

Historical context versus human behavior in "the scarlet letter"

[History](#)



“The Scarlet Letter” was set in Boston, Massachusetts in the mid 1600’s and follows the backlash of the sinful act between Hester Prynne and Boston’s own Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. In an ironic and masterfully executed red-herring type twist, Dimmesdale himself publically calls for Hester to name her sinner-in-crime in the beginning of the story, which she adamantly declines to do. The reader, at this point, does not know that Dimmesdale is her adulterer, but knows that the game is afoot.

Hester is given a scarlet “A” to wear upon her chest for her sin and bears the “A” with a sense of purpose and dignity, even embroidering it with gold thread. Hester and her daughter of sin, Pearl, end up living in a small cottage where Hester earns a living with her skillful needlework. And, in an attempt to show her shame, yet revel in it, Hester only dresses Pearl in scarlet dresses. Hester’s long-lost and presumed dead husband, Roger Chillingworth, returns to find Hester in prison for her deed and informs her that she is to tell no one of his identity.

Much later, once he establishes himself in society with a false identity as a physician, he is summoned to help the ailing Dimmesdale. Chillingworth begins to believe that Dimmesdale might be suffering from a malady beyond the physical which brings him to discover that Dimmesdale is an adulterer and Pearl’s father. Enraged and seeking revenge, Chillingworth plots to destroy Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale is so fraught with guilt at this point that he punishes himself physically, fasts, and staves off sleeping for a constant vigil.

He feels a deep sorrow and horror for what he has done to Hester's husband and tells Hester, at which point she begins to see that Chillingworth must be behind Dimmesdale's quickly declining health. Hester and Dimmesdale have a moment in the woods where she confesses that Chillingworth is actually her husband. Dimmesdale is willing to face the truth. They plan to set sail for the Old World immediately, and in an act of freedom, Hester removes her "A" and lets down her hair. Pearl becomes so distraught that Hester has to once again don her shame, and this time it is with true sadness.

They must wait until after Election Day to set sail and Dimmesdale eagerly begins his final, enlightening, sermon. At the end, he brings Hester and Pearl up on stage and confesses everything to the town. This, of course, ruins Chillingworth's plan to destroy Dimmesdale as he watches with fury while everything is revealed. As the story ends, Dimmesdale dies on the public platform after his confession, Chillingworth dies a year later, and Pearl inherits his fortune. Years later, Hester is buried next to Dimmesdale in the town cemetery.

In 1841, Hawthorne wrote a letter confessing that he was beginning to despise life in Salem and asks, "dost thou not think it really the most hateful place in all the world? My mind becomes heavy...nothing makes me wonder more than that I found it possible to write all my tales in this same region of sleepy-head and stupidity" (Moore, 2). He wrote this letter to Sophia, his wife, and it represents very clearly what he thought of his town of Salem and his Puritanical upbringings. It is from this resentment that "The Scarlet Letter" was born.

Going further back in Hawthorne's life, his " father died...when he was four, an age at which, according to Freud, the male child forms a crucial attachment to his mother...consequently, he was able to supplant his father in his mother's affections. His attachment to his mother became an impediment to his psychological maturation...especially when [she died]" (Kennedy-Andrews, 107-108). According to this information, " The Scarlet Letter" becomes an easy and remarkable parallel to Hawthorne's own personal life.

Hester's husband dies while at sea, leaving her to believe him dead and free to seek new male companionship. A reader could parallel this to Hawthorne's life in which his father died and his mother was left to seek new male companionship, albeit, with her own son. This parallel can be defined even further as " throughout the story Hawthorne continually defines Hester in terms of motherhood...and in the very beginning of the narrative, Hawthorne establishes Hester's relation to the Oedipal underpinnings of the story" (Kennedy-Andrews, 108).

As the Oedipal complex goes, the son seeks to supplant his father for his mother's affections. In most cases, as Kennedy-Andrews remarks, the son is forced to contend with a very real father figure for these affections and becomes fearful and backs down (107). In Hawthorne's case, without a father figure from such a young age, he became the man in his mother's life and the Oedipal complex became fulfilled. In fact, Hawthorne's work " aims to produce an invisible change, an internal deepening like that which

transforms the letter even as its form remains identical” (Kennedy-Andrews, 81).

Hester’s attitude towards the “ A” is to wear it, not with resignation, but accepting it as part of her life. Embroidering it with gold and crafting scarlet dresses for Pearl to wear signify this transformation externally. It is internally, in Hester’s character, that the letter changes much more significantly. She wears it as part of her life, accepting what she did, but the shame she feels slowly transforms Hester into a woman respected within the community. And the shame she once felt for Pearl is transformed into pure, satisfying love for a creation—despite the fact that Pearl was consummated through sin.

In the 1600’s the act of sin and breaking from religion became the greatest crime and the basis for Puritanical beliefs. In this, and perhaps only this, Hawthorne follows history and makes a poignant mockery of the human condition—most precisely, the value stripped from women when they fall so far from grace as to partake in human desires. The fact that Hester’s human desire happens to be a religious leader of the community only serves to highlight this point more.

Hawthorne’s use of symbolism throughout further demonstrates how the mores and ideals of the Puritanical community practically destroyed the very reason that the Puritans came to America in the first place—for freedom, as we are taught in history, without persecution or tyrannical leadership.

Instead, the characters within “ The Scarlet Letter” created their own sense of justice: persecuting women who are not obedient and compliant, like Eve

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from Biblical lore (before she forces Adam to eat the cursed apple, of course).

As a historical work, “The Scarlet Letter” cannot be trusted as to the accuracy of events or people involved. Hawthorne “attempts to undermine the Puritan community’s judgment of Hester by employing a sentimental nineteenth-century narrator, uninformed about the spiritual complexities of the story he tells” (Thickstun, 133). This is where Hawthorne’s work loses all credence as a historical work of the 1600’s. His narrator is fully nineteenth-century, exposing views that simply did not exist within society until Hawthorne’s own time. While his views make for a compelling and entertaining story, they falter in historical truth.

However, if this work is looked at closely, it becomes clear that Hawthorne’s life in the mid 1800’s actually serves as a greater historical reference for the morals and attitudes presented in the story. Historically, it can be said that yes, there were inhabitants in Massachusetts during the 1600’s, and they did profess Puritanical beliefs, much like the inhabitants of Boston where “The Scarlet Letter” takes place. However, the story within “The Scarlet Letter” is not that of history, it is that of human behavior and is better studied for a glimpse into humanity than for historical truths.

In fact, “The Scarlet Letter” should not be read if the reader is hoping to find strong roots in historical context, but can be studied, to great reward, if a reader is in search of a tale inspired by true human emotions brought on by the politics enforced by a strong Puritanical society. Hawthorne used the politics and resulting changes in humanity from his own time period to form

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the characters and interactions in his work. In looking at the characters, Hawthorne “ penetrates their subconscious minds and grapples with the secrets and compulsions he finds there.

He too, plays master to his fictionalized slaves. And in recognizing this, he too, saw himself as a kind of spiritual villain, a marauder of the mind, and this perspective endows all of his work in both its technique and creation with an air of brooding and ineradicable guilt” (Reynolds, 50). It cannot be said that he ignored events from history or took a specific view on them; however he created his own history with the lives of Hester Prynne, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, their resulting daughter, Pearl, and the lives of those they touched.

Historically, in an effort to determine whether Hawthorne’s descriptions are accurate, one can look at the values of the Puritans as a basis for study. Beyond the social, cultural, and actions of the characters, however, “ The Scarlet Letter” leaves much to be desired for historical accuracy. In truth, Hawthorne based the story upon his own cultural times, placing his characters into a time period in which he knew prejudices against sin would make a marvelous tale.

By his time, the Salem witch trials were well known, and his background in Puritanical beliefs would have made inserting characters into that background an easy feat. Hawthorne, it can be decided, focuses on the story within the backdrop—how the characters themselves shape history—and seems unconcerned with literal historical events within his tale. As to my opinion about historical events, no, Hawthorne did not change them. What

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he did was to make me see, very clearly, how easy it is for one person to become the focal point of sin within a community.

To paraphrase Gary Scharnhorst's "The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter'," the word "adultery" is never actually used within "The Scarlet Letter," yet a reader understands very clearly by the attitudes of the characters that Hester has committed the worst of all sins and has to be physically, outwardly punished for all time. The one thing that separates humans from the other animals of this world is the ability to choose between right and wrong. Animals are unable to make this rationalization.

But, as Hawthorne has so adeptly shown, the choice is often a non-issue when swept away by the driving force of a larger crowd. On their own, humans can choose between right and wrong without consequence. In a group, a dissenter would be punished just as Hester was—marked publically for all to see. In this, Hawthorne is a master. The fact that he based his work in a well-known time period serves no greater purpose than for dramatic effect. His story would be the same if set in any other time period, with any other sin. Imagine if Hawthorne had written about a young servant girl during the reign of King Henry VIII.

She could have born his child or spoken out against Catholicism and been given the same fate. Her fate probably would have been death, and in his punishment, Hawthorne was delicate—if anything he is historically inaccurate here. Witches and women of less than perfect repute were often put to death, not degraded by wearing a public symbol. In this he was kind,

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but from the outcome of the story we know why. He wanted Pearl to grow up through the castigation of her mother and still prosper in the end. The object of sin became the reason for Hester's being, and a powerful symbol of a different kind of justice.

A pearl, after all, within a dark sea that appears to be full of tragedy and strife, can still become a most beautiful jewel. Truly, "The Scarlet Letter" is a work of fiction. The characters are not real and their lives did not play out in known history; however, what Hawthorne presents, and which I feel is more important, is what could have happened. The moral of his work is not to retell an unfortunate act, but to show the nature of human character and how there is a moment where a choice must be made between good and evil. The fact that Hawthorne was raised with Puritanical beliefs only seems to lend more weight to this theme.

And this is what I enjoyed about "The Scarlet Letter." Hawthorne's life fills the pages of his work with a profound message for humanity. The scenes could have played out in any society, based upon any sin. Hawthorne even leaves a bit for the reader to infer about humanity with the final line of the book, "on a field, sable, the letter A, gules [or, is stained red]" (Hawthorne, 201). From this, we can ask: "does the scarlet letter stand for sin or for cleansing? Is the epitaph a word of despair or hope? In what direction did Hawthorne intend to lead our thoughts?"

If asked, he would have said, 'read out of your own heart' " (Scharnhorst, 131). And this, I think, is what readers should remember when studying his work. Being human means making choices based not only on who we are, but

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who others around us are and how they choose. Following the crowd, while most do so without thinking, is not always the best choice and does not, as in the case of Hester, serve the right kind of justice. In the end, once the truth is revealed, Hester finally finds peace, and the fact that her peace was granted, not by the town that punished her, but by her adulterer, is most striking of all.