
Scarlet Letter: The Image Of Puritan Society

Puritan society was a strict society that was ruled primarily through religious beliefs. It was largely a man's world where women were excluded from many societal events. In Puritan society it was believed that the soul had two parts: the immortal masculine half and the mortal feminine half. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a culture in which the gender roles damage the progression of society. Nathaniel Hawthorne characterizes Hester as a more masculine figure in society, while Dimmesdale seems to take a more feminine and maternal role.

In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, adulteress Hester Prynne must wear a scarlet A to in order to publicly shame her for her sins. Arthur Dimmesdale, stays unidentified as a party in the town's most scandalous affairs and due to this he is wracked with guilt, while her significant other, Roger Chillingworth, looks for retribution against Hester's sin. *The Scarlet Letter* provides an interesting take on what truly happens in Puritan Boston and how religious-based towns may not always be as proper as they seem.

The characters in *The Scarlet Letter* take on progressive roles that are new to Puritan Boston, and Hawthorne decides to characterize them through the self-pain that each afflicts on him/herself or on others. The most prevalent character is Hester Prynne, a woman shunned by society due to her taking on a more masculine role. Hawthorne shows her strong character through all of the pain she endures, revealed through public humiliation -- usually endured by a male -- and isolated life in Puritan society. Before wearing the scarlet letter she may have gone her entire life without being noticed; however, now she is front and center basking in her unfortunate fame. Hester Prynne is a Puritan woman who challenges traditional beliefs in the community and transcends what is determined by the community to be her role as a female.

The next character who directly juxtaposes Hester Prynne through his feminine personality and actions is Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. As a Puritan preacher, he is displayed as the perfect example of the Puritan faith, yet, he cannot even maintain his role in society, much less preach how to be the perfect Puritan in God's eyes. Since he is a genuine believer, his affair with Hester Prynne heavily weighs on him. He privately acknowledges his guilt, -- juxtaposing how Hester endures humiliation (publically), which usually is contributed to male figures, while Dimmesdale puts the most guilt upon himself, usually contributed to female figures -- and until he announces and acknowledge it publicly, he cannot begin to repent for it. The conflict between his role as a spiritual leader and the gravity of his personal sin shows how he wants to conform to society as a high-regarded male figure in his public life, yet in private he truly wants to have feminine characteristics.

Themes in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne include criticism of Puritan beliefs regarding sin, social isolation, and a dominating patriarchy. Sin is one of the major themes that appear continually throughout the book. Not only does sin mean an act against the religious normalities, but also a rebellion against the traditional society. Once the act between Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale becomes known to the public, Hester is sentenced because adultery is one of the biggest sins to the church and the church rules over the government and society. While Dimmesdale remains free due to his position, status, and influence, Hester has to

go through taxing isolation due to her daughter, Pearl. Dimmesdale's sin becomes a psychological stigma; he goes through severe depression just to prevent his downfall in society. "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin?" shows that as Dimmesdale remains silent sins pile on top of him until it eventually engulfs him. The result of the sins enacted by Hester allows for grueling social isolation to be another major theme of the novel. Hawthorne leans toward the feminist side in this novel; the fact that Hester unjustly suffered shows that *The Scarlet Letter* is more of a condemnation of the Puritan moral code of that time. Feminine resilience is not just a myth in *The Scarlet Letter*; it is a fact as well. Hester Prynne's endurance of her suffering concludes that she was able to suffer more than an ordinary man in her circumstances. "While this passed, Hester Prynne had been standing on her pedestal, still with a fixed gaze toward the stranger ... all other objects in the visible world seemed to vanish, leaving only him and her" which shows the connection between Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth and how their sins are now pronounced due to this connection. The domination of the patriarchy is another theme. While the novel opens with an anonymous narrator telling the story of a woman, the narrator is a male describing the male-dominated society. Men have created and enforced legislation, formed the religious standards, and also arranged Hester's trial. "A tendency to speculation, though it may keep a woman quiet, as it does a man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her" because Hester does not feel that life is worth living in this society if one is a woman. While this novel is a condemnation of the social normalities of the time, it is also an unconscious criticism of the male domination.

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne provides a new change to the conservative society. With this change, it also provides the effects of introducing a transcendentalist and feminist like Hester Prynne so early in American history. Hawthorne makes many commentaries on the Puritan society as a whole, while showing how the world needs more people like Hester Prynne who will break through societal trends.