



The game of re-writing: From Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to Parks' *In The Blood*



Review article



This article is published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the:

Research Journal in Advanced Humanities, Volume 1, Issue 3, 2020

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Article Information

Submitted: 17th June 2020

Accepted: 25th June 2020

Published: 1st July 2020

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Funding: None



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ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)



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Abstract

African-American female playwrights have a durable inclination for social and political change. Their plays frequently reflect and deflect the socio-political events of the society. This study examines how Suzan-Lori Parks in *In the Blood*, shapes the presentation of a text to a wider sociological context in order to attain greater understanding and recognition of her message. This has been achieved by contextualizing Parks' *In the Blood* with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* so as to assess the interpretation of history and society through the process of re-writing. The paper illustrates that ideas and events can be assembled from different studies, situations, and locations to bring out the meaning. At the core of the analysis, is the theoretical backdrop of intertextuality. This theory is important because when interpreting a text in connection to other texts and pre-texts, interpretation becomes interesting and flexible. Rewriting focusses on how a text is transformed through devices like imitation, repetition, allusion, satire and parody. Texts have no incorporated or unified meaning of their own; they are carefully related to the ongoing cultural and social developments. This theoretical position informs the conceptual praxis that this study maintains. The study indicates that Suzan-Lori Parks' drama addresses issues that bear meaning to the historical, cultural and socio-political environment within which it grows. In its conclusion, the study demonstrates that not only black, but also white women are being criticized by the same people who place them in their shameful situations.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Re-writing, texts, meaning, history, society.



How to Cite

Sih, E. B. (2020). The game of re-writing: From Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to Parks' *In The Blood*. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 1(3), 72-81.
Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/advanced-humanities/article/view/192>



Public Interest Statement

Suzan-Lori Parks in her play, *In the Blood* places the African- American woman at the centre of her own experience by relating it to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. As writers read and see their works on the page and on the stage, they are reading themselves, connecting to figures that are familiar, recreating histories that were either untold or misrepresented. Parks extensively borrows from other works in her presentation of *In the Blood* so as to demonstrate that there is no text that is original in the sense, but all texts are being influenced by its co-texts.

Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood* recreates the 17th century African-American history. Parks is a writer who refashions and challenges the ideas of the historical construction of the African-American experience. Looking at a literary piece in relation to other texts make the readers to gain a wider and deeper understanding of the text, the society, its history and culture. Contextual exploration allows one to comprehend certain ideas that may not be clear if one does not consider the time in which the text is written. In this play, Parks is not only writing or re-writing history, but is also re-enacting a version of what has been performed earlier.

In contextualizing Parks' play, it is essential to take into account the historical, cultural and sociological events and conditions the text references, either of its own time, or from the past. It is also important to demonstrate how these aspects are presented and represented. The paper focusses on the relationships and similarities found in the novel of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the play of Suzan-Lori Parks, as there is a great resemblance between the two texts. It examines Parks' *In the Blood* in different contexts since the development of literary analysis also involves a process of historical investigation. Hayden White, a white cultural historian in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* argues that, "we choose our past in the same way we choose our future" (39). This implies that our past is as important as our future. This makes it imperative to analyze previous events and texts for the understanding of this text. By relating another text that anchored on Parks' text, is an exercise in intertextuality. According to *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "the term intertext has been used variously for a text drawing on the other texts, for the text a drawn upon, and for the relationship between both" (Baldick 128). Parks text is so much connected to Hawthorne's novel.

In order to understand and interpret a literary text from an intertextual viewpoint, one needs to look at the other texts that influences its creation, and also the social, economic, and political factors from which it grows. This means that for better understanding of a literary piece, it is fundamental to know the author's social, economic, and political backgrounds, as these aspects inform literary creativity. This paper reveals that the playwright borrows and transforms a previous text so as to paint picture of the American society in general, restructuring Hawthorne's story and representing the treatment of African-American women which has either been left out or misinterpreted in history.

Parks' *In the Blood* which was published in 2001 is a contemporary American version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the celebrated and idolized American novels of guilt and redemption, set in puritan period and published in 1850. Before writing *In the Blood*, Parks affirms in an interview that she had never read *The Scarlet Letter*:

I was in a canoe with a friend, paddling along, and I said to the friend, I hollered up to the friend, "I'm going to write a play, a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*... We laughed in the canoe. As we dragged the canoe back to shore, the idea had deeply hooked me, and I knew that I had to write a play, a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*... Funny enough, I hadn't read *The Scarlet Letter* yet. I hadn't yet read the book, I just knew the story. Went home, read the book, and that became the long process of writing a play. (124)

Parks restages the 17th century puritan American society as presented by Hawthorne. Her reason for doing this is to criticize the hypocrisy in the mainstream culture. In the play, she replaces white characters like Hester Prynne, Arthur, Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth with blacks like Hester La Negrita, Reverend D and Chilli. By revealing issues and similar characters like that of Hawthorne's novel, she is simply intertextualizing. According to Tracy Lemaster in "What Is 'Intertextuality?'" "In literature, intertextuality is when a book refers to a second book by title, scene, character, or storyline, or when a book refers to a social "text" such as a media, social, or cultural story"(1). Re-writing Hawthorne's novel can be a rebellious act of assessing some of the discrimination and injustices going on in modern America. By revising Hawthorne's novel, Parks gives it another meaning with a different intention that can only be obtained by reading not only the text but also what influences the production. This is because, the externality of every literary piece needs to be interpreted and contextualized in relation to the text.

By presenting a black woman suffering from the mainstream culture, Parks reveals that Hawthorne's Hester Prynne is more than just a woman who is challenged and neglected by her society. She presents a black woman who is more marginalized in her own society by the same people who are supposed to assist her. The people who sexually abuse her tend to refer to her as a prostitute. Unlike Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Parks' Hester La Negrita is under harsher and threefold oppression- racial, sexual and economic. The men exploit her for being a woman, the white for being black and the rich for being poor. Similar to white Hester Prynne, the protagonist of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester La Negrita is also the protagonist in Parks' *In the Blood*. She is a poor black woman who lives under a bridge with her five fatherless children: Jabber, Bully, Trouble, Beauty and Baby.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, which may stand for her adultery, is written on her bosom and very visible. Her "A" serves as a penalty for her wrong doings. Contrary to hers, Hester La Negrita's "A" may stand for her ability to move beyond societal representation

of her as an illiterate and a sexually promiscuous woman. Her own scarlet letter is scrawled on the wall of her house by the presentation of the society. Society mocks her that she can't read beyond letter 'a'. Their inability to get her past the letter 'a' is reflected in their inability to accept her as their kind. Like Hawthorne's Hester who appears in public in shame and mockery with her illegitimate daughter, Pearl, Parks' Hester appears on stage with her "new born baby in her arms" (7) and is being scorned by the entire society:

WHO THE HELL SHE THINK SHE IS
A NO NOW WE GET TO PAY FOR IT
THE NERVE
SOME PEOPLE HAVE BADLUCK
SHE OUGHTA GET MARRIED
TO WHO?
THIS AINT THE FIRST TIME THIS HAS HAPPENED
TO HER
NO?
THIS IS HER FIFTH
FIFTH?
SHE GOT FIVE OF THEM
FIVE BRAT
AND NOT ONE OF THEM GOT A DADDY
PAH! (5-6)

The entire society mocks Hester for having illegitimate children. It is ironic that the same people who put her in such a state take part in the insult. Like Hester, La Negrita, Hawthorne's Hester is openly shunned and mocked for being a symbol of sin, and the community throws mud on her and her daughter. The Reverend D whose daughter she carries in her arms is not even ready to assist her in any way. Unlike Hester La Negrita whose indecent life is scrawled on the wall for everyone to see her as a slut, the people who take advantage of her hide theirs. They benefit from her helpless situation and create more pain in her. In Reverend D's confession, he states that, when a helpless woman comes to him with "four fatherless mouths to feed", "add insult to injury was what I was thinking" (78). As a reverend, instead of helping the poor as he claims is his responsibility, he goes ahead to aggravate her state of poverty by causing her more pains.

The word intertextuality is derived from Latin *Intertexto* which means to intermingle while weaving. Intertextuality deals with the text's actuality within society and history. In the play, Parks connect the names of the character; though in a shorter form from what Hawthorne presents, one may easily decipher the character she is representing. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Reverend Dimmesdale

that Parks may have referred to as Reverend D tries very hard to hide his sin of adultery and hypocrisy and remains innocent to his community. His hidden agenda causes him to talk more about good deed as a means of redemption that deviates from the puritan ideals since the puritans believe(d) that anybody can do good work for a selfish desire. To emphasize his hypocritical nature, the narrator tells us,

by the constitution of his [Dimmesdale's] nature, he loved the truth, and loathed the lie, as few men ever did. Therefore, above all things else, he loathed his miserable self! The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect (pp. 144-146). While in public, Dimmesdale portrays a positive attitude like a real puritan. Aside what he portrays outwardly, his inner state is unpleasant. Like Hawthorne's Dimmesdale, Parks' Reverend D is a hypocrite. While talking to his congregation on his soapbox, he tells them that "you dont have to hate yourself, you dont have to hate your neighbor, you can pull yourself up" (46). Though he preaches about loving one another in his sermon, he does not practice what he preaches. As a religious representative, he acts contrary to his calling. He tells us in his confession that:

The intercourse was not memorable
And when she told me of predicament
I gave her enough money to take care of it
(Rest)
I in all my days in the gutter I never hurt anyone.
I never held hate for anyone.
And now the hate I have for her
and her hunger
and the hate I have for her hunger.
God pulled me up.
Now God, through her, wants to drag me down
and sit me at the table
at the head of the table of her fatherless house.(79)

Reverend D who is supposed to be a role model in his community is not different from the others. As a Reverend, he encourages abortion which the Christian community rejects. Though he advises the congregation to love their neighbours, yet he clearly professes in his confession that he hates Hester, the mother of his child and her hunger. He does not even take responsibility for the child but goes ahead to insult Hester. When Hester visits him with her two-year old baby to ask for help, he claims not to recognize her and tells her to report to the authority who is baby's father . When she reveals herself to him, he asks her not to report to the authority again and promised

her "a much larger amount of money" (51). When Hester comes back for the money, he does not keep his promise and instead calls her a "slut".

Like Reverend D, Hawthorne's Reverend Dimmesdale does not believe that he and Hester are allowed to spend eternity together. He explains that "it may be that, we forgot our God — when we violate and reverence each for the other's soul" (256). Unlike Hester Prynne, the community does not rebuke, mock and exhort Reverend Dimmesdale on to repentance. Instead, they revere him as an angel and praise him for his pure life. Such respect tortures him as he knows that he does not deserve their admiration. His attempt to appease his conscience with insincere apologies buries Dimmesdale beneath more sin. Contrary to Hawthorne's Reverend, Parks' Reverend D does not regret his actions and tries to come out of it, rather, he still keeps his sin from society who admire him.

The cultural and historical background from which a text is being produced is very important to the analysis of the text. Though Parks rewrites Hawthorne's presentation of the 17th century puritan American society which ridicules the hypocritical nature of the society, Parks' *In the Blood*, which according to her is set "here" and "now" (3) criticizes what is happening in the American society. She exposes the inequality going on in the American society, which is hidden through the devices of the legitimate apparatuses and dominant ideologies.

The social helping agency in Parks' play claims to show concern for those who are in need but continues to exploit the needy. Through the Welfare Lady's confession, one understands the historical discourse of race and racism. She draws a well-known boundary line between herself and Hester which can be compared to the line WEB Du Bois refers to the 20th century as "colour line" (Keene 63). Her reference to "our kind" and "their kind" imitates the dialogue of racial division. The Welfare Lady's racial distinction is influenced by her social ideologies and class distinction. Paula S. Rothenberg cites major pretenses for social inequality in the United States as sex, race and class (5). Hester's state causes her to depend on the government for assistance. This causes the government to monitor her moves even on issues considered personal, and is thus, subjected to public mockery. The society intrudes in whatever small personal space she owns. In her case, there is no distinction between private and public space: what is meant to be private is open up to the public gaze.

In the dialogue in scene four, when the Welfare Lady asks the names of her children's fathers, Hester gives just four names without the name of Reverend D, the father of her last child, Baby. When she is asked: "what about the newest child" (55), her response is "— I dunno" (56). It is evident that Hester knows the name of Baby's daddy but does not want to tell the Welfare Lady when she says "you think I am doing it with mens I don't know" (56). Like in *In the Blood*, Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* is also summoned by the magistrate to reveal the name of her love, Reverend Dimmesdale who is Pearl's father. In spite of the appeal and punishment, Hester refuses to name her fellow sinner. She does not believe that the magistrate has the right to know because

he cannot understand what pushes her to commit adultery. The societal construction forces Hester Prynne into committing adultery just like Hester La Negrita, race, sex and class pushes her to be neglected. Parks' Hester is being neglected by everyone in her society. The Welfare Lady does not see her as equal when she explains that the silky nature of her hair "comes from a balance diet, three meals a day. Strict adherence to the food pyramid. Money in my pocket, cloths on my back, teeth in my mouth, womanly parts where they should be, hair on my head, husband in my bed" (56). To her, she can never be a match to Hester who is not married and is unable to eat three times a day.

Parks' *In the Blood* which is set in America historicizes the role of a black woman and the relationship she has with children. Julia Kristeva, one of the main proponents of intertextuality thinks that a texts' meaning is a transitory reorganization of features with generally pre-existent meanings. The meaning may be either inside (reader's view) or outside (society's influence) the text. Parks' background as a black woman in American has greatly after her presentation of a black woman. In the dialogue between Hester and the Doctor, who represent the health agency, the African-American woman, Hester is seen as a nurturer:

DOCTOR: Howreyr meals?

HESTER: The kids come first.

DOCTOR: Course they do. Howreyr bowels. Regular?

HESTER: I dunno.

DOCTOR: In a minute. Gimmie the Spread & Squat right quick. Lets have a look under the hood.

Yr kids are 5 strikes against you.

Hester is seen as a woman who sacrifices herself for her children just to see that they are doing well. She sees her children as "treasures" and sources of comfort. When Amiga Gringa, a white woman proposes that she gets rid of her children, she says "my kid is mine. I get rid of em what do I got" (28). Like a real African-American woman presented in history, Hester prefers to have her children on her side though in an unpleasant situation. Deborah Gies suggest that "Hester has a gifted imagination" as she " helps the children to enjoy the meagre soup that feeds them for dinner by telling them that it has everything they love in it" (83). When Hester finishes, she takes them to bed and tells them stories to make them sleep. Her white friend insults her for neglecting herself because of children. According to Jennifer Nelson, while white middle class feminists were fighting for the right of abortion, Afro-American women and women of colour were fighting for reproductive freedom, "the freedom to have and not to have children" (Keene 58). Nelson's claim is very evident in Parks' *In the Blood* where the white, Amiga Gringa and the Doctor try very hard to stop Hester from having more children. With her white ideology, she sells out the fruit of her

womb and uses the money to take care of herself. She advises Hester to do the same but she replies that "I got nothing now, but if I lose them, I got less than nothing" (28). Just like Hester, Negrita who sees her children as "treasures", Hester Prynne sees her daughter as a "pearl". When Governor Bellingworth wants Hester Prynne daughter, Pearl, to be taken from her, Hester pleaded to stay with the child. According to him, the child looks like a fairy to him and his guest. Hester insists on keeping Pearl or die. To her, her shame will motivate her to teach the child to go on the right way. Both Hester Prynne and Hester La Negrita try to survive by getting into the seamstress business.

Hester's continuous suffering and rejection gets to its climax when Chilli, Jabber's father and her lover rejects her. When Chilli returns to Hester after 13 years of absence, he defends his irresponsibility towards Hester and his son. Chilli's decision to leave Hester and pursue his life elsewhere reveals the inequality in a man/woman sexual relationship as the woman is left behind to bear the burden of nurturing the child. When it is revealed that Hester has four other children, he withdraws from his marriage proposal, takes back his wedding gift: ring, veil and dress, then leaves.

Chilli who leaves Hester for 13 years without communication expects to meet her the same way. Hester's behaviour towards Chilli brings to mind Luce Irigaray's comment of the woman's "servile love of the father-husband" (350). Though she has been abandoned by Chilli, she still opens her arms for him to embrace because she sees him not only as a father of her child but also as a husband. Hester who has no means of livelihood has no option but to get herself in another relationship thinking that the people are going to assist her. Chilli rejects her for being unworthy of a wedding dress and ring just as Chillingworth rejects Hester Prynne for being an adulterer in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Chillingworth marries a girl who can be his granddaughter. Though Hester did not love him, she marries him in pain, and their incompatibility coupled with Chillingworth's absence for three years, Hester Prynne is left with no option but to commit adultery with Reverend D. Chillingworth's primary motivation is revenge, as he disguises just to hunt Reverend D, Hester's partner in sin, and Pearl's father. Parks' presentation of single parenting is very pertinent in the American society, especially during the period of the Great Wars in which the men were forced to leave behind their wife and children for the war.

Suzan-Lori Parks rewrites *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne from a black woman's viewpoint, particularly by rereading particular ideas (adultery, social exclusion and single-parenting) discussed in canonical texts. Parks intentionally changes Hawthorne's novel by fashioning a hyperbolic case of oppression in which Hester's subjugation to social oppression is emphasized and her choices limited. Parks presents two women from the same society being sidelined by the same people they look up to. Though both women are criticized by the same authority placed to support them, Parks' Hester is more condemned for being a poor black woman. Contrary to Hester Prynne, whose daughter, Pearl bears the scarlet letter A to partake in

her shame, Jabber, Hester La Negrita's son, joins the society in condemning his mother who works tirelessly to put food on table.

Bionote

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