

EIDOS-THEOS IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*: REDEMPTION, REASON AND RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: This paper examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* through the heuristic framework of *Eidos* and *Theos* in order to reconsider the relation between symbolic instability and moral transformation in the novel. While Hawthorne criticism has long explored the Puritan ideology, gendered resistance and the ambiguous interpretation of the scarlet letter, less attention has been given to how shifting of symbolic meanings participate in the reconstruction of ethical identity. Drawing on theological hermeneutics, symbolic interpretation and narrative ethics, this study argues that Hawthorne's symbols do not merely expose the rigidity of Puritan moral systems; instead, they acquire new significance through human experience and social reinterpretation. Within this framework, *Eidos* refers to forms of

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moral abstraction that reduce individuals to fixed juridical and social categories, whereas *Theos* designates a more relational understanding of identity shaped through responsibility, compassion and lived experience. Through analysis of the scaffold scenes, the forest episode and the Election Day procession, the paper demonstrates how Hester Prynne's transformation disrupts the stability of public judgement and reshapes the meaning of the scarlet letter itself.

Keywords: *Eidos, Ethical Identity, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Symbolic Instability, Theos, The Scarlet Letter, Theological Hermeneutics.*

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has often been interpreted as a critique of Puritan ideology, patriarchal authority, and the ambiguous interpretation of moral symbols. Critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch, Nina Baym, Richard Fogle, and Laura Korobkin have approached the novel through ideology, gender, symbolism, and social regulation. Yet their interpretation does not fully explain how Hawthorne connects the changing symbolic meaning with the reshaping of ethical identity. The scarlet letter, by itself, does not remain a fixed sign of sin, nor does it merely become ambiguous over time. However, its meaning changes through Hester Prynne's suffering, labour, and the continued relation to the community that condemns her. The symbols do more than expose the limits of Puritan judgement; they participate in the reshaping of moral perception and social recognition. For example, the scarlet letter -symbolizes sin, shame, identity, and strength, the scaffold scene symbolizes public judgement, confession, and social control, and lastly, the forest -symbolizes freedom, and an escape from Puritan authority; therefore this study argues that *The Scarlet Letter* traces a movement from externally imposed moral classification toward more relational forms of ethical understanding. To describe this movement, the paper adopts the heuristic categories of *Eidos* and *Theos*. These terms are not Hawthorne's own, but are used here as interpretive concepts that clarify the novel's tension between fixed moral forms and the instability of lived human experience.

2. Methodological Framework

This study approaches *The Scarlet Letter* through a theological hermeneutic approach combining symbolism, narrative analysis, and ethical interpretation. First, it examines key symbols in the novel – especially the scarlet letter – not as fixed meanings, but as signs whose significance develops over time within the narrative. This perspective follows contemporary hermeneutic discussions that emphasize the unfolding nature of meaning in interpretation (Wiercinski 45), building on the enduring influence of Paul Ricoeur. Second, the study interprets Hester Prynne’s experience as a process of ethical transformation shaped through suffering and introspection. In this respect, it draws on developments in narrative ethics in which literature is understood as a space for moral reflection and formation (Kearney 12; Nussbaum 3).

Third, the study examines how the novel presents moral responsibility within a social context, particularly in relation to public judgement and changing identity. This approach draws on ethical criticism in literary studies, especially Wayne C. Booth’s conception of literature as shaping ethical perception and David Parker’s emphasis on reading as a form of moral engagement. (Parker).

The terms “Eidos” and “Theos” are used here as heuristic concepts rather than fixed philosophical categories. In classical thought, *eidos* refers to form or ideal structure; within this study, it describes systems that reduce individuals to stable moral and social classifications. The scarlet letter itself reflects this process, as Puritan society attempts to define Hester permanently through a visible sign of sin. *Theos*, by contrast, points toward a relational understanding of identity shaped through compassion, ethical responsibility, and lived human experience. The framework therefore moves beyond familiar oppositions such as law and grace by focusing on how Hawthorne’s symbols acquire changing meanings across the narrative. The scarlet letter, for instance, gradually shifts from a symbol of shame to one associated with strength and moral endurance as the community’s perception of Hester changes. The novel thus becomes not only a critique of moral rigidity, but also an exploration of the instability of socially imposed identities. Hawthorne portrays Hester as a woman

whose moral transformation emerges through suffering and reflection rather than through immediate absolution. Redemption in the novel may thus be understood as a gradual movement from crisis to ethical renewal and transcendence: pre-redemptive (the crisis), redemptive (proactive moral response), and post-redemptive (transcendence).

3. Philosophical Grounding of the *Eidos–Theos* Framework

The categories of *Eidos* and *Theos* are employed in this study not to impose an external philosophical system upon Hawthorne's novel, but to clarify a tension already operating within *The Scarlet Letter*: the fixed moral classification and the instability of lived experience. In classical Greek philosophy, *eidos* refers to form, appearance, or intelligible structure. Plato, associated it with stable forms through which reality becomes conceptually knowable (Plato 507b–509c). Aristotle later develops the concept in relation to substance and classification, using *eidos* to describe the formal principle that makes a thing identifiable within an ordered system (*Metaphysics* VII.1032b). Though their philosophical contexts differ, both Plato and Aristotle connect *eidos* with permanence, recognizability, and conceptual stability. Plato refers to *eidos* as an ideal and unchanging forms that exist beyond the material world, while Aristotle understands it as the defining structure or essence that gives order and identity to things.

The term becomes useful in reading *The Scarlet Letter* because Puritan society similarly depends upon visible forms of moral identification and symbolic regulation." In Hawthorne's New England, identity is rarely treated as a private matter. Sin must be displayed, punishment remain visible, and moral status must be publicly recognized before the community. The scarlet letter functions within precisely such a structure. It is intended to condense Hester Prynne to a stable moral designation and to transform her life into a public emblem of shame. In this context, the letter functions as a form of *eidos*: a symbolic structure that attempts to stabilize identity within a permanent moral category. Puritan authority depends upon such symbolism because social order is maintained through surveillance, discipline, and

communal judgement. Hawthorne, however, repeatedly exposes the limits of this process by demonstrating that human identity and moral meaning cannot remain permanently fixed within rigid symbolic categories. Hester’s experience gradually exceeds the moral expectations imposed upon her, and the scarlet letter no longer retains its singular meaning. Initially seen by the Puritan community as a sign of adultery and shame, the letter later represents Hester’s strength, charity, and moral endurance. Through her compassionate service to the poor, quiet resilience in suffering, and continued responsibility toward the community, the meaning of the symbol changes alongside the community’s perception of her.” Its meaning changes through labour, suffering, charity, memory, and altered communal perception.

Theos in this study does not refer simply to theology in a doctrinal sense, nor is it used merely as another term for divine transcendence. Rather, it points toward a mode of ethical understanding grounded in relation, inwardness, responsibility, and lived experience. If *Eidos* stabilizes identity through external forms and fixed moral classifications, *Theos* refers to a relational understanding of the human person shaped through lived experience and ethical encounter. In *The Scarlet Letter*, *Eidos* is reflected in the Puritan attempt to define Hester permanently through the scarlet letter as a visible sign of sin, whereas *Theos* emerges when Hester gradually was recognized by her compassion, endurance, and service to others rather than by the rigid judgement imposed upon her. In this respect, the framework also recalls later ethical philosophy, particularly Emmanuel Levinas’s argument that the human person exceeds the conceptual systems through which societies attempt to define identity. Whereas Hawthorne’s characterization of Hester refused to be reduced to a stable moral sign.

Furthermore, the framework clarifies limitations within several interpretive oppositions commonly used in Hawthorne criticism. Binaries such as law and grace, sin and redemption, public and private, or allegory and ambiguity emphasize the important aspects of *The Scarlet Letter*, yet they do not fully explain how symbolic meaning itself changes through communal interpretation and ethical experience. The opposition between law

and grace, for example, tends to assume a movement from condemnation toward forgiveness within a relatively stable theological structure. Hawthorne's novel is more uncertain than that model allows. Hester's transformation does not erase the symbolic order that condemns her, nor does redemption appear as a complete resolution of guilt. Instead, the moral meaning itself becomes unstable as communal perception changes over time.

Similarly, critical readings that focus on allegorical ambiguity and symbolic indeterminacy in *The Scarlet Letter* often emphasize interpretive uncertainty without fully examining how symbols reshape ethical relations within the community. The scarlet letter matters not only because it is interpreted differently at various stages in the novel as a sign of adultery, public shame, moral suffering, and eventually strength and compassion, but because those interpretations emerge through changing forms of social recognition. Thus, Hawthorne's symbols represent abstract ideas as well as shape the ways individuals are perceived, judged, and understood within a society.

The distinction between *Eidos* and *Theos* becomes necessary because it shifts attention away from symbolic ambiguity alone toward the processes through which moral identities are socially stabilized and later unsettled. Existing frameworks such as law and grace, exterior and interior, or allegory and ambiguity illuminate important dimensions of Hawthorne's novel, yet they often preserve the assumption that moral categories themselves remain conceptually stable. The *Eidos–Theos* framework instead emphasizes the instability of moral classification itself. What becomes visible through this approach is not merely that Hester resists Puritan judgement, but that the symbolic structures used to define her gradually lose their authority through changing forms of ethical recognition. The framework therefore allows the novel to be read not only as a critique of Puritan repression, but also as an exploration of how moral identities are constructed and transformed through social perception and lived experience. The *Eidos–Theos* framework is useful because it describes a movement from fixed moral classification toward more relational forms of ethical understanding. The framework does not attempt to replace

existing Hawthorne criticism. Its purpose is to clarify how Hawthorne links symbolic transformation with changes in moral perception and social recognition. Read in this way, *The Scarlet Letter* becomes, more than a critique of Puritan legalism, an exploration of the difficulty of defining human beings through fixed moral categories and publicly imposed identities.

Set within Hawthorne’s nineteenth-century engagement with seventeenth-century Puritan New England, the novel repeatedly questions the adequacy of moral systems grounded in public judgement and external conformity. Puritan ideology functions not only as a structure of religious authority but also as a mechanism of social control. As Sacvan Bercovitch observes, Puritan culture in American literature often operates through the public regulation of ethical selfhood (23). Within this setting, Hester Prynne emerges not merely as a figure of resistance, but as a character whose identity gradually exceeds the symbolic meaning imposed upon her by the community. Redemption in Hawthorne is therefore neither instantaneous nor purely doctrinal.

4. Pre-Redemptive Phase: The Limits of Moral Abstraction

The early chapters of *The Scarlet Letter* unfold within a culture shaped by public judgement and social discipline. In Puritan New England, identity is understood primarily through outward signs and visible moral conduct rather than as a private or inward reality. Hester Prynne’s punishment therefore depends as much upon display as upon law. The scarlet letter reduces her to a single moral designation, transforming a person into a public emblem. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes, Puritan culture often converts personal transgression into communal spectacle, reinforcing the authority of the social order. Hawthorne places Hester within precisely such a system, one in which moral judgement operates through surveillance and symbolic control.

Before Hester appears, Hawthorne establishes the terms of this conflict through the opposing images of the prison door and the wild rosebush. The prison represents the rigidity of institutional authority, punishment, and social control, while the rosebush symbolizes compassion, natural human feeling, and the

possibility of moral understanding beyond strict legal judgement. Located beside the prison, the rosebush suggests that sympathy and human complexity can exist even within a harsh system of punishment. Hawthorne's concern is therefore not simply with sin and punishment, but with the limits of a moral order that seeks to define a person through fixed categories. This tension becomes fully visible in the opening scaffold scene. Hester emerges wearing "the scarlet letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom" (Hawthorne 50). The detail immediately complicates the intended function of the symbol. The letter is meant to humiliate, yet its elaborate appearance draws attention to Hester's agency and self-possession. What Puritan authority attempts to stabilize as punishment already begins to resist containment. Hawthorne sharpens the scene further through his description of the crowd's "stern dignity," exposing the performative nature of communal judgement. The scaffold becomes less a site of justice than a theatre of moral regulation in which Hester is recognized by a sign before she is acknowledged as a person.

Laura Korobkin's explanation of the novel through legal and social regulation helps illuminate Hawthorne's interest in imposed identity. Yet the novel is concerned not only with the violence of classification, but also with its instability. Puritan society attempts to position Hester within a single meaning, but that meaning is meant to change. The community's interpretation of the scarlet letter begins to shift as Hester's conduct increasingly conflicts with the identity assigned to her (Korobkin 28-32). Although the letter is initially intended to mark her publicly as an adulteress, Hester gradually earns the community's respect through her charitable work, quiet endurance, and care for the poor and sick. As a result, many townspeople begin to interpret the 'A' not as a sign of shame, but as a symbol of ability and moral strength. Hester's first appearance already introduces this instability. Carrying Pearl in her arms, she neither conceals herself nor collapses under public shame. Hawthorne presents her composure with intentional restraint. She does not openly rebel against the symbolic order, but neither does she submit to it entirely. Instead, she occupies an uncertain position within it,

exposing the gap between social judgement and lived reality.

The changing meaning of the scarlet letter marks one of Hawthorne’s clearest departures from allegorical fixity. Initially interpreted as a sign of adultery, the letter gradually acquires different meanings within the community and comes to be associated with Hester’s strength, charity, and endurance. Hawthorne’s symbols do not remain stable because the moral world they inhabit is itself unstable. The meaning of the symbol gradually evolves through Hester’s actions and the community’s changing perception of her. In this respect, *The Scarlet Letter* is concerned not simply with symbolic ambiguity, but with the fragility of moral certainty itself (Hawthorne 111).

Hawthorne’s critique of Puritanism therefore extends beyond institutional severity. The novel questions the assumption that a person’s identity can be permanently fixed through legal or symbolic judgement. Hester’s transformation begins within this conflict, as the meaning imposed upon her gradually gives way to more complex forms of recognition. Hawthorne portrays Hester as a woman whose moral transformation emerges through suffering and reflection rather than through immediate absolution. Redemption in the novel may thus be understood as a gradual movement from crisis to ethical renewal and transcendence: pre-redemptive (the crisis), redemptive (proactive moral response), and post-redemptive (transcendence).

5. Redemptive Process: Responsibility and the Reconfiguration of Selfhood

Hester’s transformation depends less on confession than upon sustained participation in the society that condemns her. Rather than fleeing Boston or denying her condition, she remains within the community and gradually acquires moral authority through her resilience, charitable service, and continued responsibility toward others. The community’s changing interpretation of the scarlet letter reflects this transformation. What begins as a juridical sign of adultery slowly becomes associated with usefulness, strength, and moral dignity. Hawthorne’s interest lies not simply in symbolic instability itself, but in the way public meaning changes through conduct and social memory

(Hawthorne 67).

The contrast between Hester and Dimmesdale further complicates Puritan assumptions about sin and redemption. Dimmesdale preserves his public authority through concealment, but the division between reputation and self-reflection gradually destroys him. Hester, by contrast, remains publicly marked yet becomes increasingly integrated as a moral presence within the community. Hawthorne thus destabilizes the association between public honour and ethical authenticity.

Hester's independence unsettles conventional expectations of women conduct within Puritan society. She raises Pearl outside the strict norms of the community, achieves a degree of economic self-sufficiency, and acquires moral authority among those who once condemned her (Baym 121; Fogle 87). Baym's analysis of Hester as a figure of female autonomy emphasizes Hawthorne's challenge to patriarchal authority. Yet an emphasis on resistance alone risks narrowing the novel's larger ethical concerns. Hester's transformation is not simply oppositional. She neither escapes the symbolic order nor rejects it entirely; instead, she gradually reshapes its meaning through her sustained moral resilience and continued engagement with the very community that marks her as transgressive. Redemption in Hawthorne thus emerges less through rebellion than through sustained ethical perseverance.

The forest scene briefly suspends the disciplinary structures of Puritan society and allows Hester to imagine an identity outside public judgement. Critics such as Baym define the episode as a moment of liberation and female autonomy. Hawthorne complicates such freedom, however, through Pearl's refusal to recognize Hester once the scarlet letter is removed. The novel suggests that identity cannot simply be cast off through symbolic rejection. Even outside Puritan surveillance, Hester is shaped by the enduring social meaning associated with the letter and her past experience. Freedom in *The Scarlet Letter* emerges not through escape from the past, but through continued negotiation with it.

6. Election Day and the Collapse of Moral Performance

The Election Day scene brings Hawthorne's critique of
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reputational morality to its fullest expression. Public ceremony and civic order frame Dimmesdale’s final appearance, yet the minister’s celebrated authority stands in sharp tension with his inner collapse. The community continues to read him as a figure of sanctity even as concealment steadily destroys him. Hawthorne thus separates public honour from moral integrity, exposing the instability of a moral system grounded primarily in outward-appearance.

Dimmesdale’s confession on the scaffold reverses the symbolic logic of the novel’s opening scenes. The platform once used to fix Hester within public shame becomes the site where concealed identity is finally exposed. Critics have often interpreted the scaffold primarily as an instrument of Puritan discipline; however, Hawthorne also transforms it into a space where the limits of moral performance become visible. The minister most admired by the community proves incapable of sustaining the division between public reputation and inward experience, while Hester, despite continued social stigma, has gradually acquired moral authority through endurance and acceptance.

The Election Day scene therefore unsettles the assumption that virtue can be guaranteed through outward social approval. Hawthorne’s concern extends beyond hypocrisy itself to the fragility of systems that depend upon public reputations. Moral meaning in *The Scarlet Letter* emerges not through performance, but through the difficult negotiation between suffering, memory, and social recognition.

7. Interior Transformation: From *Eidos* to *Theos*

Following the collapse of reputational morality in the Election Day scene, Hawthorne shifts attention toward Hester’s private life. Her transformation slowly unfolds, shaped not by dramatic confession but by isolation, endurance, and years of reflection. The narrator’s description of Hester as “a thinker” suggests that punishment in the novel produces more than shame; it forces a difficult form of self-knowledgment (Hawthorne 167).

Hester’s eventual return to Boston complicates conventional ideas of liberation. She does not permanently escape

the community that was critical of her, but willingly resumes life within it and once again takes up the scarlet letter. Her return suggests neither defeat nor submission. Instead, Hawthorne presents identity as something continuously shaped by past experience and social interaction rather than by escaping one's history.

Critics have often emphasized Hawthorne's attack on Puritan severity, yet the novel is equally concerned with the instability of judgement itself. Hester acquires authority not through official forgiveness, but through her sustained ethical engagement with the community. Her reconciliation with Dimmesdale and her refusal to remain consumed by bitterness toward Chillingworth move the novel away from strictly punitive understandings of sin and redemption. The scarlet letter never settles into a single meaning. Even during the Election Day procession, observers continue to interpret it differently, suggesting that Hawthorne's symbols remain open and unstable. Pearl also resists simple moral classification. Though born from transgression, she becomes inseparable from Hester's moral and emotional development. Hawthorne's interest therefore lies less in the purification of sin than in the ways suffering and social experience reshape human identity.

8. Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has often been read as a critique of Puritan legalism, patriarchal authority, and the ambiguity of moral symbols. Such readings remain important, yet they do not fully account for the way symbolic meaning in the novel changes alongside the community's perception of Hester Prynne. Hawthorne's concern extends beyond exposing the harshness of Puritan society. The novel repeatedly questions whether human identity can be permanently defined through public judgement, legal categories, or visible signs of transgression. The scarlet letter itself does not remain fixed within a single moral meaning. Its significance changes through time, experience, and communal reinterpretation.

The *Eidos-Theos* framework helps clarify this movement within the novel. Rather than treating *The Scarlet Letter* simply as

a conflict between law and grace or sin and redemption, the framework draws attention to the instability of moral classification itself. *Eidos* refers to systems of fixed moral form that reduce persons to stable social identities, while *Theos* points toward a more relational understanding of ethical selfhood shaped through suffering, responsibility, memory, and human encounter. Examining this framework, Hawthorne’s symbols do not merely reflect moral ideas; they participate in the reshaping of judgement and identity. Hester’s transformation occurs through continued engagement with the very community that seeks to define her.

This reading also broadens the scope of ethical criticism. The novel suggests that moral meaning is neither stable nor entirely controllable within public systems of judgement. Ethical recognition emerges through human experience and evolving social perception rather than through public reputation alone. The scarlet letter thus becomes not merely a symbol of sin or resistance, but a reflection of the complexity of human identity beyond rigid moral classification. Contemporary societies continue to classify individuals through public visibility, social stigma, and moral labelling. In many contexts, identity is still shaped through forms of exposure and collective judgement that makes it difficult to change. Hawthorne anticipates these tensions by showing how public symbols can both constrain and transform human identity. *The Scarlet Letter* ultimately suggests that moral understanding emerges not from rigid judgement, but from a deeper recognition of human complexity and lived experience.

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