


# “Does Silence Speak?”: The Revelation of Truth in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

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## Abstract

*In the portrayal of the anguish and oppression experienced by individuals within society, silence assumes a distinct textual manifestation. In various literary narratives, the theme of silence is sometimes given priority over the entire course of action of an event. Through evoking profound emotions and building suspense within readers, it serves as a vehicle to reveal concealed truths pertaining to historical occurrences. Focusing specifically on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*, the paper aims to explore how the potency of silence is intricately woven into the fabric of the novel’s characters, ultimately unveiling the concealed reality of an undisclosed incident. As the main characters in the novel remain almost ‘silent’ in an attempt to hide the actual truth, the theme of silence has been purposefully used as a device in enunciating the true facts of a particular event. Consequently, the paper will try to enunciate the theme of silence as an expressive entity, which serves as a conduit to expose the veiled truth surrounding a clandestine affair.*

**Keywords:** Silence, Truth, Individual, Speak, Identity.

## Introduction

In the realm of literature, silence is often employed as a thematic element to cultivate emotions and engender a sense of anticipation. The presence of silence in fictional texts can be attributed to the traumatic experiences that individuals undergo in their lives. The term ‘silence’ holds profound ties to historical events, interweaving its essence with the fabric of the past. As Adrienne Rich states- “Silence can be a plan / rigorously executed / the blueprint to a life / It is a presence / it has a history a form” (17-18). The theme of silence in literary narratives intersects with several perceptions, such as rumours, disgrace, and mysteries, imbuing them with profound significance and resonance. Charles W. Hedrick Jr. mentions that “silence is not merely the absence of speech; it is the implication of something that might have been said, but is not” (87). In some literary works, silence reflects social issues or cultural contexts, amplifying the unsaid as a powerful commentary on the unspoken complexities of human existence. At the same time, it may illustrate

the suppression of marginalised voices, societal taboos, or power dynamics within a community. The interpretation of silence relies on the context and the author's intention, allowing readers to actively engage with the text and draw their own conclusions.

First published in 1850 and situated in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1642 and 1649, Nathaniel Hawthorne's seminal work of historical fiction, *The Scarlet Letter* revolves around the narrative of Hester Prynne, a woman compelled to wear the emblem of a scarlet letter 'A' as punishment for her act of adultery. Hester, the protagonist of the novel, remains silent when she is asked to speak about the true identity of her lover, and her silent-ness, by arousing further questions and interests among the readers, continues till the end of the novel. The author employs a deliberate utilisation of the technique of 'silence' as a means to intentionally unveil the underlying truth concealed within the factual events. Depending "for its form on the silence of the actors," the novel progresses "amid the dry regions of silence," according to Terence Martin (113). The purposeful silence exhibited by the characters serves as a deliberate device to evoke a sense of suspicion among readers regarding the unfolding events within the story. Their silence also holds symbolic value, representing concepts such as oppression, powerlessness, or the inability to express oneself, and alternatively, it symbolises peace, contemplation, or resistance against oppressive forces.

### **Silence as a Speaking Subject**

In literature, the concept of silence as a 'speaking subject' refers to the notion that silence can hold significance, convey emotions, and communicate messages within a narrative without the need for words. It involves the intentional absence of dialogue, which in itself becomes meaningful and expressive. Silence, as a speaking subject, can take on various roles in literature, functioning as a canvas upon which characters' innermost thoughts and societal nuances are painted. It may serve as a symbolic device, representing deeper emotions or themes. By intentionally omitting dialogue or descriptions, authors invite readers to interpret the silence and uncover its hidden meanings. Indeed, silence holds the remarkable ability to create suspense and tension within a narrative, as it builds anticipation, allowing readers to fill the void with their own interpretations and intensifying the emotional impact of pivotal moments in the story. When characters remain silent during critical moments, it can heighten anticipation and create a sense of mystery. The absence of words can amplify the importance of what remains unsaid, resulting in a dramatic impact and signifying power dynamics within a story. The deliberate silence of a powerful character can exert influence or instil fear more effectively than words. Furthermore, silence can be a form of communication between characters, representing understanding, empathy, or shared experiences. In such cases, silence becomes a language of its own, allowing individuals to connect on a deeper level beyond verbal expression.

The theme of 'silence' functions as an expressive entity that uncovers the harsh truth surrounding a specific event in the context of the narrative. By establishing a realm uniquely reserved for the readers, the presence of silence engenders a palpable tension, captivating their curiosity and instilling a yearning to unravel the crucial moments within the narrative. In the novel, Roger Chillingworth, the legitimate husband of Hester, possesses the "lock and key of her silence" (Hawthorne 93). Arthur Dimmesdale, the father of Hester's illegitimate child, is the fundamental reason for Hester's silence. Choosing not to speak or being silenced by others can reveal social hierarchies, dominance, or submission. The act of silencing Hester's voice by both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, two prominent male characters of the novel, holds significant implications for contemporary socio-political matters:

The silence of women is sometimes the product of the values of their societies. Women who live in traditional societies are more affected by traumatic situations because the forces of society do not allow them to talk. Their society does not accept the reality of women's problems, so women prefer to be silent rather than condemning themselves to a lifetime of derision from their community. (Haghshenas and Anushiravani 9913)

In the novel, Hester is a marginalised character who has been represented as a subservient woman to masculine doctrines and enterprises. Through her refusal to acknowledge the truth, she emerges as a symbolic embodiment of silence within the narrative. In this context, Helene Cixous states that it is only "by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (251). As silence emerges as a powerful literary device that intricately nurtures the development of individual characters throughout a narrative, it takes a key role in extending the momentum of the novel's unfolding events.

Hester, as a passive entity within a society dominated by men, assumes the role of a silent 'object'; her voice is subdued by the silence emanating from both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, representatives of a patriarchal social structure. According to feminist critics, it is often observed that women are purposefully marginalised or silenced within texts authored by men, serving as a means to maintain their dependence and powerlessness. Hester's silence and the inability to speak out the truth can be studied in the context of feminist criticism; it is thought to be appropriate due to Arthur Dimmesdale's own silence, and it is also ironic at the same time as a number of feminist critics assert that "women are customarily 'silenced' in male-authored texts in order to be rendered powerless" (Person 471). A comparable narrative dynamic can be discerned in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where a similar pattern of silencing women's voices is evident- "in the same way an author both generates and imprisons his fictive creatures, he silences them by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life" (Gilbert and Gubar 14).

### **Silence as a Tactical Model of Individuality**

In his exploration of the influential role of silence, Nathaniel Hawthorne demonstrates a prescient anticipation of Terry Eagleton's observation- "it is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt" (34-35). The silence maintained by Hester, seen as a strategic approach, serves to illuminate the political dynamics of resistance and contributes to the development of the novel's plot. She finds herself subjected to a society where her voice is effectively stifled by numerous underlying complexities, leading her to maintain a state of profound silence. In her entire life journey, she comes in contact with those people who have made her feel as if she belongs to a different society-

In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. (Hawthorne 67):

The silence exhibited by Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth contributes significantly to the revelation of an authentic truth throughout the entire narrative. "Silence, an inarticulate breath" (Hawthorne 98) becomes the catalyst for internal strife experienced by the three prominent characters- "the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* depends upon a conspiracy of silence among Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. Hester refuses to identify Pearl's father in the opening

scene and then takes an oath of silence when Chillingworth asks her not to reveal his identity” (Person 468). Chillingworth finds himself disconcerted by Hester’s silence, while Dimmesdale discovers solace within it. In essence, her silence serves a dual purpose, catering to the needs and intentions of both these characters. As she remains silent, it aids in fulfilling Chillingworth’s purpose to find out the accused, but at the same time, Dimmesdale’s suffering gets heightened by the process- “Hester’s silence, for example, simultaneously aids and frustrates Chillingworth’s plot. By keeping this ‘second secret,’ she tacitly helps him torment Dimmesdale and might even be accused of conspiring to kill his patient. By keeping Dimmesdale’s secret, she frustrates Chillingworth’s efforts, but in the process, she prolongs Dimmesdale’s pain” (Person 469).

From the vantage point of a contemporary socio-political context, the Puritans’ treatment of Hester can be perceived as reducing her to a mere ‘object’ subjected to patriarchal norms and societal control. However, Hester defies this subjugation by forging her own distinct individual identity, refusing to succumb to their demands of revealing the truth. Through her resistance against the norms imposed by the patriarchal society, she has managed to carve out her own unique sense of individuality, to a certain extent-

The narrative calls attention to the “feminine” discourse of silence and gives it a power as great or greater than the logos of patriarchy. Her refusal to name the father of her child... gives Hester a greater individuality. She does not conform to an acceptable model of womanhood that reflects the man to whom she might belong; she belongs to no man in her community, and thus projects her own meaning. (Last 360)

By rebuffing the rigid dictates of the Puritan society, Hester establishes to identify her own individuality being a woman of a ‘unique’ personality who is completely different from other women of her time. She maintains her independent identity by defying the rules and regulations of the Puritan society, particularly by refusing to disclose her lover’s identity.

In the novel, Hester tactically employs silence as a formidable weapon against the authority of the Puritans, thereby forging her own individuality in the face of the oppressive nature inherent in their society. Although her independent spirit is scrutinised by the Puritans, she persistently refuses to succumb to their coercion in disclosing the identity of the accused, Dimmesdale. In a sense, Hester “has separated herself from all the principles set up by the Puritans. These initial steps taken by Hester shows that she is taking her first step towards a sort of Emerson’s philosophy of self- reliance” (Jahan and Abidi 101). The Puritan magistrates themselves are compelled to acknowledge and even admire Hester’s unwavering resolve in withholding the name of her child’s father. She does not accept Mr. Wilson’s offer of taking off the scarlet letter by disclosing the name of Pearl’s unlawful father. Instead, she says that the scarlet letter ‘A’ “... is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!” (Hawthorne 55). Her refusal to divulge the truth manifests as a rebellious nature, constituting a strategic employment of silence to assert her power within a society dominated by men. Michel Foucault argues, although in another context, that “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (27). The statement “my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!” shows her robust determination to protect her lover from the criticism of society (Hawthorne 55).

### **Revelation of Truth through Silence**

The silence maintained by both Hester and Dimmesdale unveils the hidden narrative of their clandestine relationship within the novel. Dimmesdale, burdened by his incapacity to disclose the truth, endures an inner turmoil in solitude. He gradually comes to comprehend that silence “confers a power only slightly less than divine. Little does he realize how the power of silence can and will be used against him” (Person 469). The trajectory of Dimmesdale’s life ultimately culminates in self-destruction, a consequence born out of the weighty burden of his silence- “Arthur Dimmesdale

suffers during the seven years of silence. The source of his anguish is the regret he feels for his sin. Guilt eats away at his very soul and threatens to destroy him” (Londhe 4). Even Roger Chillingworth has also refrained himself from revealing the truth that he is the husband of Hester Prynne. So, Michael Ragussis states that a “ban of silence lies on everyone in *The Scarlet Letter*,” and the “act of speech” is “suppressed from without and repressed from within” to conceal the truth behind the intricate web of familial connections (863).

Hester’s transgression is depicted as casting a strain upon the entire community, leading to a collective gathering of its members to demand retribution for her actions. However, her refusal to acknowledge the sin of adultery through her silence is perceived as a violation against the natural order of things- “Adultery is a crime against society, but Hester’s silence begins to look like a crime against nature” (Ragussis 864). She preserves her silence with the intention of protecting the life of Arthur Dimmesdale, her beloved, during her husband Chillingworth’s absence. This course of action is driven by her desire to honour the love shared with Dimmesdale, there by evoking a sense of sympathy among the readers- “Hester, all by herself, a lonely woman struggling independently for survival in a totally alien land, wins certain excusable sympathy toward her transgressive behavior from the reader” (Wang 547). Simultaneously, Hester’s silence inflicts prolonged suffering upon Dimmesdale, as he grapples with the burden of concealing their clandestine relationship until his eventual self-confession. Her deliberate silence also serves as a means to obfuscate the distinction between Dimmesdale, her lover, and Chillingworth, her husband, safeguarding their respective identities. Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth desire Hester’s continued silence to fulfil their own individual desires, preventing the disclosure of the truth to society. Her silence thus generates an atmosphere of ambiguity, blurring the boundaries between the actions of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth-

The silence Hester keeps in order to protect her lover merges with the silence that prevents him from discover-ing the identity of his worst enemy. If speech is the medium for recognizing the difference between kindred and enemy, silence dissolves the difference between the real father and the evil father-surrogate or “enemy.” (Ragussis 865)

## **Conclusion**

In the novel, silence assumes a discernible social relevance as it is employed to elucidate the complexities surrounding the event in question. It brings forth the concern that “silence may be a product of oppression or it may be a means of resistance against oppression” (Roberts 344). At the same time, it offers an opportunity for readers to comprehend the pivotal moments of the event throughout the narrative’s development and action. Almost at the outset of the novel, Hester chooses silence when questioned about the father of her child, Pearl. This incites a specific response among the onlookers, arousing the curiosity of readers to ascertain the true identity of Pearl’s father. Hester’s silence, which becomes “a metaphor for communication,” to quote Adam Jaworsky, assumes a pivotal role in shaping the plot and progression of the novel (3). Therefore, the paper provides a remarkable exposition of an event that has been illuminated and explored through the thematic lens of silence.

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