

# Women in puritan society



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A Noose and a Thread Since early civilization religion has set the precedent for society. As time goes on, society evolves, but at the price of evolution comes a great sacrifice that women are usually at the center of. In *The Heretic's Daughter* and *The Scarlet Letter*, both of the main characters, two different but also similar women, endure suffering not at the hands of their peers, but by the will of the local religious institution, Puritanism.

The situations the characters found themselves in were mostly because of their personalities, the strictness of Puritanism, and the misogynistic view that society held back then. Women, especially rebellious ones, were unfairly treated because of the heavy discrimination Puritans held against them. In both books, the conflict centers on the suffering of the main woman. At first glance, Martha Carrier and Hester Prynne seem to be dealing with separate issues, but a more analytic look reveals that these women's issues are because of their very characters: strong-willed, tough, and nonconforming.

We see these traits in Martha Carrier when exchanging tempestuous dialogue with Reverend Barnard at Grandmother Carrier's funeral. "Goody Carrier, it says in Romans that he who rebels against the given authority is rebelling against what God has ordained and those who do so will bring judgment upon themselves." In response, Martha defends herself with, "And does not First Peter say rid your selves of hypocrisy, envy and slander lest it bring to ruin the defiler? (Kent 73-74) In one swift motion Martha exhibits all the aforementioned traits by choosing to defend herself over inaction, denouncing the Reverend's character, and exhibiting no signs of regret or penitence. Hester reflects the very same qualities within the very first chapters as she stands trial: "Speak, woman!" said another voice

coldly and sternly, proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold. " Speak; and give your child a father! " " I will not speak! " answered Hester, turning pale as death, but responding to this voice, which she too surely recognized. And my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one! " (Hawthorne 63) Hester, just like Martha, refused to break under societal pressure and deemed her will more important than that of the like-minded community by rebuking their demands. Such women in a Puritanical society did not last long, but in their short lives they served as complete examples of the tyrannical conduct of Puritans against women. Puritans were renowned for their intolerance and their severity when a member broke tradition.

Both of the accused, Hester and Martha, were charged with sentences that ended in capital punishment. Though excessive, Puritans believed that retribution for crimes should be just like those in the Bible. After all, if you're going to escape from the corruption of one religion, you might as well go back to its " pure" roots. In their seeking to " purify corruption", the Puritans went to excessive lengths to punish the heretics of their day. In fact, thirteen out of the nineteen hanged of heresy during the Salem Witch Trials were women.

Both Hester Prynne and Martha Carrier suffered unjustly under the cruel sovereignty of Puritans and their religious views, but because of their rebellion they revealed just how oppressive and unjust Puritans and their views were. " Well-behaved women seldom make history. " This quote reverberates throughout time and can be seen more in religious colonial times than any other era. Women were second-class citizens in a Puritan

society, and rightly so, because their Bible told them that it was acceptable to treat women like that. Just like in the Bible, Hester's sin was ultimately her fault.

Like Eve, she tempted the man and fell into sin and as the direct cause she had to endure the harshest of the punishment. This repugnant view not only took place in the court of law, but also in the household, where women were expected to work effectually and obey the will of their husbands unquestionably: "[Goodman Preston's] wife came to the door of the house to listen and I could see that her right eye had been blackened and swollen, so that the lids were shut together...When [Samuel Preston] saw he could not drive [Martha] away with the sound of his voice, he clenched his fist as though to strike her.

Mother then raised over her head the long thorny stick she had used to prod the cow. I don't think, until that moment, a woman had ever met his anger without a bowed head and a curved back." (Kent 118) This passage, along with the scorn Hester Prynne feels later in her life, exemplify the way women were expected to behave and what was, in Puritanism, the right way to treat them had they not complied. Martha

Carrier and Hester Prynne refused to fall victim to the misogyny that Puritans advocated, subsequently setting a place aside for themselves in literary history. Martha Carrier and Hester Prynne are but two examples of women who suffered in Puritan society. Though there may have been more, the two women were similar spirits whose disobedience reflected on their society. It

is because of women like them that we have moved away from the worst parts of our Puritan past and treat women with higher esteem today.