

‘Replacing Prologue And Epilogue By Gerard Genette’s Paratextual Materials: ‘The Custom House’ As Peritext Of Nathaniel Hawthorn’s The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract

The present paper brings into focus a very significant and yet ignored issue: the peri-textual materials. Therefore, the researchers’ focus is on the materials which are appended to the original text and which although seem contingent but serve as integral part of a text book. The term ‘peri’ which means surrounding and ‘textual’ means, elements that are related directly to the text. So the paper tries to explore the necessary and significant connection between a text book and the surrounding materials that help us comprehend the text fully and more conveniently and also these materials mitigate the inclusiveness of the writer. As this study highlights the necessity and function of such paratextual materials, the study owes debt to Gerard Genette’s work on Paratexts and Threshold of Interpretation (1997). Although nearly all books have these supporting and attached surrounding textual materials, this paper’s scope is exclusively applied to Nathaniel Hawthorn’s The Scarlet Letter, and the ‘Custom House’ serves as its Peritext. Genette’s text and his methods are employed to read the entire text of the subject and has been brought into an inspection under its lense. The paper finds that the understanding of The Scarlet Letter becomes more accomplished and refined once ‘The Custom House’ is consulted.

Introduction

The late twentieth and early twenty first century has brought a previously ignored material into sharp focus: paratext. Most literature in the past was read from manuscripts which was often in a very misshapen or rough form. By rough, it is not meant that the text was not in a good chronological order or its plot was wayward, but that it bore the unmistakable imprints of the vicissitudes of time. More often than not, crucial pages in texts were torn or lost by the negligence of its readers. The paratext was the central concern neither of writers nor of readers, and this chronic lack of attention did jeopardize the authenticity and originality of texts books as well. That is why many works along with their paratext have unfortunately been lost. Preventing further

danger of anonymity both to the books as well as writers, the work of Gerard Genette (1997): Paratexts and Threshold of Interpretation is a timely medicine. The same work redresses this fault in the production and reception of the texts and draws attention to the neglected paratextual paradigm. His definition of the paratext and its illocutionary and pragmatic force standardized modern reading of literature. As mentioned above, the past did not pay any attention to the subsidiary parts of the text but lingered along its immediate plot and content. The presents study is such an attempt to bring the readers’ attention to an important issue of ‘The Custom House’ bearing the witness to be quite crucial to the understanding of The Scarlet Letter which despite its ability to stand glued to the main work has been considered

as independently situated entity of the text.

Statement of the Problem

The issues related to paratextual materials are not new. Writers and readers alike face this issue. Writers are in a flux how to attract copious amount of readers to their works. This paper attempts to disambiguate the mentality of readers to be clear about the significance of additional materials of texts, such as publication agency, the texture, the writer, even volume and size of books. The issue is a contemporary issue owing to the plethora of internet materials afloat onto readers' minds.

Aims and Objective of the Research

This paper mainly attempts to bring awareness among publishing agencies, critics, writers, but mainly readers about the techniques to reading textbooks, especially literary books and materials. Other aims and objective of the paper include the significance of materials that appear contingent but are the part and parcel of these text books. Further objective of the papers is to ensure that readers are perfectly engrossed in these paratextual materials and to critically evaluate beauty of a text. In order to preserve and maintain sanctity, intellectual potential, virtue of text books, this study is determined to achieve this level.

Rationale of the Study

Text books, such as the *The Scarlet Letter*, are at alarming risk of being lost or ignored. There are writers' embedded themes in texts which are searched fathomlessly by readers but paradoxically the apparent (paratextual materials) ones are either deliberately ignored or discarded. This study is a treating attempt to prevent this chronic injustice to textual materials surrounding the main text. The other issue which textbooks confront is the exorbitance of internet study materials and its ready availability which excite readers who, at will, forgo written texts in books. Therefore, the paper's rationale is being instituted through this significance of the study to proscribe further looming desertion to textbooks and increase their importance through roping in paratextual materials to the textual study domain.

Research Questions

1. What are the elements in 'The Custom House' which contribute to the comprehensive understanding of *The Scarlet Letter*?
2. Does 'The Custom House' contain all material that Gerard Genette explains to include in paratextual materials? Or does 'The Custom house' stay in true relation as a prologue to *The Scarlet Letter*?

Discussion and Analysis

Genette's statement: the paratext is a source by which a book makes itself perfect, presentable and readable to the readers and public. (261). This definition brings some important details into life, such as the preface, author's name and publishing time and dates. And 'Peritext' he says, is the positioning of the attached paratextual element embedded in the "interstices" of the text or can be linked to the spaces within the same text or even the prefatorial notes or title pages of the chapters. (Genette, 263). This essay explores the peritextual materials of Genette's definition of peritext mentioned above, in 'The Custom-House' which serves as an Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*).

As per Genette, the peritext is the additional text surrounding the text or something within it attached or embedded as subsidiary element; although *The Custom-House* is the original part of *The Scarlet Letter* but this study explores *The Custom-House* as more a peritext of *The Scarlet Letter* than an actual part of it; due to its potential knowledge that helps unlock much-implied meanings, denotations and lurking information. Without 'The Custom-House', *The Scarlet Letter* will be like a letter in the post office that bears no knowledge or address of the addressee; where the postman struggles to deliver. It may also be said that the 'The Custom-House' performs a dual function: as the actual part of the text as well as a detached part of the text as a peritext. We may also say that the 'The Custom-House' is a title page of *The Scarlet Letter*. The-*Custom House* is a prologue or very much like Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*', where Chaucer clarifies much details beforehand, especially the caricature of his characters such as

the Friar, the Monk, Doctor of Physique, the Wife of Bath. Similarly, the narrator in the Custom-House throws a detailed light on some of his characters who in turn echo in the novel afterward. The major characters of them are his puritan ancestors and the Inspector. More importantly, Hawthorne like Chaucer gives a humorous ironical tinge to his characters.

Now to talk about the 'The Custom-House' and its ability to facilitate our understanding and reading of *The Scarlet Letter*; there are many points in the Custom-House where Nathaniel Hawthorne makes a hint at the understanding of the novel. Speaking of the role of The Custom House, we may firstly say that it connects the past to the present and present to the future. The past is author's deceased grandparents who reduced to dust many years ago, the present is his sceptic state and job as a surveyor and future is the substantiation of *The Scarlet Letter*.

At the very beginning of the *Scarlet Letter*, we see at the Prison-Door, 'a throng of the bearded [...] steeple crowned hats'⁵ (53), echoes the very embodiment of the narrator's puritan ancestors who with proud had their unique pose as steeple-crowned or had wigs. The lines from The Custom-House can underpin the same words. 'But the sentiment likewise its moral quality, the figure of the first ancestor [...] bearded, sable-clocked, and steeple-crowned progenitor, -' (Custom-House, p.9). It means that the writer turns to be very much autobiographical in a sense to reflect more of his self. However, Rose, C. Morfin thinks on the contrary to the point made above, he believes these were not the reflection of his Puritan ancestors (9).

We see in The Custom-House the writer creates a connection between Hester and himself: what he says in The Custom-House, 'his forefathers would not be happy with him at his attempt of writing a novel and would simply call him a 'degenerate''. Narrator's situation is very much applicable to Hester's as well, when she performs charity work and gropes for her stability and recognition in the society. But the

inflexible society never value her charity or needle work over her profanity. So, the narrator plods to write and similarly, Hester identifies herself with the narrator to move forward undauntedly, despite having the incessant curses of the Puritanical and narrow-minded society. The writer believes in continuous efforts to recognize oneself. The narrator's other connections with the central figure of the novel: Hester, are:

'I was happy enough to find listener or two on the former occasion'- [...] that the few who will understand him better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates'(4)

Hester Prynne wants to find out one who could understand her; give her an unprejudiced ear, feel more compassion for her. Otherwise, as the narrator says '-as thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed unless the speaker stands in some true relation with his audience-' (Custom-House p.5) suggests that he would be in the same position as Hester's, whose voice would find no channel or medium to be heard. The words: 'schoolmates' and 'lifemates' mean those are nearby, who understand but less the genuine or hidden problems of familiar one and stay knowingly blind to fellow's agitation. The same situation is perfectly applied to Hester's whose both closest male partners: Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, keep her deliberately sunken in tribulations; never try to become compassionate towards her and understand her problems. Both the above lines clearly elaborate the problems which Hester has in *The Scarlet Letter* and narrator in the Custom-House (possibly the latter's writing career).

The one point in the Custom-House which shows prime importance is the 'American eagle', that represents the so-called Puritan law and societal understanding of *The Scarlet Letter*. A few lines will make it clear. What the writer suggests that the eagle has 'outspread wings', and 'barbed arrows in each claw', with customary infirmity' of temper (6), has a meaning that serves

as a piece of auxiliary information for the understanding of the Puritan law established in *The Scarlet Letter*. The entire eagle's body suggests the jurisdiction where the law in the novel is functional. The 'barbed claws' a phrase, takes after the door of the prison that is 'the door of timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes' (*Scarlet Letter*, p-53). The thorny claws further represent the punishment for the one who trespasses the rules and shows defiance; such as Hester and Dimmesdale. The 'infirmity of the temper' may aptly be applied as the law that has arbitrary nature: for some relax and for others adamant and harsh. The eagle also forewarns the offenders. But she (eagle) may also be described for another connotative meaning, when the narrator says 'vixenly as she looks' (5) as the sister of the Governor Bellingham: Mistress Hibbins, who is a malicious woman and plays witchcraft. The above dual nature of the law is the lame excuse for the law when she plays the same witchcraft in the forest, so that Hibbins does not fall within the jurisdiction of the law, but Hester does. She (eagle) also provides some safety to the citizens as the narrator describes but her nature is unpredictable, her mercurial attitude: anytime she can annihilate the sheltered citizens. The idea can be extended to the minister, Dimmesdale, who disguised himself as a pious clergy and delivered sermons under the security and shadow of the Puritan law and the unrealistic belief of the citizens. At last, he is overpowered by the eagle (Puritan law) not the force or shame of society, as he confessed the irresistible voice of conscience.

As a romancer in *The Custom-House*, the narrator builds an uncertainty in the reader's mind that it will follow much details in the novel about the romance and unreality or perhaps the readers will struggle to understand the law and the society. As Zakary Turpin mentions in 'Hawthorne the Unreliabilist': that he prepares the readers to believe what is the mixture of both romance and reality and talks about the authenticity of his materials in *The Custom-House*⁷, that ultimately gives birth to the novel in the same way. Therefore, it leaves the readers at the end of the novel perplexed, as the novel ends up esoterically. We do not know for certain

whether Dimmesdale's confession at the end is a justified act or much the same act of confession made up for Hester's early struggle. *The Scarlet Letter* leads to so many questions as *The Custom-House* does.

Furthermore, the characterization of *The Custom-House*, breeds good hint for the understanding of the *The Scarlet Letter*. The writer mentions, 'We have the smart young clerk, who gets the taste of traffic as a wolf-cub does of blood' (7), reminds us the 'leech', the doctor Chillingworth who is the leech, sucking blood from the Dimmesdale. The structure of *The Custom-House* as described by the narrator 'Neither the front or the back entrance of the Custom-House opens on the road to Paradise' (14), seems he is critical of the ways of corrupt officers of the same house. This contributes a plain addition to the complex philosophy and skepticism of the novel. A reader is in sixes and sevens to decipher any satisfied meaning from the novel. Whether Hester has won the Paradise or Dimmesdale is a true figure for salvation or Chillingworth's desertion of Hester wears any cloth of moral stance.

Conclusion

From all the above discussion it may be inferred that 'The Custom-House' stays in true relation to the *The Scarlet Letter*. Giving additional meaning to the readers on the first look at *The Custom-House*. It serves as a catalyst and anchor sheet to pave the way for readers to comprehend *The Scarlet Letter*. Despite the fact *The Custom-House* is the actual part of *The Scarlet Letter*, yet it can stand alone as an independent autonomous entity. It serves as a subordinate clause. Therefore, on all grounds as researchers we are safe to say that epilogue, prologue have been used traditionally to define such traditional themes and plots in-depth analysis of various texts, but paratextual materials have in a modern fashion supplanted and superseded the beauty, necessity and significance of them. So, 'The Custom House' with all its comprehensiveness turns out to be an integral part of the text and is seen as a torch bearer and prepares us for what happens next in

the text.

⁷ Zakary Turpin. Hawthorn the Unreliabilist': His Epistemology in 'The Custom-House' and Other Prefaces. A Journal of the American Renaissance Vol.60, No.4, 2104 (No.237, O.S.) pp.487-520, p-513

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