

The Scarlet Letter: Struggle of a Hester Prynne in the 17th Century Puritan Society

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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1840-1864) 'The Scarlet Letter' is a classical novel in the 19th century American literature. It was written in the 18th century but the setting is in the 17th century in Boston, America. The novel shows Puritanism's great impact on people's life and thought. It's a story of a woman named, Hester Prynne, who is punished for her adulteries with a young priest Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. She also has a daughter but denies disclosing her father's name. She fights against society, custom and her own sin. Her activities after wearing the scarlet letter change the letter 'A' from 'adulteries' to 'able'. This paper will give a picture of puritans' life and ideology in the Puritan town Boston and will show how the communities in the town are deeply influenced by Puritanism. By analyzing the main character, Hester, the paper will present the austerity and the strict punishment that was in vogue in the then Puritan society.

Key words: Puritan Society, Witchcraft, Adulteries, Sin, Church, Punishment, Scarlet Letter, Ostracize, Strength of Mind, Ability, Decision Making Ability.

Introduction

We first see Hester Prynne is publicly humiliated by inflicting punishment on her for breaking one of the Ten Commandments- adultery. She is compelled to stand in front of the town for hours and the crowd tries to break her down with criticism. They enjoyed seeing her punished, having thought that thereby they cleansed the town, and therefore only leaving a "pure" society. Hester has been living a life of humiliation and shame for long seven years, wearing the scarlet "A" and surviving by doing needlework and helping the poor and deprived. Earlier Hester married Chillingworth, an old man, although she did not love him. Their marriage was uncomfortable because such an old, decaying man should not marry such a young and lovely woman. The loveless match ends in separation. Chillingworth abandons his wife; he is presumed dead at sea and out of loneliness Hester reaches out to love Dimmesdale. While waiting in Boston for the arrival of her husband, Roger Prynne, Hester commits adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale who is a minister and cannot confess his guilt. While being pilloried, Hester sees her much older husband in the crowd. Chillingworth convinces Hester to refrain from identifying him. Chillingworth, upon his return, jealously avenges what he considers the actions of evildoers. There are no social or moral constraints placed upon his desire to see revenge. He without conscience sets out to destroy the man who took his place and won Hester's heart. Roger Chillingworth acts as a physician and vows vengeance upon the man, i.e., Pearl's father. He comes to suspect Dimmesdale as Hester's lover, moving with him in the guise of a physician to poison and torture Dimmesdale. Hester's entire existence revolves around her sin and the Puritan acuity. Puritan community to some degree has constructed Hester's character.

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Who are the Puritans?

'Puritan is the name given in the 16th century to the more extreme Protestants within the Church of England. These Protestants thought the English Reformation had not gone far enough in reforming the doctrines and structure of the church. They wanted to purify their church. In the 17th century many Puritans immigrated to the New World, where they sought to find a holy Commonwealth in New England. "The Puritans did not allow holding different religious belief. They insisted that high position and achievements were signs of 'eternal grace', that is, favour of God. The Puritan era during which the action of Hawthorne's (1961) *The Scarlet Letter* takes place embodied a society in which the individual and his or her actions were often pitted against a social order determined to stamp out behaviours it considered immoral.'

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Puritan Society

'Puritans wanted their children to be able to read the Bible. Massachusetts Bay Colony was a man's world. Women did not participate in town meetings and were excluded from decision making in the church. Puritan ministers furthered male supremacy in their writings and sermons. They preached that the soul had two parts, the immortal masculine half, and the mortal feminine half. Puritan law was extremely strict; men and women were severely punished for a variety of crimes. Even a child could be put to death for cursing his parents. It was believed that women who were pregnant with a male child had a rosy complexion and that women carrying a female child were pale. Church attendance was compulsory. Those who missed church regularly were subject to a fine. The sermon became a means of addressing town problems or concerns. The church was sometimes patrolled by a man who held a long pole. On one end was a collection of feathers to tickle the chins of old men who fell asleep. On the other was a hard wooden knob to alert children who giggled or slept. Church was serious business indeed. The Puritans believed they were doing God's work. Hence, there was little room for compromise. Harsh punishment was inflicted on those who were seen as straying from God's work. The Scarlet Letter was a real form of punishment in Puritan society. Adulterers might have been forced to wear a scarlet "A" if they were lucky. At least two known adulterers were executed in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Public whippings were commonplace. The stockade forced the humiliated guilty person to sit in the public square, while onlookers spat or laughed at them. Puritans felt no remorse about administering punishment. They believed in Old Testament methods. Surely God's correction would be far worse to the individual than any earthly penalty.'

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Role of Church

In *The Scarlet Letter*, we find that the base of puritan society was the church. The church and beliefs of Protestantism became important within the town of Boston; the church would be directly involved in the judgment of the community. The laws were established according to the Bible, as the Puritans treated the Bible as the "true law" of God, which provided guidelines for

¹ <http://www.oppapers.com/essays/Puritanism-Scarlet-Letter>

² <http://www.ushistory.org/us/3d.asp>

the church and the government. Those who committed crimes against the government were not only criminals but also sinners, and they were punished severely. The Puritan culture is one that recognizes Protestantism.

Comparison of Puritan lifestyle and The Scarlet Letter

The Puritan lifestyle followed strict guidelines to live a holy life to please God. The Puritan lifestyle became almost the symbol of perfection. The views of *The Scarlet Letter* and that age's history agree on the Puritan way of life. There are many examples about the Puritan lifestyles that reflect this statement. The government was closely related to the religion during the time of the Puritans. The church and the state had many similarities and they worked together. To make a decision, the Governor was not the sole person. The reverends were closely involved in the judgment of crimes as we find in *The Scarlet Letter*,

“There was a murmur among the dignified and reverend occupants of the balcony; and Governor Bellingham gave expression to its purport, speaking in an authoritative voice, although tempered with respect towards the youthful clergyman whom he addressed. ‘Good Master Dimmesdale,’ said he, ‘the responsibility of this woman’s soul lies greatly with you. It behooves you, therefore to surround by the teachings of their religion and Puritanism itself. ... exhort her to repentance, and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof.’” (Hawthorne, p. 69)

The Governor replaces his authority over the life of Hester with the reverend Dimmesdale. The church and the state are making the decision together. The government made laws based on their religion not on what was fair and just. *The Scarlet Letter* shows the aspects of relationships, religion, community, discipline and punishment in the puritan community of 17th century Boston. Relationships between men and women were very controlled and adultery was seen as a bad sin in the eyes of everyone in the community. Public discipline and punishment were used to discourage everyone else from committing the same crime or sin.

Mental strength to survive alone

Hester is banished and alienated from the community and has to live far from the rest of them. People chose to pass their negative impression to their offspring after this punishment by living outside her community. "Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast...as the figure, the body, the reality of sin" (Hawthorne, p. 55). The mothers of the children in the community always tell their children not to be like her. They would use her as an example of the consequences of going against society's rules.

"Children too young to comprehend wherefore this woman so be shut out from the sphere of human charities...coming forth along the pathway that lead town ward; and, discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off with a strange, contagious fear" (Hawthorne, p. 57).

The community never let her forget what she had done, and she accepts society's condemnation. The community tries to exclude her both physically and mentally from everything, but she is still with them. When Hester is forced to live apart from the townspeople, the society begins to learn

what Hester's real nature is and is able to see her for what and who she is and realizes that she is an asset to the community.

“But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne here, in New England, than 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. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But . . . the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, and yet with reverence, too”(Hawthorne).

Hester feels a lack of acceptance among other women in the community. When Hester is first brought out of her prison cell, the gossiping goodwives recommend much harsher punishment like death. Hester is no longer seen as a human being but as a symbol of evil and shame to the town.

Duty to Society

Hester practices her social life to punish herself which she thought God had appointed to her as punishment for her sins. The punishment received by Hester was based upon the Puritan religious, social, and governmental beliefs, structured into a single ideology.

The community realizes Hester's honesty and sincerity in her wrongdoing and her willingness to repent. They think her as a good person and someone gifted with the talent of sewing. People started accepting her into their lives once again. So they used her and were willing to overlook her sins when she looked to be of value to them. Though Hester is considered the worst person in the community, she manages to rehabilitate herself in the community by caring for the poor. She barely manages herself with the money she gets from her sewing skills. Though still she shares what little she has with the needy, yet those people too still insult her.

Even the poor think themselves better than Hester as they are financially poor, but not morally. Hester had no responsibility to feed the poor but she knew it was the right thing to do. Hester's good deeds finally were noticed by the community and life takes a turn for the better for her. They finally find out that they could not destroy her spirit and they really needed a person like her in their community:

“She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness. . . . The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss (Hawthorne, p. 214)”.

On the Scaffold

The first scaffold scene shows the beliefs of the general public at that time, and gives a prospective of what Hester Prynne should follow. The scene shows that the whole town was there for a cruel public punishment. The crowd was not there for an execution though, yet they were there for public punishment of Hester Prynne who had committed adultery. A townsman describes Hester's punishment to a stranger as, they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand only a

space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom. This scene shows the weight of values and morals in the society in the 17th century and how public punishment was a way of discouraging others from committing the same crime.

Sin and Punishment

The community acted as the main force behind this punishment because it helped alienate Hester and further her pain. Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the humiliating letter be embossed upon her tombstone. Religion is shown as ironic when everyone looked up to a reverend that had committed the same sin as someone they looked down upon severely. Dimmesdale says, "before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I must stand together! But daylight of this world shall not see our meeting (Hawthorne, p. 165)!"

In the 17th century, Puritans believed that there was a strict God who had decided in advance the fate of each person. To increase their chances of getting to go to heaven, the townspeople would often get one step closer to God by getting close to a religious leader, which was bad for Arthur Dimmesdale who was probably farther away from God than everyone else because of his sin. Relationships were looked upon as something sacred and a woman should be loyal to her husband. A townsman explains that the penalty is death for her crime. It shows the harshness of the 17th century.

Man-woman relationship

Anything Hester said in her defense would have just been ignored as women still did not have many rights. Relationships were not supposed to be broken unless by divorce. We can understand what was expected of townspeople in the 17th century through relationships, religion, community, discipline and punishment. *The Scarlet Letter* shows the pain and suffering a woman goes through when she breaks her marriage and disobeys her religion.

The Scarlet Letter 'A'

The church and the government sentenced Hester to a life of embarrassment with the letter "A": "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore. The cloth letter presented on Hester's chest opened a door for continuous public humiliation and involvement. Hester herself became conscious of the letter's brilliance and relevance, as the "A" characterized Hester's immoral position; for such embroidery was "greatly beyond what was allowed (Hawthorne, p. 69)."

When she threw the letter after seven years, Pearl didn't accept her without it and forced her to wear it again. After wearing 'A', she said, "Now thou art my mother indeed! And I am thy little Pearl (Hawthorne, p. 227)!"

Witchcraft

‘Hester too is equaled with a witch in the novel, like many other women of the 17th century who were, in one way or the other, condemned for moral or social disobedience. She shatters the Puritan image of ideal womanhood by incarnating the two sins generally linked with witches: the seduction of man (her adultery) and the failure to serve man (her refusal to comply with the institutional authority of Puritan society). ... So we see that the Puritan’s belief in witchcraft is inseparable from their ideas about women and their larger religious worldview. The witch was both a negative model by which the virtuous women were defined and the focus for Puritan version of Evil (Choudhury, 2008).’

Individuality

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the author attempts to show the way the society casts out individuals simply because their ideas and deeds differ from the common values. Hester Prynne symbolizes those who challenge social conformities. Though she has been banished for committing adultery, she sees that the community needs her. Through her humanitarian activities the community realizes she is a person who, despite of her sin, can affect the community in a positive way. At the beginning the townspeople do not see her as a necessary person but want to get rid of her. So in a sense when they drive out Hester, they are casting out a part of themselves. The Puritans exclude Hester Prynne from the society for their fear. This new society was afraid that their community would fall apart "in a land where iniquity is searched out and punished" if they do not seek out those individuals that were immoral in their eyes. They only saw Hester for the crime she had committed but not as the woman she was. Through banishing Hester Prynne they uphold their morality but lose an individual.

Changing attitudes of community

Over the time the community began to soften their views about Hester and slowly she reclaimed a place for her within the community. Despite all that she had been through, she never spoke up in her own defense. She let her skills and charity for others speak for them and it was through those very actions that brought her back into the fold. People in the community even started to discuss whether or not the letter "A" should remain on her clothing. "It was debated whether or not the scarlet letter was to be taken off her bosom" (Hawthorne). With this the people are beginning to consider that may be Hester has fulfilled her punishment. Although she has gained their acceptance once again, it was mostly due to her not ever backing down from her silence. She gained the respect of the community with her firmness, her sewing skills and her charitable ways with the poor in the community. "Such helpfulness was found in her-so much power to do and power to sympathized -that many people refused to interpret the scarlet "A" by its original signification. They said that it meant "Able": so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength (Hawthorne).’

‘Adulteries’ to ‘Able’

She was "able" to deal with a town that hated her, and then a town that accepted her for her good works. The society was able to look past their hatred for her and saw that in fact they needed her. And finally she was able to stay, where she wanted to be. Over the time the fact that Hester didn't crumble and in fact stood taller despite her exclusion from the Puritan society opened their eyes to see that good can survive even in the heart of a sinner. Thus her adulteries turn into her ability to survive.

Chillingworth and Hester

Roger Chillingworth is a man who has deficiency in human warmth. His twisted, stooped, deformed shoulders mirror his distorted soul. He was a difficult husband who ignored his wife for much of the time, yet expected affection from her. His death is a result of the nature of his character. Chillingworth represents true evil who is associated with secular and sometimes illicit forms of knowledge, as his chemical experiments and medical practices occasionally verge on witchcraft and murder.

Dimmesdale and Hester

Arthur Dimmesdale, like Hester Prynne, is an individual whose identity owes more to external circumstances than to his innate nature. He was a scholar of Oxford University. He has an unusually active conscience. He gets more sick to see that Hester takes on herself all of the blame for their shared sin, it affects his conscience; and this is the cause of his mental anguish and physical weakness. Consequently, he becomes an articulate and emotionally powerful speaker and an empathetic leader, and his congregation is able to receive meaningful spiritual guidance. Ironically, the townspeople do not believe Dimmesdale's protestations of sinfulness. Dimmesdale's congregation generally interprets his sermons allegorically rather than as expressions of any personal guilt. This drives Dimmesdale to further internalize his guilt and self-punishment and leads to still more deterioration in his physical and spiritual condition.

He said to Hester, "As concerns the good which I may appear to do, I have no faith in it. It must needs be a delusion. What can a ruined soul, like mine, effect towards the redemption of other souls? – or a polluted soul, towards their purification?" (Hawthorne, p. 205)

He also regrets, "I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it!" (Hawthorne, p. 205)

"Be thou strong for me," Dimmesdale pleads' "Advise me what to do (Hawthorne, p. 204)." This is a cry for help from Dimmesdale, finally admitting he cannot go through this ordeal by himself. When Dimmesdale asks for help, he is no longer sustaining the belief that he is above Hester. He is finally admitting that she is an equal, or even that she is above him.

Hester's letter is visible to all but his one is torturing him silently, "Mine burns in secret!" (Hawthorne, p. 206)

He cannot tolerate people's adoration and faith on him any more because he is not a good person in his own eyes. "It is all falsehood! – all emptiness! – all death!" (Hawthorne, p. 206)

Forest scene

In the deep and dark forest, many of the vital characters bring forth hidden thoughts and emotions. The forest track leads away from the settlement out into the wilderness where all signs of civilization vanish. This is the escape route from strict rules of law and religion, where a man and woman can open up and be themselves. It is here that Dimmesdale openly acknowledges Hester and his everlasting love for her and the two of them openly engage in conversation without being anxious with the constraints that Puritan society places on them. The forest itself is the very incarnation of freedom. Nobody watches in the woods, thus it is here that people may do as they wish. She openly talks with Dimmesdale about their future which would never be discussed in any place other than the forest.

Hester and Pearl

Hester's daughter, Pearl is as a symbol in the novel. When Dimmesdale dies she is only seven years old and her real importance lies in her ability to incite the adult characters in the book. She asks them sharp questions and draws their attention. Children in *The Scarlet Letter* are portrayed as more insightful and more honest than adults, and Pearl is the most insightful of them all. Pearl makes us constantly aware of her mother's scarlet letter and of the society that produced it. Pearl's innocent or perhaps intuitive comments about the letter raise crucial questions about its meaning: "Will not it come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown"

(Hawthorne, p. 196) The strict Puritan society punishes Hester by forcing her to forever wear a scarlet "A" and banishing her from the community; thus simultaneously punishing Pearl and leading her into a confused childhood. Because of Pearl's odd attributes and the fact that she had no father, the Puritan community began to wonder if Pearl was a "witch-baby" fathered by the devil.

Throughout the novel Pearl is referred to as "the scarlet letter endowed with life because she is Hester's constant reminder of her sin. Because of this, Hester's view of Pearl is obstructed by her own guilty conscience, and thus, Hester's own sin leads her to believe, along with the Puritan community, that Pearl might be a "witch-baby." When Reverend Wilson asks Pearl "Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee (Hawthorne, p. 164)?" Pearl responds, out of defiance, that she was "plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door (Hawthorne, p. 164)." While this causes Mr. Wilson to think that Pearl does not believe in God, and Pearl could not associate herself with other children, she created her own imaginary world in nature.

Nature vs. Law

Hester was in a struggle to win her freedom from her husband. Chillingworth tells Hester that he knew that she did not truly love him while they were married. Hester, in a manner of speaking, finds her freedom from the demonically portrayed Chillingworth by sailing the ocean and indulging in adultery in the New World. With Dimmesdale, Hester is able to lucidly explore what true love is. She says in the novel that her most affectionate memory was her undying love for Dimmesdale. In this case the "old world" marriage to Chillingworth represents the abuses incurred by human law on individuality. By escaping to the "new world" and being able to

indulge in an act of true love, Hester represents the true nature of humanity, the fact that natural desires will always clash with man-made law.’³

Public vs. Private Self

‘Hester also undergoes a struggle with the sin that she has committed adultery. Hester is forced to wear a scarlet “A” that stands for adulterer as a punishment. Her daughter Pearl, the scarlet letter incarnate, enhances the struggle. While undergoing this struggle to be redeemed, Hester is actually given a new view on life and begins pondering the institutions on which her colony has been founded on. Hester remains very isolated and is allowed to flower these thoughts within her mind. While wearing the letter, Hester remains permanently ostracized from the community. This seclusion represents Hester’s inner desires going against the strict law of Puritan society. Her struggle represents that private desires will almost always at some point clash with the ideals of society.’⁴

Individual vs. Society

‘Hester has to struggle to conceal her feelings and love that are rekindled when she meets Dimmesdale in the forest. Once her passions for her love are rekindled she is so energized that she even removes the scarlet “A” that she had not since been without for seven years. Hester now struggles with the question of how she will be able to keep this glorious feeling. In this struggle, Puritan law has forced Hester to become a dull conformist, but her natural passion inevitably overtakes her and allows her to drop what she had thought to be repentance of sin. This shows that true passion can very easily overtake conformist habits instilled by human laws. Additionally, Hester is once again rekindled with the individuality that the Puritan society had taken from her.’⁵

Conclusion

Thus the struggle of Hester Prynne ends in a positive way. Hester's character had evolved from the shame of town to a well respected individual in the Puritan community. Hester is seen always as strong and virtuous. After seven years of struggle, Hester continues her life isolated on the outskirts of town. She is free to go elsewhere and start a new life but she chooses to remain in Boston. She had become a modest woman, seeking nothing but having her sin be forgiven, in the place where it had been committed. Hester had come to accept the Puritan religion, and punishment of adultery. Hester had also come to, and risen above, the expectations that were set upon her. Hester became to the community a symbol of a strong minded individual to the people of Boston. Hawthorne in his novel uses Hester's character to uncover the flaws of puritan society and the hypocrisy of their reactions to Hester.

³ <http://www.litcharts.com/lit/thescarletletter/themes>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

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