



Pursuit and Hindrance: The Self-Identity of Mistress Hibbins in The Scarlet Letter and Cristina in Lives of the Saints

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ABSTRACT

In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by the famous American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mistress Hibbins, a character recognized as a witch in society, not only demonstrates a strong spirit of religious resistance but is also a forerunner of feminist thought. Similarly, in the Italian-Canadian novelist Nino Ricci's debut and masterpiece *Lives of the Saints* (1990), Ricci succeeds in portraying Cristina, a woman with a rebellious spirit. These two female characters, though in different time and space backgrounds, have shown persistent pursuit of self-identity. Therefore, the objective of this essay is to delve into the relentless quest for self-identity and the obstacles encountered by Mistress Hibbins and Cristina within the context of alienation. Drawing on the theoretical framework of identity, this analysis aims to illustrate that despite their hardships and tragic endings, both women ultimately achieve a recognition of their own identity.

Keywords: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lives of the Saints*, self-identity, alienation

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), a pivotal figure in American Romantic literature in the 19th century and a pioneer of psychoanalytic fiction, excels in dissecting characters' inner conflicts and exploring moral issues through rich imagination, intricate plotting, and profuse imagery. His masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), narrates the events in the Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1642 to 1649, and centers on Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. This novel indirectly exposes the cruelty of social codes, religious hypocrisy, and moral decay of America during the era of capitalist development in the 19th century. Nino Ricci (1959-) is an Italian-Canadian novelist. *Lives of the Saints* (1990), his debut and masterpiece, is the first in a trilogy of novels chronicling the over 30-year life of the protagonist, Vittorio Innocente. Set in a small Italian rural village, Valle del Sole, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it details the oppressive and traditional life of the seven-year-old Vittorio and his mother. Notably, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Mistress Hibbins, a character recognized as a witch in society, not only demonstrates a strong spirit of religious resistance but is also a forerunner of feminist thought. Similarly, in *Lives of the Saints*, Ricci succeeds in portraying Cristina, a woman with a rebellious spirit. Both of these female characters, despite being in different eras, demonstrate a persistent quest for self-identity. Therefore, the objective of this essay is to delve into the relentless quest for self-identity and the obstacles encountered by Mistress Hibbins and Cristina within the context of alienation. Drawing on the theoretical framework of identity, this analysis aims to illustrate that despite their hardships and tragic endings, both women ultimately achieve a recognition of their own identity. Before starting the analysis of their alienation, the pursuit of self-identity, and the obstacles they encountered, there will be a brief literature review.

At present, research on *The Scarlet Letter* mainly focuses on its themes, artistic techniques, creative skills, and comparative studies, adopting various perspectives such as symbolism, new historicism, feminism, Freudian psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and mythological archetypal criticism. However, analysis of the crucial character Mistress Hibbins remains inadequate. Studies on

Mistress Hibbins primarily center on analyzing her identity as a witch and her connection with witchcraft from the religious perspective, or on using her analysis as a supplement to the study of the female protagonist Hester. For instance, Choudhury (2008) argues that Mistress Hibbins is the character who seduces Hester to connect with demons. Additionally, she briefly analyzes the historical figure who serves as the prototype for Mistress Hibbins. Liu and Yang (2011) posit that Mistress Hibbins, lacking understanding from society, forms a stark contrast with Hester, who is benevolent and venerated as an “angel” among townspeople, particularly women, thus highlighting Hester’s virtues. Significantly, there is even less research on Mistress Hibbins’ self-identity.

In contrast to the extensive research on *The Scarlet Letter*, there are relatively few analyses of the *Lives of the Saints*. Foreign studies of this novel mostly focus on mythical symbols, spatial theory, and the ethnicity of Canada (for example Baldo, 2004; Castagnino, 2011; Newman, 2012). Moreover, research on this novel in China is still in its infancy. Yao (2006) compares Cristina’s adulterous behavior in *Lives of the Saints* with Hester’s actions in *The Scarlet Letter* from a moral perspective, characterizing Cristina as a “sacred sinner” with a rebellious spirit. It is noteworthy that there are relatively few present studies that analyze the self-identity and identity construction of the heroine Cristina. Self-identity is an important approach to delve into the character of Cristina. Given this, in the following paragraphs of this essay, a comparative analysis will be conducted on the manifestations of alienation, the pursuit of self-identity, and the obstacles encountered by Mistress Hibbins and Cristina.

The Alienated Mistress Hibbins and Cristina

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* is set in 17th-century New England, when a group of Puritans, unable to endure the political exclusion and religious persecution in England, traveled a long way across the ocean to America in search of freedom and equality, settling in their imagined “Garden of Eden”. However, the actual Puritan society was highly oppressive and xenophobic. They adhered strictly to moral norms and religious beliefs, devoutly believed in God and the doctrine of original sin, and harshly punished any behavior that deviated from their standards. Against this backdrop, the town of Salem in *The Scarlet Letter* is imbued with a strong Puritan atmosphere. Governor Bellingham, though law-abiding, thinks and acts more like a traditional English aristocrat; Reverend Wilson is learned and affable, but is also a stodgy and obstinate Puritan; and Reverend Dimmesdale is emotional, but is also indecisive and cowardly, and unable to escape the shackles of his clerical identity. These characters, along with the obedient townspeople, the pristine coastline and forests, the vast land, and the *Bible*, constitute the landscape of Salem under the puritanical circumstances.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the alienation of Mistress Hibbins is particularly prominent, mainly manifesting in her alternative behavior and special identity under the dual influence of gender oppression and

religious persecution. Mistress Hibbins is mentioned four times by others and appears personally four times. Hawthorne employs words and phrases like “bitter-tempered widow”, “ill-omened physiognomy”, “sour and discontented face”, “ugly-tempered”, and “the cankered wrath of an old witch”, significantly highlighting Mistress Hibbins’ deviation from the Puritan ideal of femininity and, thus, emphasizing her uniqueness and social rejection. Furthermore, in Puritan society, witches were seen as evil forces aligned with demons, and their existence posed a threat to social moral order and religious beliefs. Mistress Hibbins, as the “ancient lady had the renown of being a principal actor in all the works of necromancy” (216), is naturally viewed by town residents as a witch for her nocturnal excursions into the woods to seek the “Black Man” and her attempts to recruit Hester Prynne into her alliance with the “Black Man”. This identity as a witch is not only Mistress Hibbins’ assigned social role but also a direct manifestation of her alienation. Moreover, her plight is not just a personal tragedy, but also a microcosm of the era, highlighting the prejudice and discrimination faced by women in society, as well as the helplessness and resistance of women under religious and power oppression.

In the novel *Lives of the Saints*, the female protagonist, Cristina, stands as a paradigmatic example of alienation, primarily manifesting in her conflict with local religious traditions and her deviation from societal norms. The central plot takes place in a closed-minded Italian village called Valle del Sole during the 1960s. In the beginning, Cristina, Vittorio’s mother, is “bitten by a snake” (1) while committing adultery with a blue-eyed man in the stable. For the villagers, this event is not a mere accident, but a symbol of “the evil eye”, and a punishment from God for her immoral behavior. In Valle del Sole, snakes are believed to be “agents of the evil eye, which the villagers feared far more than any mere Christian deity or devil” (4). Villagers avoid “anyone or anything that had been touched by the eye, as if there was a peril that the affliction might spread by contagion” (43). As a result, the villagers are convinced that Cristina’s snakebite is a curse from “the evil eye”, branding her as an outlier and shunning her and her family.

Through Vittorio’s perspective, readers can witness how the villagers, out of fear and prejudice, view Cristina as an alienated outsider. They no longer visit her and her father, deliberately avoiding her gaze when passing her house. Even Cristina’s childhood friends, Maria Maiale and Giuseppina Dagnello, sit so far away from her that they might “have been half way across the road” (39) as if she carries a contagious curse. Moreover, Vittorio’s friend Fabrizio chooses to stand deeper in the alley, out of sight of the villagers, when he explains to Vittorio why the villagers avoid Vittorio’s family: “It’s not because of you. It’s because of your mother and the snake” (72), emphasizing the villagers’ deep fear of “the evil eye” as well as their prejudice against Cristina. As the story progresses, Cristina’s pregnancy is revealed, further pushing her to the fringes of society. When the men of the village see her, “their eyes averted almost guiltily, as if they had been forced into a posture that did not sit well with them” (119). The women of the village are even harsher on her, when they pass by Cristina, they always avoid her “with a cold-eyed rectitude” (119). It is clear that Cristina has become

transparent in the eyes of the villagers, her presence is completely ignored and her behavior is utterly despised.

The Pursuit and Obstacles of Self-Identity of Mistress Hibbins and Cristina

Identity formation is a psychological process that involves an individual's confirmation of self-identity, recognition of their affiliated group, accompanying emotional experiences, and behavioral patterns (Zhang, Li, & Liu, 2012). The core of this process lies in the prominence of psychological feelings and self-awareness. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Mistress Hibbins stands out as a typical character struggling on the path of self-identity amidst a society deeply rooted in Puritan beliefs. She is the first character mentioned in the novel. In describing the scene in which Hester is about to be released from prison, the narrator speculates on the type of criminal that might be present: "a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows" (66). In the eyes of the public, Mistress Hibbins is a maverick witch aligned with the "Black Man" and makes excursions into the forest with demons and spirits at night. She becomes a symbol of social repulsion. However, the author does not directly mention the reasons for her eventual execution as a witch several years later.

If one reads the chapter "The Custom House" in *The Scarlet Letter* and understands the background of Hawthorne's work, one can find that Hawthorne had an ancestor named John Hathorne who served as a judge in the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692, and that he "made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him" (36). Moreover, the historical prototype of Mistress Hibbins in the novel is Ann Hibbins, who was executed for witchcraft in 1656. Anne Hibbins was not exiled from the church for witchcraft but for her stubborn challenges to religious, secular, and family authority. However, according to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, when her neighbors accused her of supernatural activities and malicious acts, despite a lack of evidence, she was finally convicted as a witch and executed as an enemy of New England society and the Puritan faith (Ketterer, 1983). Ann Hibbins is not the embodiment of evil, but a victim of misjudgment. As Hawthorne's fate intertwined with the witchcraft trials, he chose to present Mistress Hibbins as a significant character in *The Scarlet Letter*, aiming to dispel the guilt associated with his family history. Therefore, the prototype's unjust execution implies that Mistress Hibbins in the novel also suffered from society's unfair perception and the persecution of religion and patriarchy. In addition, it is not difficult to infer that Mistress Hibbins is also deemed a witch and alienated because she pursues something different from social recognition.

On the level of religion, Mistress Hibbins is viewed as a witch and pagan, ostracized by society like a plague. From a gender perspective, her clear self-awareness also poses obstacles to her journey of self-identity. She is deeply aware of the privileges enjoyed by men in the patriarchal society, such

as the fact that the “Black Man” is a symbol of evil, which could manifest in different forms, including Roger Chillingworth, Arthur Dimmesdale, and other men in the town. However, they face no punishment. Furthermore, despite the Puritans’ quest for equality, their equality is deeply gendered. In the novel, the governor, bishops, priests, and ministers are all men, holding all decision-making power, while women are unconsciously influenced by Puritanism and unconditionally subject to their management, without a voice. Mistress Hibbins’ invitation to Hester to join the “merry company” in the forest is perceived as a “Satan’s snare”. In reality, it might be an attempt by Mistress Hibbins to comfort Hester, letting her know that she is not alone, and making her aware that religious persecution and social prejudice are the reasons for her humiliation, discrimination, and near loss of custody of her daughter. However, her actions are misunderstood by Hester.

Therefore, it is evident that in the Puritan-dominated environment and under the control of a patriarchal society, Mistress Hibbins’ strength appears flimsy, and her ideals and aspirations will never be understood by society. Furthermore, the fact that Mistress Hibbins is executed as a witch several years later suggests that she does not defend herself or care about others’ opinions. Instead, she steadfastly explores her self-identity and searches for the true goodness of humanity. Despite a tragic ending, Mistress Hibbins is not bound by the imposed social identity of a witch. She bravely seeks and realizes her self-identity.

Like Mistress Hibbins, Cristina’s path to exploring self-identity is also fraught with difficulties. On the religious level, her pursuit of self-identity manifests in her skepticism and disdain for the superstitions and religious customs prevalent in the village. Many narratives about “the evil eye” involve the nature of contagion. For example, when Cristina is bitten by a snake, the villagers distance themselves from her, “as if there was a peril that the afiction might spread by contagion” (43). However, Cristina scorns such behavior and responds with silence. When her childhood friends Maria and Giuseppina visit her, they just sit on chairs at the door, because they are unwilling to come near her. Realizing the reason, Cristina deliberately asks, “Giuseppi, why don’t you come in and sit down? Whatever I have it’s not contagious” (39), expressing her dissatisfaction with their superstitions. Later, in Chapter Six, Giuseppina suggests to Cristina some treatments counteract “the evil eye”, such as making a confession or offering a chicken or goat as a sacrifice. However, these suggestions are met with ridicule and rejection from Cristina. She says, “Giuseppi, you’re not serious! A good God-fearing woman like you talking to me about these stupidaggini! I thought you had more sense than that” (45). Cristina dismisses Giuseppina’s instructions as “stupidaggini”, in other words, stupid or absurd beliefs. Her disdain for people’s faith and refusal to embrace it create a rift between her and those around her.

As a member of society, however, she cannot completely escape its influence. In her search for self-identity, she encounters numerous obstacles from those around her. “Someone had poured some poison in my father’s ear” (130) indicates that Cristina’s husband has learned of her extramarital

affair and pregnancy. He subsequently “let forth a fury of letters” (130) ordering her to “over there on the next boat” (131) and sending her “a letter to give to the embassy in Rome, to get a visa” (ibid). Additionally, Cristina’s father and husband demand that she gives birth to “that bastard child” and send the child to an orphanage. Such pressure and control are unbearable for Cristina. But to escape the shackles of false beliefs and the ignorance of the villagers, she decides to accept her husband’s suggestion and embark on a journey to America with her son Vittorio in search of a “Sun Parlour”.

In terms of gender, Cristina, as a proactive feminist, bravely confronts the entrenched traditional female role in the oppressive patriarchal society of Valle del Sole, struggling yet determinedly in her quest for self-identity. In traditional notions, women are often portrayed as symbols of weakness, but in this novel, Cristina shows no signs of weakness. For instance, in the village, she is “famous for her indifference to pain” (10). When Vittorio, along with his grandfather and Di Lucci, goes to take her to the hospital, she is “sitting calmly on the stone bench as if nothing had happened” (8). Furthermore, while wrapping her leg in a shirt in the car, despite “the cloth sank into her leg and the skin around it turned white” (10), Cristina does not “wince or grimace” (ibid). Even during childbirth, she remains silent, displaying a composure and resilience that contradicts traditional perceptions of femininity.

Moreover, when her husband goes to work in Canada, Cristina takes on the sole responsibility of raising Vittorio, working tirelessly in the fields, and standing up for Vittorio when he is bullied by Vincenzo. She blames and hits Vincenzo’s mother, Maria Maiale, and threatens her by saying, “You tell your Vincenzo, that if he lays another finger on my son, I’ll tear out your eyes and feed them to the dogs! To the dogs!” (92). This demonstrates Cristina’s bravery and strength beyond traditional female roles. In addition, her rebellious spirit is also reflected in her forceful resistance to society’s deprivation of women’s sexual freedom. When she agrees to go to church with her father, she dresses “not in one of her loose dresses but in a white blouse and a black skirt which fit tight around her waist” (118) to show her pregnancy. She rebels against society because she opposes its views and allows gossip to work against her.

Cristina firmly asserts her identity amidst societal constraints and discrimination. Before she departs for America, she reaches a climax of anger and dissatisfaction following an argument with her father. She vehemently denounces the “stupid rules and superstitions”, and prays “to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities of the face of the earth” (156), expressing her longing for freedom and the right to make her own choices. Her impassioned speech not only reflects her staunch feminist stance but also criticizes the women in the town who blindly pursue patriarchal norms and destroy their selves in the process. Despite the tragic ending of the novel, where Cristina struggles to give birth in a storm and ultimately dies of hemorrhaging from a difficult delivery, her spirit and convictions have long since transcended the boundaries of life and death, and her identity has long since been realized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Mistress Hibbins in *The Scarlet Letter* and Cristina in *Lives of the Saints* are representative figures of alienation. They persistently pursue beliefs and lifestyles that diverge from the mainstream. Under the dual yoke of gender oppression and religious persecution, Mistress Hibbins is labeled as a witch, enduring endless mental torment and social ostracism. Meanwhile, Cristina's actions are deemed deviations from societal norms, isolating her as an outsider amidst superstitions and gender oppression. These experiences profoundly reveal the tragic fate of women within patriarchal power structures.

At the same time, their alienated identities doom their journeys toward self-identification to be fraught with difficulties and challenges. It is undoubtedly an arduous task to break through the shackles of the old-fashioned and backward culture. Therefore, although they have realized their self-identity to a certain extent, they have also paid a heavy price. Mistress Hibbins is unfortunately executed as a witch in the end, while Cristina passes away due to hemorrhaging from a difficult birth on the way to America by ship. Such tragic endings epitomize both the fate of individuals and the context of the times. Their stories inspire profound reflection on the religious yoke and the status and power of women.

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