses to follow the doctrine of love and affection, and by leveraging the power bestowed upon her, distorts Puritanical meanings to create new ones. She consequently discovers refuge inside herself and becomes an agoraphobic character to strengthen the scarlet letter's impact and abandon the "sable" culture.

The novel's conclusion is drawn interestingly; Dimmesdale demonstrates courage by removing the mask of false purity and holiness. He does not go with Hester to have a comfortable life elsewhere. Instead, he aims to achieve mental freedom at the cost of his life. He can finally set himself free from the strict Puritan society's grip. Pearl sets herself free from the symbol of shame. She embraces her new identity as soon as her biological father confesses his affair with Hester Prynne. She finds no site to call her own. Hester does not reveal her real existence in New England. She conveys this affirmation to other women that beyond being involved in misdeeds, they will be agoraphobic.

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