

Contrast in the scarlet letter essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Puritan society was known for its strict morals and religious piety.

But despite these supposedly virtuous qualities, in the Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, we are shown how twisted this model of society is. The people torment Hester, but refuse to see that their beloved minister carries the same sin in his heart; in fact, they revere him all the more for it. In his chapters, "Hester at Her Needle," and "The Interior of a Heart," Hawthorne creates an ironic contrast between Hester's public torment and Dimmesdale's inner agony. While there are many parallels between the two chapters, the contrasts in the characters' ways of dealing with their crime reveal how sinfulness leads to a development of oneself, as well as development of a sense of empathy for others. Paradoxically, these traits are shown to be incompatible with living the true Puritan lifestyle. This is why what goes on outside Hester and Dimmesdale is so vital to their inner narrative, Hester's public torment eventually sets her free, while Dimmesdale's public reverence slowly kills him. Both chapters cover a variety of insights into both Hester and Dimmesdale's innermost decisions and thoughts. The purpose of "Hester at Her Needle" is to give readers an understanding of why Hester stays at the scene of her crime, as well as how she ostracizes in society as a result.

In "The Interior of a Heart," Hawthorne also delves into the minister's inner anguish, and his quest to find an alternate route to absolution, even as he is raised up by society for doing so. In "Hester at Her Needle," Hawthorne reveals why she stays at the scene of her crime, "But there is a fatality... which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great marked event has given color to their lifetime" (72). Hester's sin has given her life color, in the form of the scarlet

letter. But were Hester to flee to Europe or run away into the wilderness, she would be accepting that the Puritan society had control over her life and choice.

By choosing to stay and accept her punishment, however cruel, Hester is establishing control over her own fate. She doesn't need to escape the town to escape the judgments about her and her crime. She accepts her punishment and her sin, and thus she is able to accept herself. In contrast, Dimmesdale is unable to accept his sin or his punishment.

Ironically, as Hester falls from grace she only grows more adored. Even as she is raised up as "the saint on earth!" Hawthorne reveals the anguish this brings upon him: "It is inconceivable the agony with which this public veneration tortured him" (125-126). Dimmesdale is acutely aware of the disparity between the image he projects and his private self, but this only enables his preaching to appeal more to his masses.

Dimmesdale lives the daily torment of sin so he can speak to it effortlessly, making his sermons all the more empathetic. This is very different than how Hester lives with her sin, baring it to the world daily, instead of hiding in plain sight as Dimmesdale does. As Hester is slowly freeing herself from her sin, Dimmesdale drowns in his own depravity, only worsened by his guilt from deceiving his adoring congregation. This highlights how important the outside world is. Another important contrast is the way in which Hester and Dimmesdale deal with their sympathy for their fellow sinners. In "Hester at Her Needle," Hawthorne reveals how Hester's sin allows her to see the sins of others, and disclose how heavily they weigh upon her: But sometimes, once

in many days, or perchance in many months, she felt an eye? a human eye? upon the ignominious brand, that seemed to give a momentary relief, as if half of her agony were shared. The next instant, back it all rushed again, with still a deeper throb of pain; for, in that brief interval, she had sinned anew.

Had Hester sinned alone? (78) Hester is not alone her sin, even though society has chosen her to publicly torment, which makes the relief of realizing she is to alone all the more painful. She is publicly bears the sins of the community; she is the communal symbol of shame, the “ figure, the body, the reality of sin” (72). This burdens her deeply, in a way that Timescale never experiences. In fact, Timescale derives his power from this sense of empathy. His sin gives him ‘ sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind, so that his heart liberate[s] in unison with theirs” (124).

This trait is what gives his sermons their strength, bringing him adoration even as he insists that he is “ utterly a pollution and lie” (125). Except for Chlorinating, everyone around the minister willfully ignores his clear cries for absolution and outward misery, mistaking it for divine holiness.

Unfortunately, Timescale is unable to learn as Hester does, that one must accept their identity, however ugly, in order to truly find peace within themselves. Hawthorne also creates many direct parallels within the chapters, which serves to highlight to contrasts even more. Both Timescale and Hester sympathize with the sins of others but differ in their reactions to it. They share a public spotlight but for ‘ ere different reasons. Giving a

public service is also a common trait, but as Hester provides charity to the needy, they bite the hand that provides to them.

Timescale is adored for his public sermons. But perhaps the most important parallel of all is the pain the two “ sinners” are in. Despite the difference in how they deal with their torment, they are together in shared agony. Hester and Damsely’s collective agony is a product of how society deals with their transgressions. While the chapters focus on the innermost thoughts of both characters, they also relate how the outside Nor affects them to what this causes internally.