

Individual vs. the society in "the scarlet letter"

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the theme of the individual versus society is prevalent. One of the most intriguing characters in the novel is Hester Prynne, who is ostracized by the society around her. Hawthorne uses symbols to accentuate how Hester chooses to accept her branded punishment as a moral obligation rather than a mark of shame. Her individualism is achieved through a clear conscience and accepting the fact that she is unique, distanced from the Puritans surrounding her.

Immediately, *The Scarlet Letter* sets up a clear contrast between Hester and the other ladies in Boston, Massachusetts. Hester emerges from the prison as a gorgeous woman who was,

“ tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, beside being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion... was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity.

” (Narrator, p. 46-47)

Meanwhile, the other women in Boston are portrayed as gossiping quacks who ridicule Hester out of jealousy and spite. Hester is further distanced from the mob through her elegant garb and her skill of needle-work.

While on the scaffold, and later when she moves into a cottage distanced from everyone else, Hester remains defiant. She asserts her quasi rebellious personality by not wavering amid the penetrating stares of the townspeople. In addition, she chooses to stay in Boston rather than take the opportunity to escape and start a new life. By running away, Hester would be

acknowledging society's power of her. Instead, she desires to establish her own identity and not have society determine it for her. If Hester were to succumb to outside pressure, it would further undermine what little integrity the townspeople see in her. However, the cruel taunts are meaningless to her, because Hester is adamant in her convictions; she has a genuine purpose in life.

Her daughter Pearl is an important part of Hester's life. Much more than a living embodiment of the sin that Hester is reminded of through the scarlet letter, Pearl allows Hester to have a reason to live and a reason to stay. Pearl acts as a reality check, for she daily reminds her mother of her sin. Yet, Pearl is a miracle child, by proving that beauty can spring from sin. She offers Hester a mirror of herself, and an enduring obligation for which to uphold. In addition, Hester feels an obligation to stay in New England because she feels morally bound to stay with Pearl's father.

The scarlet letter in a sense defines who Hester is. Lavishly decorated "in fine red cloth surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread," (Narrator, p. 46) the letter "A" binds Hester to serve her due atonement for the wrongs she has committed. However, her brilliant skills at needle-work and uniqueness of individuality are frowned upon by the society. Out of malice and jealousy, they verbally abuse both her and Pearl, degrading them to worthless figures while they themselves are hypocrites in their own right. Ironic takes its finest form when the skillful works of Hester are adorned by those highest officials that are punishing her.

Despite the ridicule, Hester stands tall. She knows the expectations that are placed on her, and that the shame incurred by her will extend for possibly

generations to come. Hester is not willing to mold herself to the eager hands of others so that they may satiate their cruel desire to see her torture in her mental prison. She strives for compassion and well-being amid all the harsh words. This is evidenced in her treatment of Pearl, who is exalted far beyond the other children. She is dressed in the most extravagant attire, while being taught heavenly virtues. Motherly love defies all pressures, and Hester's undeniable love for Pearl is the quintessence of this.

In the strict morals of Puritan society that are delineated in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne undergoes many tribulations. Her wrongdoing helps provoke the angry sentiments of the townspeople, who are determined to see her suffer to the fullest extent. However, Hester's attitude is one of moral obligation and compassionate defiance. She retorts with nothing but love, as beautifully demonstrated in her treatment of Pearl. Hester is unique, and so is her unwavering attitude regardless of what the rest of society thinks of her. She answers to a higher order and never relents her conscience to the greedy hands of others.