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Values and Morals of the Western Community in Different Ages in Selected Novels(*)

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Abstract

The values and morals of Western communities vary significantly across different eras, heavily influenced by socio-cultural and religious contexts. However, these values and morals can be abandoned or transformed over time due to various circumstances. The convictions and traditions rooted in socio-cultural and religious values often clash with the interests and beliefs of newer generations. This study examines two novels from different periods that have also been adapted into films due to the significance of their social context: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (published in 1850) and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (published in 2005 and translated into English 2008). By exploring the historical context and the evolution of socio-cultural values, the study investigates how communities view their socio-cultural and religious legacies and their inclination to challenge or uphold these values. The study reveals that new generations often reject traditional socio-cultural and religious values, while earlier generations strive to maintain them. The older generations view the abandonment of these values and morals as a sin that brings disrepute to the individual within the community. This tension between maintaining traditional values and embracing new beliefs is a central theme in both novels.

Keywords: socio-cultural context, western community, scarlet letter, dragon tattoo, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Stieg Larsson, Scio-cultural, religious values.



قيم وأخلاق المجتمع الغربي في العصور المختلفة في روايات مختارة

د/ رشاد محمد مقبل العريقي

أستاذ مشارك في الأدب الإنجليزي بكلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية
قسم اللغات الأجنبية - جامعة الباحة - المملكة العربية السعودية

الملخص

تختلف قيم وأخلاق المجتمعات الغربية بشكل كبير عبر العصور المختلفة، وتتأثر بشدة بالسياقات الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية. إلا أن هذه القيم والأخلاق يمكن التخلي عنها أو تغييرها بمرور الوقت بسبب الظروف المختلفة. غالبًا ما تتعارض المعتقدات والتقاليد المتجذرة في القيم الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية مع مصالح ومعتقدات الأجيال الجديدة. تتناول هذه الدراسة روايتين من فترات مختلفة تم تحويلهما أيضًا إلى أفلام نظرًا لأهمية سياقهما الاجتماعي: "الحرف القرمزي" لناثانيال هوثورن (نشرت عام 1850)، و"الفتاة ذات وشم التنين" لستيغ لارسون (نشرت عام 2005 وترجمت إلى الإنجليزية عام 2008). ومن خلال استكشاف السياق التاريخي وتطور القيم الاجتماعية والثقافية، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية رؤية المجتمعات لتراثها الاجتماعي والثقافي والديني وميلها إلى تحدي هذه القيم أو التمسك بها. وتكشف الدراسة أن الأجيال الجديدة غالبًا ما ترفض القيم الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية التقليدية، في حين تسعى الأجيال السابقة إلى الحفاظ عليها. وتعتبر الأجيال الأكبر سنًا أن التخلي عن هذه القيم والأخلاق خطيئة تسيء إلى سمعة الفرد داخل المجتمع. هذا التوتر بين الحفاظ على القيم التقليدية وأحتضان المعتقدات الجديدة هو موضوع رئيسي في كلتا الروايتين.

كلمات مفتاحية: السياق الاجتماعي والثقافي، المجتمع الغربي، الحرف القرمزي، وشم التنين، ناثانيال هوثورن، ستيغ لارسون، القيم الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية.



Introduction

Community values and morals are not static; they evolve over time due to various circumstances and interests that significantly influence individual beliefs and choices. This study explores two novels from different eras to deeply analyze Western community values and morals and their transformation due to changing societal beliefs. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "*The Scarlet Letter*," published in 1850, is set in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony during the seventeenth century. The novel examines sin, guilt, redemption, and the community's attitude toward these values and morals. It highlights the conflict between communal values and individual choices, exposing the tension between society and the individual.

The narrative follows Hester Prynne, a young woman who conceives a daughter through an extramarital affair and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity. The novel opens with Hester being led to the scaffold in the town square, where she is publicly shamed and forced to wear a scarlet "A" (for Adulteress) on her dress. Shunned by the Puritan community for having a child out of wedlock, Hester lives on the outskirts of society but gradually earns respect for her philanthropic works and quiet dignity. Pearl, Hester's daughter, is a wild and free-spirited child perceived as a living symbol of her mother's sin. Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl's father, is tormented by his hidden sin, leading to the deterioration of his health.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Swedish author Stieg Larsson, originally published in Swedish as *Men Who Hate Women* and translated into English in 2008, combines mystery and crime. The story follows Mikael Blomkvist, a journalist and co-owner of the magazine "Millennium," who is convicted of libeling a powerful businessman, Hans-Erik Wennerström. Disgraced and facing a prison sentence, he is approached by Henrik Vanger, the elderly patriarch of the wealthy Vanger family, to investigate the disappearance of his niece, Harriet, 40 years earlier. The novel explores themes of power abuse, violence against women, justice, and revenge. Blomkvist's investigation uncovers dark secrets within the Vanger family, highlighting the pervasive corruption and violence in their history. Lisbeth Salander, a brilliant but troubled hacker, becomes Blomkvist's partner in the investigation, using her skills to uncover the truth and seek justice. Through the analysis of these two novels, the study delves into the shifting values and



morals in Western communities, illustrating how changes in societal beliefs influence individual and collective actions.

This study aims to address the knowledge gap regarding how different generations across various eras appreciate and engage with their cultural, social, and religious legacies. It explores the extent to which each era is intertwined with its socio-cultural and religious values, examining whether the earlier generations or the contemporary ones maintain stronger ties. By tracing these shifts in human nature and attitudes, this study seeks to illuminate the evolving relationship between individuals and their religious and cultural values, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these elements influence and shape human behavior over time.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

The novel is set in a Puritan village in New England and centers on Hester Prynne, a young woman who has borne a child out of wedlock. Believing her husband to be dead, Hester is shocked when Roger Chillingworth, her husband, arrives in New England and conceals his identity. He discovers that Hester has been condemned to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her dress as punishment for her adultery. When Hester refuses to reveal her lover's identity, Chillingworth becomes obsessed with uncovering the man's identity. Chillingworth eventually learns that Hester's lover is Arthur Dimmesdale, a revered young minister who has been one of the leading voices condemning her. Consumed by revenge, Chillingworth torments Dimmesdale, whose health deteriorates under the weight of his guilt. Hester, meanwhile, emerges as a self-reliant and strong heroine, unrepentant for her affair with Dimmesdale, believing their love to have sanctified their actions. Though initially scorned by the community, Hester's compassion and dignity eventually win over many of her critics. In the end, Chillingworth's monomaniacal quest for revenge leads to his moral downfall. Dimmesdale, overwhelmed by guilt, publicly confesses his adultery before dying in Hester's arms. Hester, showing remarkable resilience, plans to start a new life with her daughter, Pearl, in Europe. However, she eventually returns to New England, continuing to wear the scarlet letter. After her death, she is buried next to Dimmesdale, their shared tombstone bearing the inscription: "ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES" (p. 254).



Hester Prynne, the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, achieves self-reliance and self-sufficiency through her individual ability to chart her life's path and find fulfillment by making responsible, free choices. Hester's journey is marked by several critical decisions that showcase her strength and integrity. Firstly, Hester chooses not to disclose the identity of her partner in sin, despite facing judgment and condemnation. She gracefully accepts the jury's verdict to wear the scarlet letter "A" as a badge of shame on her chest for the rest of her life. This acceptance reflects her willingness to bear the burden of her actions without implicating others. Secondly, Hester decides to remain in the same community that shuns her, despite the immense suffering it brings. She resolves to endure the hardships and, over time, reintegrates herself into the community, attempting to change her status and ultimately succeeding in doing so. Through her charitable deeds and quiet dignity, Hester transforms the meaning of the scarlet letter from a symbol of shame to one of honor and acceptance. These decisions are marked by existential freedom, demonstrating Hester's profound sense of commitment and responsibility for their consequences. As an existential individual, Hester navigates her suffering and turns her badge of ignominy into one of respect and admiration. In essence, Hester Prynne is presented as an existential figure who transforms her predicament into a blessing through resilience and personal integrity.

Puritan New England Values and Morals

It is evident that Puritan New England during that era punished the vice of adultery by forcing Hester Prynne to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her dress. This symbolized her shame and sin, publicly exposing her affair and adultery. "Let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart" (47). This line, spoken by one of the townswomen at the beginning of the novel, highlights a critical aspect of Hester's punishment. While the visible scarlet letter is intended to publicly shame Hester, the true source of her suffering lies in her inner, personal knowledge of her sin. This suggests that the physical mark is almost superfluous; Hester's emotional and psychological guilt will perpetually haunt her, inflicting a deeper and more enduring pain than any external symbol ever could.

Hester embodies a morality based on the free conscience of individuals rather than on religious authority. She strongly believes in humanitarian love



and the antinomian freedom of religion, celebrating the sanctity of the human heart. According to Hester's theology, only God has the power to punish the damned or forgive wrongdoings. She asserts that no human or political institution has the authority to punish individuals for breaches of divine law, as such offenses are not against the state, nor can authorities act as agents of God's will. Consequently, Hester rejects the state's right to punish her actions, arguing that they fall within the realm of personal and non-political matters. Her stance challenges the established moral and political standards of her Puritan community, advocating for a more personal and compassionate approach to morality and justice.

The study of history reveals that each generation tends to judge its predecessors based on contemporary standards rather than the standards of the past. This tendency often results in anachronistic and potentially unjust assessments. Hawthorne, however, advocates for a more nuanced and sophisticated approach. He seeks to revive the past and examine it through the lens of the present, allowing the past to speak for itself and respond to contemporary critiques. Hawthorne emphasizes that the circumstances and conditions of bygone eras were different from those of today. Most importantly, he illustrates that simplistic moral judgments about the past fail to provide new insights; they merely reinforce our current beliefs. By understanding the unique contexts of past times, we gain a deeper and more accurate comprehension of history (Bloom. P. 17).

The townswoman's observation underscores the futility and redundancy of the public punishment. It implies that societal efforts to mark and shame are secondary to the profound impact of personal conscience. Hester's internal torment is the real punishment, demonstrating that the most potent form of retribution comes from within. This argument challenges the efficacy and morality of public shaming as a form of justice, suggesting that true repentance and suffering are deeply personal experiences that cannot be fully addressed or mitigated by external means. Although the letter "A" initially served as a source of torment and disturbance, Hester endeavors to change its meaning to one of integrity and deep love. While the community views the letter as a mark of shame and sin, Hester perceives it as a representation of profound and sincere love.



Darbandi and Beyad (2024) argued:

The Puritan world of sin, predestination and immutable law is continually challenged by Hester Prynne—the heroine—who, despite being marked as an infamous adulterer, refuses to accept the evilness of her action and seeks to re-evaluate her values utilizing her own free will rather than leaning on the dark stricture of seventeenth-century Puritan authority (36).

The community not only ostracizes Hester but also rejects her illegitimate daughter, maintaining silence regarding her sin and vice. By forcing Hester to wear the scarlet letter, the community ensures her sin is publicly known. Adultery, viewed as an intolerable sin, especially when it results in a child, marks her daughter as a symbol of her vice. Despite this, Hester chooses to bear her actions alone, protecting the identity of her daughter's father to shield him from the community's contempt, as he holds a religious position as a minister.

Hester displays remarkable strength of character throughout the novel, accepting her punishment with grace and without harboring resentment. She maintains her personal integrity and control over her own actions, including her own sin. Despite being harshly judged and ostracized by her community for a crime that, while serious, is not beyond understanding, Hester rises above her circumstances to become a benefactor to the very people who condemned her. She transforms into a symbol and a prophetic figure for the Puritan community of Boston, with her story taking on various interpretations over time. Hester faces significant trials, not only due to the harsh treatment from her community but also because of her deep concern for the well-being of her daughter, Pearl. Her noble decision to protect Dimmesdale's identity places Pearl in a precarious moral situation. Hester's commitment to preserving Dimmesdale's secret demonstrates her profound strength and integrity, even when it complicates her daughter's future.

Hester and Dimmesdale, the minister and father of the child, prioritize their love over the socio-cultural and religious values of their community. Dimmesdale, despite being a symbol of religious virtue, violates these sacred values by committing adultery, a sin prohibited in Christianity and other divine religions. Hester, believing herself to be a widow, is shocked when her husband, Chillingworth, returns and sees the scarlet letter on her dress.



Concealing his identity, Chillingworth seeks to torture Dimmesdale and make him suffer for his guilt and sin. Stricken by guilt, Dimmesdale becomes increasingly ill, while Hester, showing no regret or repentance, and views her daughter Pearl as a precious product of their love. Hester names her daughter "Pearl" to symbolize her love and pride. Dimmesdale, unable to continue hiding the truth, regrets allowing Hester to bear the consequences of their love alone. Ultimately, he publicly confesses his adultery with Hester before dying in her arms. (Bloom, p. 17).

In the end, the scarlet letter "A" is embroidered with golden threads, transforming its meaning from a symbol of adultery to one of deep love and loyalty. It becomes a mark of love and integrity rather than sin and vice, suggesting that the apparent sinners are, in fact, and the most virtuous. Hester's story exposes the vulnerability of socio-cultural and religious values in the Puritan community, highlighting the social oppression and psychological repression. Hester undermines the Puritans' moral rigidity and initiates a radical reform of moral and political standards. Ultimately, personal integrity triumphs over the constraints of social and religious control and domination.

The Community Attitude towards the Illegal Child, Pearl, and Symbols

Several years pass, during which Hester supports herself by working as a seamstress, and Pearl grows into a willful and impish child. Shunned by the community, they live in a small cottage on the outskirts of Boston. Despite their isolation, Hester and Pearl remain together, even when community officials attempt to take Pearl away. Arthur Dimmesdale, a young and eloquent minister, intervenes on their behalf, allowing mother and daughter to stay together. However, Dimmesdale appears to be wasting away, suffering from mysterious heart trouble seemingly caused by psychological distress. Hester watches Pearl frolic in the forest, adorned with flowers, a place where she feels entirely at home. Unlike the social world that has rejected her due to the stigma of her birth, the natural environment accepts Pearl without judgment. By likening the flowers to precious jewels, Hester suggests that society misplaces its values, prioritizing material wealth and social status over the inherent purity and beauty of the natural world. This contrast highlights



the superficiality of societal norms and the true worth found in nature's simplicity and innocence.

Roger Chillingworth, Hester's estranged husband, attaches himself to the ailing minister, offering his services as a physician. Chillingworth moves in with Dimmesdale to provide round-the-clock care, but he harbors suspicions that there is a connection between the minister's torments and Hester's secret. To uncover the truth, Chillingworth begins to subtly test Dimmesdale. One afternoon, while the minister is asleep, Chillingworth makes a shocking discovery. He finds a mark on Dimmesdale's chest, the details of which are kept from the reader that convinces him his suspicions are correct. This mark confirms the connection between Dimmesdale's suffering and Hester's secret, further deepening the physician's resolve to uncover the full extent of the minister's hidden guilt.

The themes of life and death instincts are vividly portrayed in *The Scarlet Letter*. Feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, and fear envelop the two main characters. Unlike Dimmesdale, who inflicts harm upon himself out of guilt, Hester Prynne exhibits patience and resilience in the face of her shame. The contrast between Dimmesdale and Prynne is particularly intriguing. Dimmesdale serves as a perfect foil to Hester; while both grapple with the same moral dilemma, their responses diverge significantly. Hester is driven by a life instinct, demonstrating strength and perseverance, whereas Dimmesdale is dominated by a death instinct, succumbing to self-destructive behavior. This dichotomy highlights their differing approaches to coping with their shared burden and enriches the narrative's exploration of human psychology.

The Scarlet Letter is a narrative set in a Puritanical society that tells the story of a woman who undergoes a traumatic encounter with a community outwardly committed to religious values but is, in reality, corrupt and hypocritical. This society manipulates religion as a guise for authority, with those who create and enforce the rules being the same individuals who secretly violate them. In this novel, a woman endures the community's restrictions and public shame for transgressing one of God's commands in New England. Meanwhile, a man in a position of power hides his own transgressions, avoiding the very rules he helped establish. The woman has



assimilated and internalized the existing culture and its rules, making her suffering even more poignant (Alghofaili, p. 3).

By comparing these two fictional characters, Hawthorne seems to critique the society of the Puritanical era. Both characters commit adultery, yet the text illustrates that Arthur, a priest, is more overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. In contrast, Hester Prynne is portrayed as a victim who suffers immensely because she bears the moral burden alone. This comparison underscores the double standards and harsh judgment prevalent in their society, highlighting the different ways guilt and shame manifest in individuals based on their social roles (Mindrop & Hidayat, p. 72).

Dimmesdale's psychological anguish deepens, leading him to invent new tortures for himself. Meanwhile, Hester's charitable deeds and quiet humility earn her a reprieve from the community's scorn. One night, when Pearl is about seven years old, she and her mother are returning home from a visit to a deathbed when they encounter Dimmesdale atop the town scaffold, attempting to punish himself for his sins. Hester and Pearl join him, and the three link hands. Despite Pearl's request for Dimmesdale to acknowledge her publicly the next day, he refuses. A meteor then marks a dull red "A" in the night sky. Recognizing the minister's worsening condition, Hester resolves to intervene. She pleads with Chillingworth to stop exacerbating Dimmesdale's torment, but Chillingworth refuses.

Determined to find a solution, Hester arranges a clandestine meeting with Dimmesdale in the forest. Aware that Chillingworth likely suspects her plan to reveal his identity to Dimmesdale, she and Dimmesdale decide to flee to Europe, where they can live together with Pearl as a family. They plan to take a ship sailing from Boston in four days. Feeling a sense of release, Hester removes her scarlet letter and lets down her hair, but Pearl, playing nearby, does not recognize her mother without the letter. The day before the ship is set to sail, the townspeople gather for a holiday, and Dimmesdale delivers his most eloquent sermon ever. During the festivities, Hester learns that Chillingworth has discovered their plan and booked passage on the same ship. As Dimmesdale leaves the church after his sermon, he sees Hester and Pearl standing before the town scaffold. In a moment of impulsive resolve, he mounts the scaffold with his lover and daughter, publicly confessing his sins and revealing a scarlet letter seared into the flesh of his chest. After his



confession, he falls dead, and Pearl kisses him. Through these events, Dimmesdale's torment and Hester's endurance highlight the themes of guilt, redemption, and the complex interplay between personal integrity and societal judgment.

Frustrated in his quest for revenge, Chillingworth succumbs to his own bitterness and dies a year later. Hester and Pearl leave Boston, their whereabouts shrouded in mystery. This departure underscores the community's failure to truly understand or control them. Many years pass before Hester returns alone to her old cottage, still adorned with the scarlet letter. Her decision to resume her charitable work in the same place that once shunned her is a powerful statement of resilience and defiance against societal condemnation. The scarlet letter, once a symbol of her shame, now represents her strength and unwavering spirit. Occasionally, Hester receives letters from Pearl, who has married a European aristocrat and established a family of her own. This detail not only signifies Pearl's successful integration into society but also suggests that the stigma of her birth did not hinder her future.

In death, Hester's narrative comes full circle. She is buried next to Dimmesdale, the man she loved and suffered with. Their shared tombstone, bearing a scarlet "A," serves as a poignant reminder of their intertwined lives and the enduring impact of their story. This final act challenges the community's moral judgments and redefines the meaning of the scarlet letter, turning it into a symbol of love, redemption, and the complexity of human experience.

The scarlet letter, intended as a symbol of shame, evolves into a powerful emblem of Hester's identity. Initially meant to mark her as an adulterer, the "A" transforms over time to signify "Able." Eventually, it becomes an indeterminate symbol, with Native Americans interpreting it as a mark of importance and status during the Election Day pageant. This evolution highlights the fluidity of symbols and questions the community's rigid system of judgment and punishment. Compared to the living reminder of her affair, Pearl, the letter seems insignificant, underscoring the ultimate meaninglessness of society's attempt to control and define through symbolic condemnation. While Pearl is a divine or natural consequence, the letter is a mere human contrivance. The instability of the letter's meaning challenges



society's use of symbols for ideological reinforcement, often turning them into focal points for critical analysis and debate.

Similarly, the meteor which traces an "A" in the night sky as Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl, exemplifies the subjective nature of symbols. To Dimmesdale, it signifies his shared guilt and need for a mark of shame, while the community interprets it as an "Angel" marking Governor Winthrop's entry into heaven. This awkward reading highlights how symbols are often molded to fit personal or collective interpretations, rather than possessing inherent meaning. The meteor incident contrasts Puritan and literary uses of symbols, demonstrating that their significance often lies in the eye of the beholder.

Pearl, though a complex character, primarily functions as a living symbol of her mother's scarlet letter. She embodies the physical consequence of Hester's transgression and serves as a constant reminder of her sin. Yet, Pearl is more than a punishment; she is a blessing, representing the vital spirit and passion behind the sin. Her existence gives Hester a reason to live, sustaining her during moments of despair. Pearl's full humanity is only realized when Dimmesdale acknowledges her as his daughter, resolving the mystery and allowing her to transcend her symbolic role. This transformation underscores the multifaceted nature of symbols within the novel, revealing their power to both condemn and uplift. Hester utters these words when she declines to disclose Pearl's father. She strategically invokes religious doctrine to counter the demands of the influential men pressuring her to reveal her secret. By asserting that God is considered the father of all according to Christian belief, Hester questions the necessity of naming Pearl's biological father.

Aşkaroğlu (2024) discusses the red color in the novel "It does not signify victory, revolution or love; instead, it symbolizes the stigmatization of women. It is presented to the whole public, where red symbolizes attention, passion and danger" (p. 258). Another symbol in *The Scarlet Letter* is the embroidered letter "A" on Hester Prynne's clothing. In both modern and ancient times, embroidery on clothing has often served to make an individual look stylish, elegant, and attractive. Embroidered designs on collars or chests might include figures, flowers, or initials representing the wearer's name. These symbols can carry various meanings, depending on the context. The scarlet letter "A," initially symbolizing adultery, eventually becomes a guide



for Hester's survival. Condemned and ostracized by society, Hester is initially seen as a symbol of sin and moral failure. However, over time, the meaning of the "A" transforms. Instead of standing solely for "adultery," it comes to be associated with the word "able." This shift in interpretation reflects Hester's resilience and strength. She gradually regains her freedom and dismantles the societal pressure imposed on her through her own determination and actions. The evolution of the "A" from a mark of shame to a symbol of capability and independence highlights Hester's journey towards self-empowerment and the reclamation of her identity.

However, in the novel, the scarlet letter "A" that Hester wears does not symbolize elegance or ladylikeness. Instead, it is a mark of shame, immorality, and crime. This emblem signifies the societal judgment imposed on Hester, branding her for her sin of adultery. The "A" is a visible declaration of her supposed moral failing and the severe punishment she endures. It represents the denial of her freedom, body, and autonomy by a society that seeks to oppress and control her. The scarlet letter, standing for "adultery," becomes a powerful symbol of the neglect of women's rights, the struggle for survival, and societal oppression.

Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Forty years ago, influential industrialist Henrik Vanger's niece, Harriet, vanished under mysterious circumstances. Desperate to solve the case, Vanger hires investigative journalist Mikael Blomkvist. Harriet disappeared during a family gathering on the Vanger family's private island. Despite an extensive search, her body was never found, and Vanger suspects foul play, believing the perpetrator to be one of his own dysfunctional family members. Blomkvist, a disgraced financial journalist, teams up with the tattooed and formidable computer hacker Lisbeth Salander to unravel the mystery. As they delve deeper, they uncover links between Harriet's disappearance and a series of grotesque murders from four decades ago, revealing a dark and twisted family history. The Vangers, a secretive and powerful clan, will go to great lengths to protect their secrets, putting Blomkvist and Salander in grave danger.

In Stockholm, Blomkvist, a leftist journalist, has been convicted of libel against a right-wing industrialist who framed him. Awaiting his jail sentence, he is approached by Henrik Vanger to investigate his niece's disappearance.



On the secluded island, with few suspects—all Vanger family members—Blomkvist meticulously sifts through files, photographs, and interviews, receiving unexpected assistance from Salander. With a troubled past and a talent for hacking, Salander is determined to uncover the truth, regardless of the risks. Their investigation threatens to expose the Vanger family's darkest secrets, and as they get closer to the truth, the danger intensifies. Blomkvist, aided by the enigmatic Salander, must navigate a perilous path to justice for Harriet. Inspired by Stieg Larsson's acclaimed trilogy, this gripping tale reveals that even the wealthiest families harbor sinister secrets.

In December 2002, Mikael Blomkvist (Michael Nyqvist), publisher of Millennium magazine, loses a libel case involving allegations he published about billionaire financier Hans-Erik Wennerström (Stefan Sauk). Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace), a surveillance agent, is tasked with investigating Blomkvist and delivers a comprehensive report to lawyer Dirch Frode (Ingvar Hirdwall) on behalf of his only client, 82-year-old Henrik Vanger (Sven-Bertil Taube). Salander privately believes Blomkvist was framed in the Wennerström case but keeps this opinion out of her report. Henrik Vanger hires Blomkvist to investigate the disappearance of his great-niece, Harriet, who vanished on Children's Day in 1966. Vanger suspects Harriet was murdered by a family member and chose Blomkvist for the investigation due to his impeccable reputation. Vanger reveals that Blomkvist's father worked for the Vanger family in 1965 and that Blomkvist had occasionally played with Harriet. Harriet disappeared during a family gathering on the Vanger family's private island, isolated due to an accident that blocked the only bridge for 24 hours.

Meanwhile, Salander is reassigned to a new legal guardian, lawyer Nils Bjurman (Peter Andersson), after her current guardian suffers a stroke. Bjurman, a sexual sadist, forces Salander into performing sexual acts for access to her bank account. In their next meeting, he beats, handcuffs, and rapes her, unaware that she is recording the assault with a hidden camera. After recovering, Salander retaliates by tasing Bjurman, tying him up, and forcing him to relinquish control of her finances. She tattoos his abdomen with "I am a sadist pig and a rapist" as a warning and ensures he will recommend ending her state guardianship within a year. Blomkvist moves into a cottage on the Vanger estate and learns from Vanger about the family's



dark history. Three of Vanger's brothers-Harald, Richard, and Gottfried-were members of the Swedish Nazi Party, with only Harald still living. Harriet was Gottfried's daughter, and her brother Martin now heads the Vanger group of companies. Blomkvist discovers a list of names and numbers in Harriet's Bible, which police inspector Morell (Björn Granath) was unable to decipher. Blomkvist traces a photograph from the Children's Day parade to a woman who unknowingly captured the outline of a man Harriet saw before she disappeared. Salander hacks Blomkvist's computer, deciphers the list, and emails him her findings. When Blomkvist discovers his computer was hacked, Frode directs him to Salander. Convincing her to join the investigation, they link the names on Harriet's list to a series of murders between 1945 and 1955, all of which involved Jewish victims, suggesting an anti-Semitic motive. As Henrik suffers a heart attack, Martin and Isabella Vanger press Blomkvist to quit, but he refuses. Blomkvist realizes the woman in the 1966 photograph is Harriet's cousin Anita, who resembled Harriet. He is then shot at by a man in a deer-hunting costume. Inspector Morell identifies the last name on Harriet's list as a woman brutally murdered in January 1965, who was also Gottfried's secretary.

Suspecting Harald Vanger as the killer, Blomkvist and Salander investigate further. Salander discovers it was Martin and his father, Gottfried, who traveled to the murder locations. She returns to find Blomkvist missing. Blomkvist wakes in Martin's cellar, where Martin confesses to decades of rape and murder but denies killing Harriet. Salander rescues Blomkvist by attacking Martin, who flees and dies in a car crash. Blomkvist informs Henrik and Morell that Martin did not kill Harriet. He then tracks down Harriet in Australia, living under her Cousin Anita's name. Harriet reveals that she killed her father, Gottfried, who, along with Martin, had been sexually abusing her. Fearing for her life after seeing Martin at the parade, she fled with Anita's help. Salander visits Blomkvist in prison, providing new evidence on the Wennerström case. Blomkvist publishes an exposé, leading to Wennerström's downfall and subsequent death. A young woman, suspected to be Salander in disguise, is seen withdrawing money from Wennerström's offshore account. The film concludes with the same woman walking along a sunny beach promenade.



Mikael Blomkvist, the central figure in the novel, is the publisher of the political magazine *Millennium* and a seasoned investigative journalist in his fifties. Following a libel conviction that jeopardizes his credibility, Blomkvist accepts an unusual freelance assignment from Henrik Vanger, seeking to navigate his uncertain future and, ideally, restore his tarnished reputation. Known for his integrity and rigorous ethics, Blomkvist initially gains acclaim as a vigilant reporter dedicated to uncovering corruption. However, his conviction leads to widespread disparagement and ridicule. Given that his journalistic value hinges on his credibility and *Millennium*'s success is intertwined with Blomkvist's reputation, the novel largely revolves around his quest to redeem his name. His commitment to solving the Vanger case highlights his honor, as he honors his promise despite significant personal risks. Nonetheless, Blomkvist discovers that regaining his credibility often involves compromising his ethical standards.

In addition to his professional struggles, Blomkvist's personal life is marked by his difficulty with commitment. His most enduring relationship is with Erika Berger, who is married and content to maintain a causal connection with him, which provides Blomkvist a semblance of freedom. Although he maintains a respectful distance from his ex-wife, his most intense connection is with Lisbeth Salander, his partner in solving Harriet Vanger's disappearance. Blomkvist values Salander's unique qualities and respects her intellect, but he doesn't reciprocate the emotional depth she shows him. Despite Salander's initial coldness, it is Blomkvist who ultimately struggles with intimacy by the novel's end. Salander influences Blomkvist significantly, shifting his initial earnestness and idealism toward a more pragmatic approach. As a result of their partnership, Blomkvist becomes more willing to employ less-than-ethical tactics to achieve his goals and defend his reputation.

Lisbeth Salander's Dragon Tattoo: Significance and Symbolism

Lisbeth Salander's dragon tattoo is a powerful symbol in the novel, embodying rebellion, strength, and fierce independence. It represents her defiance against societal norms and her rejection of conformity, aligning with her complex and rebellious nature. The tattoo is not only a part of her personal identity but also a way for her to reclaim power over her life, reflecting her



history of trauma and her resilience. Through this symbol, Salander showcases her internal battles and the strength she has built.

In contrast, Hester Prynne's scarlet letter in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a mark of sin and weakness. The letter "A" represents contempt and disrespect, enforced by societal and religious norms. Hester's attempts to alter the meaning of the letter through her dedication to her lover are ultimately ineffective against the rigid community values that impose her shame. While Hester is depicted as struggling against these societal forces, Salander's dragon tattoo signifies her strength and determination to reshape her own destiny. The tattoo's connection to Swedish cultural and aesthetic elements—where dragon imagery often signifies power and protection—further underscores Salander's resistance and personal empowerment.

In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth Salander emerges as a secondary protagonist whose exceptional hacking abilities play a crucial role in unraveling the mystery of Harriet Vanger's disappearance alongside Mikael Blomkvist. Salander's character is marked by her nonconformity and unorthodox style—her tattoos, piercings, and gothic attire set her apart, and her withdrawn demeanor often leads others to misinterpret, dismiss, or judge her. Her initial boss at Milton Security underestimates her, believing she is suited only for temporary work, while her second guardian and various authorities view her as mentally unstable or even deserving of institutionalization. The narrative illustrates how Salander consistently defies these expectations through her intelligence, independence, and foresight, ultimately achieving liberation from her abusive guardian and forming a strong bond with Blomkvist "Salander was an information junkie with a delinquent child's take on morals and ethics" (21). Her ability to leverage others' misjudgments to her advantage underscores her resilience and strategic acumen.

Throughout the novel, Salander embodies both victimhood and survival. Despite repeated and severe abuse from her guardian, she refuses to see herself merely as a victim. Instead, she perceives the abuse as a broader societal issue rather than a personal attack. Her violent retaliations—such as torturing her guardian and attacking Martin Vanger—reflect her determination to secure her survival and exact justice for the oppressed. Salander's actions underscore her pursuit of autonomy and self-protection,



contrasting sharply with Blomkvist's role as a journalist who represents transparency and societal reform. While Blomkvist's work implies a functioning social system capable of addressing its own ills, Salander's fierce independence highlights the necessity of self-reliance in the face of a deeply flawed system.

Systematic Abuse of Women in Swedish Society

Salander's profound frustration with the systemic abuse of women in Swedish society. Her experience leads her to view sexual violence as a normalized, everyday issue. This is evident when she decides against reporting Bjurman's assault to the police, believing they will dismiss it rather than treat it as a serious crime. Salander's disillusionment with the societal and legal systems, which fail to hold abusers accountable, compels her to seek justice on her own. "I think you're wrong. It's not an insane serial killer who read his Bible wrong. It's just a common or garden bastard who hates women" (20). By labeling the serial killer as a "common bastard," she conveys her recognition of the widespread nature of such men and her belief that they warrant severe contempt. This contempt not only fuels her rage but also motivates her to violently confront her abuser and later Martin Vanger. In Salander's view, the abuse of women is an ingrained societal issue that authorities tacitly accept, driving her to take on the role of vigilante to challenge and correct this pervasive violence.

Violent assaults on women are a central theme in the novel. Larsson focuses much of this violence on Lisbeth Salander, while many other female characters also endure various forms of assault. This portrayal is not intended for sensationalism or entertainment but serves a critical purpose: to underscore the alarming frequency of violence against women in Sweden. Through these depictions, the novel aims to shed light on the pervasive and disturbing reality of gender-based violence. (Supardan, P. 105). In contrast to Isabella, Cecilia Vanger exhibits more positive feminine qualities, making her more endearing. Both Henrik and Blomkvist hold her in high esteem. Despite facing her own share of hardships, much like other female characters, Cecilia endures male abuse similar to Harriet. She spends her life battling a pervasive sense of inferiority to men. Her marriage to Jerry Karlson is marked by ongoing distress and challenges.



Harriet demonstrates remarkable courage when she pushes her father into the river in a desperate bid to defend herself. Although her actions stem from desperation, her determination to ensure his death highlights her formidable nature. Harriet further exemplifies her boldness by moving to Italy alone at the age of 16, where she spends four years living in a convent for four years. Her independence helps her overcome the turmoil inflicted by her own family. By the end of the story, she emerges as a successful and self-assured woman, having become the owner of Cochran Farm.

Lisbeth Salander is the only female character who fully embraces and benefits from being associated with masculinity. She embodies the masculine traits identified by Mosse and Eagly, including power, self-restraint, courage, independence, control, assertiveness, and directness. While Salander is arguably the bravest character in the story, her bravery alone is not what allows her to navigate and succeed in a male-dominated society. Martin, a primary antagonist in the novel, is depicted as both a serial killer and a rapist. The narrative explores how traumatic experiences contribute to Martin's psychopathic tendencies, characterized by his sadistic and manipulative behavior, and his pleasure in inflicting pain on women. These psychopathic traits are triggered by the abuse he suffered during childhood, including sexual assault by his father and being forced to witness his father murder women. These formative experiences shape Martin's personality and behaviors, ultimately driving him to commit his crimes.

Tisnawijaya and Astuti (2020) argue that

Growing up as a child who was neglected by parents, especially by the mother, shaped Martin as a misogynist. Misogyny is known as hatred towards women which often derived from trauma relating to or involving female figures (p. 145).

Martin is fully aware that his actions are illegal, yet he continues to commit crimes. This highlights his relish for the power he wields, viewing it as a form of superiority. He relishes being the arbiter of life and death for his victims, capable of ending their lives at any moment he chooses, especially when he grows weary of torturing them. Martin deceives his victims by pretending to offer them freedom. He takes pleasure in witnessing the despair in their eyes when they come to the horrifying realization that he intends to kill them rather than set them free.



Conclusion

The study explores the transformation of values and morals within Western communities across different eras. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," Hester Prynne is portrayed as a strong character who strives to redefine the meaning of the scarlet letter from a symbol of sin to one of resistance against societal values and morals. She views the religious and socio-cultural values of the Puritan community as false, and the religious men, who are supposed to uphold these morals, often violate them. Hester endures the community's punishment with strength and resilience. However, her profound love and the illicit nature of her relationship with her lover are more significant. Her lover's reluctance to reveal his identity as Pearl's father is portrayed as a weakness. Ultimately, he is consumed by guilt and confesses his sins to share the pain and punishment with Hester, leading to his death before receiving his due punishment.

In contrast, Lisbeth Salander from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is depicted as tough and self-reliant despite her traumatic past. She appears stronger than Hester, and Mikael Blomkvist is portrayed as more robust and intelligent than the character of Dimmesdale. The scarlet letter evolves into a symbol of dignity, love, and sacrifice, representing resistance and deep love. Meanwhile, Lisbeth embodies strength, power, and independence despite her traumatic history, refusing to succumb to the community's oppression of women. The study reveals that the Western community, both past and present, often does not adhere to social, cultural, or religious values. Women stand firm in defending their rights and love, regardless of the consequences.

In "The Scarlet Letter," the Puritan community's values and morals are depicted as fragile, with those meant to defend them, such as the minister and religious leaders, often violating them. The community becomes hypocritical, presenting false morals and values. Hester responds to the community's punishment with loyalty to her lover, refusing to reveal his identity and viewing their illegitimate relationship as sacred because it unites her with him, disregarding the community's values and morals.

In "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," Lisbeth Salander manages to live life on her terms despite societal restrictions and oppression. The values and morals she believes in make her a strong woman. Her character teaches the Western community the importance of defending one's rights against



oppression and domination. Stories of community exploitation and abuse of women highlight how some women, like Lisbeth, emerge stronger. Early upbringing and education shape a community's morals and values. The child, Martin, was forced to participate in his father's abuse of women, leading him to become not only a hater of women but also to find such practices enjoyable. Here, the values and morals are absent.

In conclusion, this study reveals that community values and morals are dynamic, evolving over time due to various circumstances and interests that significantly influence individual beliefs and choices. By delving into Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, this research finds that these novels from different eras deeply analyze Western community values and their transformation due to changing societal beliefs. *The Scarlet Letter* examines sin, guilt, redemption, and the tension between communal values and individual choices in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony. In contrast, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* explores themes of power abuse, violence against women, justice, and revenge, uncovering dark secrets and corruption within the Vanger family. Ultimately, this study shows that changes in societal beliefs profoundly impact individual and collective actions, highlighting the dynamic nature of community values and morals and their influence on human behavior over time. Overall, both novels illustrate how individual characters navigate and resist societal norms, shedding light on the persistence of certain moral and ethical challenges across different eras.

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