

Hester Prynne's Character in the Scarlet Letter (1850): A Cognitive Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

The present study aims to conduct a cognitive stylistic analysis of the characterization in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), specifically the character of the protagonist, Hester Prynne. Combining the perspectives of cognitive psychology and literary analysis, the study explores the linguistic and stylistic devices that Hawthorne employs to create and develop the character of Hester Prynne by utilizing the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics (Gavins & Steen, 2003). The study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze selected excerpts of the novel from the perspective of cognitive stylistics, resulting in the fact that the combination of linguistic and stylistic devices used by Hawthorne, such as metaphor, imagery, and irony, constructs a character in Hester Prynne that is multi-dimensional and complex. The study provides a greater insight and analysis of Hester Prynne's character construction as the novel's protagonist, as well as an enhanced grasp of the literary character development process in light of the cognitive progressions in the novel.

Keywords: Character development, cognitive stylistic analysis, metaphor, imagery, irony

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne first published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. Set in the Puritan community of seventeenth-century Boston, the novel tells the story of Hester Prynne, a woman forced to commit adultery and wear a scarlet letter "A" on her chest as a symbol of her shame and sin. In large part, the novel is an exploration of the relationship between sin, guilt, and redemption as well as an examination of the role that society plays in shaping individual identity. Above all, the novel portrays Hester's character as a strong and complex figure, challenging readers to rethink their assumptions about the nature of sin, morality, and the very function of societal norms. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne employs a wide variety of linguistic and stylistic devices to develop Hester's character and to construct the narrative, including metaphor, imagery, and, notably, irony.

The complexity and power of Hester's character are another aspect of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) that sets it apart from other works of fiction. The people in her community ostracize and shame Hester, yet despite her public humiliation, she resists self-pity, resentment, or despair. She remains steadfast in her pursuit of a meaningful life for herself and her daughter, and this resilience is part of why she is such a compelling figure. Because of this, Hester forces readers to reevaluate their own lives, beliefs, and moral values, ensuring that she will continue to inspire and evoke sympathy like few other characters in literature.

Hester is a figure who invites readers to question the nature of sin and redemption. As she grapples with her individual sense of guilt and her censure from society, she questions the concept of redemption as well as the morality politics entertained by religion. She encourages readers to not only empathize with her strength and courage, but also to contemplate how experience and belief can shape human behavior.

In short, Hester Prynne's powerful construction and development in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) are an important part of why she remains one of the most important and powerful figures in American literature. The novel continues to be a thought-provoking meditation on society, morality, and the nature of human identity, and for this, readers have Hester to thank.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is often described as the greatest work of literature ever crafted by an American author. The novel tells the story of Hester Prynne, a woman forced to wear a scarlet "A" on her chest as a mark of shame for her adultery. The text explores sin, redemption, and the consequences of social isolation in remarkable depth. Literary scholars have

evaluated the novel through diverse critical lenses, including feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and historicism. However, we have yet to explore the construction of the characters in the text from a cognitive perspective. Cognitive stylistics is an emerging academic field that seeks to apply the principles of cognitive psychology to understand the cognitive processes that underpin readers' comprehension and interpretation of literary texts.

The present portrait seeks to contribute to the field of literary studies by probing the linguistic and stylistic means through which Hawthorne constructs the character of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), as well as the cognitive processes that underpin readers' comprehension and interpretation of this character.

The research will contribute to the field of literary studies by providing deeper insights into the character of Hester Prynne and her significance in the novel, as well as uncovering some of the cognitive processes involved in character construction. The study will be of significance to scholars and students of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and, more generally, to readers interested in cognitive approaches to literature. Finally, it will demonstrate the potential of cognitive stylistics in literary analysis.

Statement of the Problem:

The study is concerned with identifying Hawthorne's linguistic and stylistic devices used in the construction of Hester's character, as well as investigating the cognitive processes involved in readers' comprehension and interpretation of this character. By taking Hester Prynne as its object of analysis, the research highlights the potential of cognitive stylistics as a tool for the study of literary character and thereby suggests a new direction for literary studies, particularly in their analysis of character.

Research Questions

1. What linguistic and stylistic devices does Hawthorne utilise in constructing and developing the character of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)?
2. What role does metaphor play in the construction and development of Hester's character in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)?
3. How does imagery contribute to the construction and development of Hester's character in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research from the perspective of the cognitive stylistic analysis of characterization in Hester Prynne, the central character of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), lies in its potential to provide a deeper understanding of the character of Hester Prynne and her role in the novel. Through an analysis of the linguistic and stylistic devices used by Hawthorne to construct Hester's character and an examination of the cognitive processes that come into play when readers comprehend and interpret this character, this study aims to clarify the intricacies involved in character construction in literature. Moreover, a second aim of this research is to underscore the potential of cognitive stylistics to serve as a tool for literary analysis. By applying principles of cognitive psychology to the analysis of literary texts, this research aims to illustrate the ways in which devices such as metaphor, imagery, irony, etc. shape readers' understanding of characters, as well as the ways in which such devices contribute to a work's overall meaning.

Literature Review

Cognitive stylistics, a branch of cognitive linguistics (Gavins & Steen, 2003), investigates the emotional and cognitive impacts that texts have on literate readers. Semino and Culpeper (2002) posit that characters in texts, influenced by the text's language and interpretation, shape the reader's cognitive and emotional responses. Cognitive stylistics is the crossroads of linguistics, cognitive science and literary studies that is integration of linguistic analysis with cognitive theories (Stockwell, 2002; Semino & Culpeper, 2002).

In narrative fiction characters are analysed as "text-based mental models of possible individuals" (Margolin, 2007), which are built in a reader's mind. The connection between literature and psychology is "the products of cognizing minds" and identifies interpretations as "the products of other cognizing minds in the context of the physical and socio-cultural worlds in which they have been created and read" (Freeman, 2000). The comprehension of metaphor as a process of thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; et al.) gave it a central place in theories of human cognition and communication. Consequently, metaphor has attracted particular attention in the studies of narrative fiction (Turner, 1991; Semino, 2002; Zunshine, 2006; Palmer, 2007; et al.) from linguistic and cognitive perspectives.

Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive stylistics in analysing character construction in literature. Semino and Culpeper (2002) used cognitive stylistics to analyse Sherlock Holmes' character in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories, demonstrating the character's construction through the use of metaphor, imagery, and other linguistic devices. Gavins and Steen (2003) also applied cognitive stylistics to character analysis, using metaphor as a means of characterising the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; they revealed how the use of metaphor in the novel was a means of constructing the character and thereby also the meaning of the novel. Regarding studies concerning the characterization of the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), previous research has largely considered the themes of sin and redemption. For instance, Capps (2006) examined Hester Prynne, the protagonist of the novel, arguing that Hester was a symbol of sin and redemption; indeed, Capps explained that Hester did embody the theme of redemption through suffering.

While there have been a number of cognitive stylistic studies of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) that analyse the novel's linguistic and stylistic features from various perspectives, few have adopted a cognitive stylistic approach to investigating the construction of Hester's character. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by offering an analysis of how Hawthorne's linguistic and stylistic choices facilitate the construction of Hester as a character in *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as the cognitive processes through which readers understand and interpret this character.

This study strongly supports research on cognitive stylistics and character analysis. This suggests that cognitive stylistics is a valuable tool for character development, and studying cognitive stylistics could improve our understanding of fictional characters.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study employs a qualitative research design. The novel's original text is the primary source of research, with various published articles and reviews serving as secondary sources. The present study's theoretical framework aligns with the principles of cognitive stylistics, drawing from cognitive psychology and literary criticism. Gavins and Steen (2003, p. 65) explain that cognitive stylistics is a discipline within literary criticism that approaches the analysis of literary texts from the perspective of the cognitive and affective processing involved in their comprehension and interpretation. Zwaan and Radvansky (1998) argue that readers' comprehension of characters in literature relies on their mental representations of the character, built on the integration of information from the text with their prior experience and world knowledge. The use of linguistic devices like metaphor (Zunshine, 2006), image schemas (Gavins & Steen, 2003), symbolism (Ruczaj, 1992: 241-22), and irony (Fisch, 2007) is instrumental in shaping the reader's interpretation and understanding of the character and contributes to the overall meaning of a literary work.

Data Analysis

There are several linguistic and stylistic devices that Hawthorne uses to construct and develop the character of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). First, Hawthorne uses the technique of the extended metaphor to convey the complexity of Hester's character. Hawthorne compares Hester to a flower that "grew out of the rank earth and the unsightly asphodel" (48), symbolising her ability to grow and thrive even in the most challenging circumstances. Second, Hawthorne relies heavily on rich imagery to paint a vivid picture of Hester and her environment. The description of the scarlet letter as "fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom" (50) not only enhances the reader's imagination, but also establishes a metaphor where the garment symbolizes her shame, shining like a jailbreak light in the darkness of the night. Third, Hawthorne uses irony and paradox in developing Hester's character. Despite facing ostracism and punishment from her community, Hester unexpectedly demonstrates incredible strength and resilience.

Fourth, Hawthorne uses Hester's interactions with other characters to reveal different facets of her personality. For instance, her interactions with Reverend Dimmesdale reveal her capacity for empathy and compassion, while her interactions with Roger Chillingworth reveal her capacity for anger and defiance. Finally, Hawthorne uses Hester's dialogue to convey her thoughts and emotions. Her use of irony and sarcasm, for example, reflects her frustration with the hypocrisy and double standards of her community. How do readers understand and interpret Hester Prynne's character in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and what cognitive processes are involved in this comprehension and interpretation? The comprehension and interpretation of the character of Hester Prynne in the novel involve several cognitive processes, including attention, perception, memory, and inference. First, readers must pay attention to the details presented in the text that contribute to the construction and development of Hester's character. These details may include her physical appearance, her actions, her interactions with other characters, and her dialogue.

This cognitive process consists of several stages. First, readers must attend to the detailed description of Hester's face, her emotions, the song she is singing, and her actions with her daughter. This process involves several interconnected mechanisms, including the perception of visual and auditory features, the extraction of facial and emotional expressions, and the automatic detection of song lyrics.

Second, readers must map these details onto a coherent and integrated mental representation of Hester's character. The processes of activation and integration of distributed mental representations are required, including visual records of Hester's face and hands, auditory records representing the mechanisms of song lyrics, and semantic records associated with Hester and her emotional expression.

Third, readers must keep the text's details active in their minds and establish connections between different pieces of information about Hester. In this scenario, readers must retrieve and integrate their stored prior knowledge about Hester with what they are currently learning in the text to create a coherent representation of her character.

Finally, readers must make inferences and draw conclusions about why Hester is behaving as she is, how she feels, and what she believes. This process employs general knowledge, personal experiences, and cultural norms to explain the character's motivations, emotions, and beliefs. To form a mental representation of why Hester is acting in this particular way and singing this particular song, readers must draw upon general world knowledge, particularly the historical prevalence of sad or mournful songs. Other than Hester quietly singing to herself (e.g., the song "that has so long been suspended, and which was pouring forth almost as if it were a stream of the saddest thoughts, in tones that were broken and tremulous") and her hands holding her child, a pulse of sadness continued to beat for her child as the song emerged from her lips. Ultimately, when readers portray Hester's character in this passage, they will create a new primitive that represents the feeling of sorrow. Readers will link this primitive to visual records of Hester and Pearl in the house, auditory records of Hester singing, and semantic records associated with her sorrow. It will also provide a potential explanation for the feeling of profound happiness in sorrow, such as her personal history and how it might have led her to experience such feelings.

Hawthorne describes Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne describes Hester as an extended metaphor for a rosebush. This rosebush is something beautiful growing in an otherwise unfriendly and harsh environment. The novel lays it out very early, when Hester emerges from the prison, where she awaited trial for several months, and leads her to the scaffold, where she faces public humiliation and identification as an adulteress. The novel describes her first appearance as follows: "In this month of June, a wild rose adorns the doorstep, adorned with delicate gems, symbolizing the deep heart of nature's compassion and kindness towards the prisoner as he enters and the condemned criminal as he faces his fate (41).

This metaphor emphasises Hester's internal resilience and strength, as well as her ability to grow and change. It underscores the stark opposition between her vitality and beauty in contrast to the severity of her surroundings, highlighting her status as an outcast and living symbol of sin in the community.

"What was it? The complaint of a human heart, sorrow-laden, perchance guilty, telling its secret, whether of guilt or sorrow, to the vast heart of mankind; beseeching its sympathy or forgiveness—at every moment—in each accent—and never in vain!" (Chapter 21).

Another metaphor used to describe Hester is that of a flame or light, which illustrates her spiritual and emotional intensity. For instance, the description of Hester as "radiant" and the likening of her beauty to "a newly created Eve" occur when she removes her scarlet letter and lets down her hair inside the forest. This metaphor serves to underscore Hester's passionate nature and her ability to love and desire despite the limitations and strictures placed around her by her society.

Metaphor plays a crucial role in the construction and development of Hester's character in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). By weaving a complex and multifaceted web of metaphor around Hester, Hawthorne deepens readers' understanding of her inner life and emotional world, drawing connections between her resilience, strength, and beauty and the actual or potential meanings of various elements of her character. At the same time, Hawthorne uses metaphor to create a stark contrast between the vitality of Hester's inner world and the harshness of the world that surrounds her, making it possible to read Hester as an extraordinarily vivid, luminous, and lifelike embodiment of the novel's principal themes: the nature of sin, redemption, and the power of the human spirit.

The use of imagery heavily influences the construction and development of Hester's character in the story, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In the novel, Hawthorne employs a diverse array of vivid and evocative imagery, revealing intricate details about Hester's physical appearance, her extravagant attire, and the harsh Puritan New England environment she must endure. However, Hawthorne ultimately intends this imagery to function as a metaphor, portraying Hester's liminal, marginal psychological and emotional state while also reflecting the cultural nature of this state's liminality or marginality. Hawthorne uses scarlet as a symbol in the novel.

They asserted that the symbol was not merely a scarlet cloth, tinted in an earthly dye pot, but was ablaze with infernal fire, illuminating the night sky whenever Hester Prynne ventured out. And we must say, it seared Hester's bosom so deeply that perhaps there was more truth in the rumour than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit".

For instance, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes Hester's scarlet letter in vivid detail: "It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of ordinary relations with humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself." Furthermore, when Hester casts one of the most persistent symbols in literature aside, Hawthorne writes, "The mystic token alighted on the hither verge of the stream. With a hand's breadth further flight, it would have fallen into the water and given the little brook another woe to carry onward, besides the unintelligible tale that it still kept murmuring about." Here, he reinforces the "weight" of the letter and Hester's emotional and psychological state.

In addition to the scarlet letter, imagery of Hester's physical appearance and clothing flesh out her character in *The Scarlet Letter*, as monumental a symbol as she is. Hester appears in the novel initially wearing a "rich, elaborate, and oriental" dress—not only does this emphasise her great beauty and femininity, but also her status as something of a strange and exotic figure, plainly estranged from New England society—but as a rich man's wife set apart from the common Puritans. Later, when she is literally "outcast," both physically and culturally, Hester's clothes are "plain but exquisitely neat," with no ornamentation at all. These details of Hester's bearing serve to greatly enrich the reader's understanding of her passions, terror, terrible resolve, and great "strength and movement." They underline the novel's major themes of sin, guilt, and redemption, as well as the great powers of symbolism that emerge throughout the story, which are amplified and made real through their use.

Irony is a key component in shaping and developing Hester's character in the novel. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne employs irony to create a distance between appearance and reality, challenging readers' perceptions and forcing them to question their assumptions about Hester and the reasons behind her actions.

Hester commits her adultery, her sin, out of love, yet the society that puritanically claims to value it seeks to punish and ostracize her for it. This shows the Puritans' hypocrisy and the novel's central themes of sin and redemption from Hester's perspective.

"Her fate and fortunes had a tendency to set her free." The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (Chapter 18).

Another key irony is the way Hester transitions from a figure of sin and shame to one of compassion and kindness. Through her ostracism and public shaming, Hester could've become bitter and cruel, yet she instead moves past the hatred of those around her, becoming the kindest and most compassionate figure in the novel, caring for and nurturing the sick and dying and fighting for the rights of other women and outcasts. This serves to challenge the readers' assumptions about who Hester is and to show how deep and complicated a character Hester truly is.

Irony plays several crucial roles in the construction and development of Hester's character in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). First, it serves to deepen readers' understanding of her motives and actions, challenging them to question their own assumptions about morality, justice, and human behavior. Secondly, it highlights the potency of irony as a literary tool and its influence on readers' perceptions and interpretations of characters and events. Adopting a cognitive stylistic perspective on character construction in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) could yield new insights into literary character, and these insights could enhance our comprehension of the role of literary language in presenting human "selves" to readers. Here, it becomes clear that a cognitive stylistic analysis of character construction in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) can make several important contributions to our understanding of how readers construct and interpret character in literary texts. Looking at Hawthorne's writing style and language as a structured system of

meaning helps us understand how metaphor, imagery, and irony played a part in building and changing Hester's character. These devices are part of more complex processes of character creation and interpretation. Through these lenses, Hester emerges as a prototypical literary character, inasmuch as she is a conceptually rich cultural artefact whose primary function lies in its ability to ground diverse acts of interpretation in complex, dynamic, inner psychological states.

Finally, by providing new insight into how readers interpret and understand literary texts, a cognitive stylistic analysis of character construction in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) has the potential to enrich literary studies more broadly.

"The days of the distant future would continue, carrying the same burden with her" (Chapter 5).

It further highlights Hester's ability to progressively establish a fresh reputation for herself. As she puts in a lot of effort and establishes herself as a capable and valuable member of the community, people gradually begin to suspect that the scarlet letter ("it") could represent something different. The quotation illustrates Hester's unwavering perseverance in the face of extreme hardship.

"They said it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (Chapter 13).

By uncovering the cognitive processes by which readers understand characters in literary texts, researchers can develop a deeper understanding of how literature functions within an audience and how it has the power to shape cultural, social, and individual structures and values.

To sum up the discussion, a cognitive stylistic analysis of character construction in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) serves a commendable purpose. Raising awareness of the complex and dynamic relationship between literature, language, and cognition is a worthwhile contribution to ongoing efforts to understand how literary texts create meaning and contribute to our construction of the world around us.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a cognitive stylistic analysis of the formation and development of Hester Prynne's character in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) can provide insight into how readers perceive and interpret literary characters. Through the exploitation of various linguistic and stylistic devices like metaphor, imagery, and irony, Nathaniel Hawthorne creates a complex and multi-faceted character that challenges readers' assumptions and forces them to come to terms with their own beliefs and values. The analysis of Hester's character's construction and development has, furthermore, illuminated how readers' contextual information and background knowledge, their personal experiences and attitudes, and the operation of their cognitive faculties serve to construct a mental model of the character, as well as how processes such as emotion, empathy, and moral reasoning mediate the reading and interpretation of literary characters.

Beyond character construction in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), this sort of cognitive stylistic analysis can also open up fresh perspectives in literary studies: towards how it is that literary texts make meaning, shape the world, and make human understanding; in so doing, literary texts activate the cognitive processes that we bring to bear when we interpret characters, events, and indeed, entire fictional worlds. In this respect, a cognitive stylistic analysis of characterization can effectively relate the notion of the cognitive interface to larger, more general issues about literature's operations, cultural values, social ideologies, and collective memories. In sum, what is literature to think about? As I have sought to show here, the cognitive stylistic analysis of characterization in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) both enriches our comprehension of the novel and the people who ineluctably populate it, joining them in ways that enable a revised understanding of the fraught concatenation of literature, language, and human cognition.

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