


Rebellion or Reconciliation— A Study of *Lives of the Saints* and *The Scarlet Letter*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 14 Apr 2023; Received in revised form: 22 May 2023; Accepted: 02 Jun 2023; Available online: 10 Jun 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p>  <p>Keywords— <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>, <i>Lives of the Saints</i>, <i>Concession</i>, <i>Confrontation</i>, <i>Return</i>, <i>Departure</i>, <i>Immigration</i></p>	<p>Nino Ricci, a Canadian writer of Italian heritage wrote a trilogy, starting with a book entitled <i>Lives of the Saints</i> (2015), which drew comparisons to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>, prompting scholars to analyze the similarities between the two works. Both the two heroines, Christina in <i>Lives of the Saints</i> and Hester in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>, engage in extramarital affairs, are pregnant with a baby, challenge the strict social norms of their villages, and are isolated from the community. Although <i>Lives of the Saints</i> is regarded as “Canadian <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>” [1], few scholars have compared the two novels with proofs and details. In particular, apart from the massive resemblances, the differences between the two novels have been neglected by most researchers. This paper aims to analyze the two novels from the process and results of the two heroines’ rebellion, comparing their silence and argument, reconciliation and rebellion, return and departure, and attempting to find the reasons behind those differences.</p>

1. Introduction

The *Lives of the Saints*, is the first book in a trilogy written by Canadian-Italian author Nino Ricci, which tells the story of Cristina, a strong-willed woman who lives with her son in an Italian village. Cristina’s extramarital relationship with a “blue-eyed man” challenges the superstitions of the village, which believes her family is cursed because of her adultery. Afterwards, Christina takes her son on a journey to Canada. Since its publication, Ricci’s advantageous employment of immigrants’ life is astutely noticed by Mary Rimmer, who discusses that Ricci compares the artist’s situation as an outsider to that of an immigrant: “outsiders are necessary in fiction to test the rules of the

community”[2]. Licia Canton also argues that Ricci’s novels, particularly *Lives of the Saints*, “show how it is possible to write about Italian-Canadian experiences without resorting to stereotypes or caricatures” [3]. Additionally, she highlights Ricci’s skillful depiction of complex familial relationships and dynamics.[3]. Nadler turns concerns to the effects on approaches to the childhood of ethnic minorities, “Using these ‘child focalizers’ in order to depict defamiliarized, displaced, and minor perspectives, the authors write in the genre I call minor



literature” [4]. In addition to above two focuses, another consistent subject in *Lives of The Saints* is Ricci’s depiction of the evil eye. For example, Baldo demonstrates that “its (the evil eye’s) role is fundamental to the novel’s narrative construction. He furtherly poses the evil eye as a symbol of oppression on women. “The evil eye becomes a symbol of the pain and violence of the behavioural rules and boundaries imposed on women’s flesh” [5]. Interpretations about women are also pointed out by a Chinese scholar, Yao Yinghua, who holds the view that “The author (Nino Ricci) succeeded in creating a defiant and rebellious woman in his novel – Kristina, who can be compared to Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*” [1].

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is a classic work of American literature that follows the story of Hester Prynne, a young woman who is forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” on her chest as a symbol of her adultery and sin. It is analyzed from many aspects such as theocracy [6], Puritanism [7], Redemption [8], as well as feminist consciousness [9]. Although Yao Yinghua regards *Lives of The Saints* as Canadian “The Scarlet Letter”, he fails to compare the two novels with proofs and details. This paper aims to analyze Nino Ricci’s *Lives of The Saints* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* from the process and results of the two heroines’ rebellion, comparing their silence and argument, reconciliation and rebellion, return and departure, and attempting to find the reasons behind those differences.

2. Silence And Argument

As the heroines of the two novels, Christina and Hester do share many similarities in that they, respectively, challenge the strict social norms of their communities by engaging in extramarital affairs. They are both publicly shamed for their actions. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is forced to wear a scarlet “A” on her chest, which marks her as an adulterer and is a constant reminder of her crimes [10]. Similarly, Christina is subjected to public scrutiny and gossip in the village, and her affair and pregnancy bring shame and condemnation to her family [11]. They both refuse

to be defined by the social norms of their respective societies. Hester refuses to reveal the identity of her lover, even under pressure from the authorities, and she refuses to be intimidated by the judgment of her puritanical peers. Similarly, Christina refuses to accept the superstitions of her village and bravely defies the expectations of being a woman.

However, the ways they choose to resist are different. Hester chooses silence. As Terence Martin notes, “the gesture of silence fits Hester’s mood perfectly: the novel *The Scarlet Letter* will unfold in the silent, cold atmosphere of repressed humanity under Puritan rule” [12]. Hester’s silence continues throughout the novel as she refuses to say who her daughter’s father is. “Hester shook her head” [10]. When interrogated again by Mr. Wilson, she replies, “Never!.....I will not speak!.....And my child must seek a heavenly father; she shall never know an earthly one!” [10] As Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert state in *The Madwoman in The Attic*, “in the same way an author both generates and imprisons his fictive creatures, he silences them by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life” [13]. This image of “silence” encourages women to become submissive, fearful of being silenced for their rebellious words or actions. Hester comprehends her predicament and opts for silence, but eventually, her suppressed emotions emerge when she meets her lover Dimmesdale in the forest, Hester even lets the emotions that have been suppressed out. As a rebellious gesture against her heavy moral burden, Hester resolutely removes the scarlet letter, the symbolic sign of her sin. This miraculously works for Hester, as she feels immediately free from the moral burden of “shame and pain” and gains a brief moment of freedom. In addition to removing the sign of shame, Hester also let her dark, thick hair fall over her shoulders. Almost immediately, “her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty” [10] returns. She even proposes a romantic elopement to Europe. However, these rebellious acts were hidden from public view. After leaving the forest, she picks up the scarlet letter which was thrown away again, coils her long hair, and disperses her femininity.

Nevertheless, this paradoxical silence does not mean an escape. Person highlights that “The many silences and half-truths in *The Scarlet Letter* signal more than repression or evasion, however. The novel shows Hawthorne experimenting with the power of silence, with the active, political power of passive resistance” [12]. Hester’s silent resistance is from Hawthorne, as he expresses his dissatisfaction with customs in the preface of *The Scarlet Letter* rather than in the main text, he expresses his political view “silently”. Jonathan D.Katz also points out: “Silence could and did prove effective as a strategy of dissent. It manifests resistance, but does not articulate the position or identity from which that resistance comes” [14]. Hawthorne regards silence as a strategy, which is effective but without showing his position obviously. Pramono further elaborates on this point, “The word silent offers personal and internal efforts to resist oppression without movement, revolts, or protests” [15].

On the contrary, in *Lives of The Saints*, Cristina denies the traditional rules and values loudly. Outside Valle del Sole’s church, Christina calls Father Nick “our fatted calf”: “since he’d taken over the parish, the church had gone to ruin, because all the money he collected went into his own pocket. Other people made fun of him too, behind his back” [11]. She even jokingly refers to the clergy as a pig: “He was sweating like a pig today—and we like idiots still give him money for his wine and sausage, and eat stones all week. I’d like to see how much of what he took in today ever gets to the sick” [11]. Her scorn for hypocritical beliefs is ubiquitous. When hearing Giuseppina’s advice to take the blood of a chicken or a goat as a cure for the malocchio, Cristina refuses to act on this and burst into laughter: “Giuseppina 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” [11] Cristina dismisses Giuseppina’s instructions to cure malocchio as stupidaggini, in other words, as silly or stupid beliefs [5]. She rebels against the stereotypical values of the village and pursues her own values. Just like Santa Cristina, who “became a Christian and broke up all of the gold and silver images of the pagan gods in her

father’s house, selling the pieces to help the poor” [11], breaking the social rules of the time and suffering seriously. Christina is analogized by Ricci to Santa Cristina in mythology, who speaks for the true belief and rebels against the hypocritical ones aloud. As Ricci said in an interview, “the emigrant needs a mythology that can connect him/her to the culture left behind, give meaning to his/her experience of immigration in the new land and enabling him/her to better confront the future” [16], the story of Christina is Vittorio’s mythology which connects him to the culture left behind and fosters him a sense of resilience towards future challenges. As the mythical “saint”, Christina needs to resist loudly and violently rather than remain silent.

3. Concession And Confrontation

In addition, there were variations in their relationship with the community. Although both Christina and Hester are isolated from their communities and forced to live on the outskirts of society, the patterns they adapt to deal with their communities are diverse. To satisfy the expectations and demands of Puritanism for women, the dresses Hester sews for herself are made of the coarsest materials and the duller colors. Despite her ornate designs for her daughter, Pearl, to express her dissatisfaction with Puritan society, she does make concessions to the community. “She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies” [10]. Actually, she even keeps making efforts to stay connected with the community. Despite facing insults from others, she continues to help the poor and perform good deeds. During the epidemic, she even enters the homes of the sick to provide comfort. “None so self-devoted as Hester when pestilence stalked through the town” [10]. Her actions eventually earn her the respect of society. “Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge?’ they would say to strangers. ‘It is our Hester--the town’s own Hester--who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!’” [10]. The meaning of the scarlet letter “A” on

her chest, which originally signified shame, changes to represent “Able”, “Admirable”, and even “Angel” [17]. As a result, Hester becomes known as a saintly woman, and the scarlet letter A becomes an embodiment of her qualities of Abel. Hester’s compromise underlines Hawthorne’s idea of reform and illustrates his aversion to isolated individualism: “According to Hawthorne, self and community are dependent, and only by social participation can the individual find a fulfilling form of democratic life” [18].

Whereas Hester’s reconciliation with the community, Christina is completely hostile to the village. When Cristina shows up in the church, she wears a tight dress to show her pregnancy. “But the door to my mother’s room creaked open now and my mother appeared at the top of the stairs, dressed not in one of her loose dresses but in a white blouse and a black skirt which fit tight around her waist, the swell there rising up like a hill” [11]. She loudly announces to the world that she is pregnant with a child, showing her pursuit of freedom and love, as well as her rebellion against traditional society. Furtherly, during a visit the villagers intend to express their forgiveness towards Cristina, she declines their gifts: “Cristina, however, who believes that her neighbors are simply fishing for gossip, refuses their gift and by doing so refuses to comply with community norms” [5]. As expressed by DeMaria Harney, “Gift giving is both a material and a symbolic act, a marker of social obligation to a community and a way of initiating a social interaction” [19]. But Christina refuses those gifts, directly severs the ties of reconciliation between her and the community. Indeed, Cristina perceives that she can never receive true forgiveness from the villagers because she is a woman “who held in contempt by other women for her pride, her beauty and her refusal to conform to local standards” [20]. Newman has stated that confession in the village is eroded:

“In the village, confession has become disfigured, impoverished of spirituality and forgiveness, and devoid of reconciliation. The secular sinner can never be granted total absolution, which is unconditional readmittance to the

village society, as this honor is withheld as a form of perpetual penance. The confessional ritual, then, is necessary not for the forgiveness of the person who is required to confess but for the narrow-minded and vindictive villagers themselves who must feed their hunger to punish anyone representing an alternative to their way”. [21]

In the patriarchal society in southern Italy, women are restricted from sexual freedom as the norms and rules are mainly established by men, and violation of these norms results in punishment, social isolation, or confinement to the domestic sphere. There are a large number of proverbs showing the confinement of women: “Guard your women like your chickens.....or they’ll make food for the neighbour’s table; A woman is like a goat: she’ll eat anything she sees in front of her” [11]. Even women in the village obey the patriarchal rules, as Baldo presented in his paper: “Malocchio is the language that the village women have at their disposal to express their distress and their envy for the fact that Cristina has a freedom that they lack but of which she is proud” [5]. Actually, what the villagers want is not Christina’s repentance, but her suffering as a woman with freedom. In a village confession has become disfigured, Cristina, as a woman who possesses advanced feminist ideas, has no choice but confront.

4. Return And departure

The end of *The Scarlet Letter* best illustrates the position of Hawthorne’s political standards. “Desirable reform, for Hawthorne, is one that connects the past with the present with an emphasis on historical continuity in terms of both self and society” (Huang 538). After escaping the prison of Puritan patriarchy with her daughter Pearl, Hester, at the end of the novel, returns to the seaside cottage in Boston. “And Hester Prynne had returned, and taken up her long-forsaken shame!” [10] Hawthorne furtherly elaborates on this return:

“.....there was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, that in

that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it-- resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale". [10]

She returns, one reason is that her sinful experience has become an integral part of her entire identity; another reason is that she "acknowledges the importance of the civil order as she did not in her rebellious days" and she is "now accepted by the people who once spurned her" [22]. At the end of the novel, the local villagers, particularly women, come to Hester and confides in her about their misfortunes or sins. It is their belief that Hester possesses the ability to alleviate their misfortunes or sins, as well as prophesy the arrival of a renewed existence. "She assured them, too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be" [10]. Her return is a two-way compromise between her and the community. She returns, with the intention of promoting reform in a compassionate and peaceful manner, and the anticipation of a bright future. Through her return, Hawthorne's stance on social change is revealed. "On the one hand, he appeals to social reform; on the other hand, he denounces radical reform that breaks the present from the past" [18].

For Christina, departure marks the start of a new chapter in her life, without taking anything in the village. She adamantly declines to help Giuseppina in transporting her bundle to America: "I'm sorry Giuseppina.....I'm not taking anything. It's nothing against you, but I'm not the one to send as your messenger" [11]. On the day of departure, she even shouts with villagers, announcing her break with them:

"Fools!" she shouted now. "You tried to kill me but you see I'm still alive. And now you came to watch me hang, but I won't be hanged, not by your stupid rules and superstitions. You are the ones who

are dead, not me, because not one of you knows what it means to be free and to make a choice, and I pray to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities of the face of the earth!" [11]

As an Italian-Canadian writer, the main theme of Nino Ricci's novels is about migration. Verdicchio's interpretation verifies this idea, "Like other Italian-Canadian works, this novel can be considered a post-migrant narrative as it is written by a second-generation Italian Canadian and deals with the aftermath of migration" [23]. Christina's departure from the rural communities of southern Italy is to pave the way for future stories of emigration. The American continent is a new and mysterious land for Cristina, as well as her son, Vittorio. It is confirmed by Ricci in *Lives of The Saints*: "America. How many dreams and fears and contradictions were tied up in that single word, a word which conjured up a world, like a name uttered at the dawn of creation, even while it broke another, the one of village and home and family" [11]. Moving to the new continent signifies a new beginning at an unexploded world, and at the same time, a farewell to the old land. With the fear of the unknown, the desire for freedom, and the expectations for the future, they set out on a journey to America. Only through departure can the story of migration be continued. In addition, her leaving leads to her death on the ship due to childbirth. From then on, the trauma of losing mother, which is shown in the novel's sequels, *In a Glass House* and *Where She Has Gone*, haunts Vittorio, the young immigrant. Christina's departure represents that her son, Vittorio, embarks on a new chapter of immigration life.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, although the experience of Christina and Hester are similar, for their engagement in extramarital affairs, their rebellion against traditional puritan beliefs, and their isolation from the community, they illustrate two distinct modes of resistance against societal oppression: Christina's vocal and complete rejection of societal expectations leads to

her exile, while Hester's silent endurance eventually allows her to return to the community she once defied. Hester's silence, reconciliation, and return elaborate Hawthorne's attitude to social changes. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, Hawthorne advocates for a thoughtful and deliberate approach to social change. As Huang claims in his paper, Hawthorne is conservative in terms of reform; "that is, reform should not break with history" [18]. Unlike Hawthorne, Nino Ricci is an Italian-Canadian writer, whose stories contain the causes and consequences of migration. Cristina's rebellion, departure, and death lead to her son, Vittorio's immigration to Canada: "he forced to face his future abroad alone: the mother dies, just as the motherland looms forgotten and dark on the horizon" [24]. In fact, it is Christina who paves the way for Vittorio's emigration from the old society to the new world. In addition, compared with Saint Cristina by Ricci, Christina plays the role of "mythology" that can connect the emigrants to the culture left behind. As Baldo states, "(Lives and The Saints) unmask the implications of traditional patriotic and nostalgic narratives based on women's sexuality, and eventually construct a complex narrative of the Italian-Canadian post-migrant experience" [5]. Witnessed his mother's break with the original land due to a sexual relationship with the blue-eyed man, young Vittorio has to move to a new continent with fears as well as expectations, which is the resource of the complex emotion towards his homeland.

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