

Is the scarlet letter a feminist novel? essay sample

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The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a great work with many excellent things that could be said about it. One thing that makes The Scarlet Letter stand out is the character of Hester Prynne, who is one of the strongest female characters in literature. Having a female character with such strength raises the question of whether or not The Scarlet Letter is a feminist novel; by looking at what feminism is and analyzing the book itself, one can see that the book is more a commentary on society as a whole rather than a feminist statement. Hawthorne depicts many strong characters throughout his novel. Some, such as Chillingworth, seem to be stronger than others, like Dimmesdale. One character in particular, however, happens to stand out among the rest. The main protagonist, Hester Prynne, is an extremely tough female character.

Her strength flourishes when she is forced into isolation after her sin is discovered; society attempts to imprison her but she does not let it. She utilizes her skill with a needle when she embroidered her red letter A, wearing it proudly, almost as though she were trying to show it off. This is illustrated directly through Hawthorne's writing; he states in chapter 5, " She bore on her breast, in a curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to the fabrics of silk and gold." Feminism is the collective belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Feminists often feel that women are not given the same things that all men are given and they are willing to fight for equality.

Throughout history these ideas have not been very popular; in fact women were not even given the right to vote in the US until 1920. This is the reason why the character of Hester Prynne is such a groundbreaking accomplishment in literature. She is portrayed as a strong, independent woman, raising a child on her own while having to deal with weight that the scarlet letter holds. While there are traces of feminism in the novel, *The Scarlet Letter* is not a feminist work as a whole simply because the book's main focus is on the church and the Puritan way of life. This book has a strong independent female main character that has to learn how to deal with the isolation the town has shoved upon her. However, the book really discusses the strict Puritan lifestyle and how the foundation of their morals is with the church and their religion.

Hawthorne writes, "Throughout them all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion." This shows that the church has made her their example in what should be avoided. The church's opinion on her sin was meant to take a toll on her and begin to change her personality. The people of the town react to Hester's sin by immediately turning towards the church for how they should act. Whatever the church says goes with them since the people who are running it are, to them, the purest and holiest of all and were handpicked by God to lead them.

Thus, this book questions the society itself and does not focus solely upon Hester's experiences. Another reason as to why this isn't a feminist novel is

that Hawthorne refused to actually bring up the couple's relationship for most of the book, and only mentions the affair every now and then. This allows for the reader to form their own opinion on how this society deals with sin and not exactly on how "empowered" Hester is. The focus of the book wasn't entirely on Hester and more on how the society runs.

Overall The Scarlet Letter displays numerous accounts of feminism within the characters' thoughts and actions, but the novel itself is not feministic.

Feminism is just a small part within a whole, and can be analyzed time and time again without any progress made in doing so. Hester Prynne, the main character that could be seen as portraying feminism, bears a letter that should have been an ultimate atrocity and demise of her reputation, but in fact it is that same letter that teaches herself and the reader that it does not matter what other people think. She could wallow in a pit of despair giving into societal pressures, yet she walks proudly and with her head higher than before. Hester Prynne did in fact let her haters be her motivators. She is a true hero to many women, but Hawthorne does not make her the center of attention and wishes the book to be viewed as a whole rather than its unique and individual parts.