

# Hester prynne: a strong female character that challenges society's norm

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## **An Author Ahead of His Time**

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses protagonist Hester Prynne as a dynamic depiction of a strong female character, one who challenges society's norm. Such a concept was not quite as prominent at the time, and furthermore enforced throughout the novel in various ways.

Hester's thoughts, actions, and her legacy are all closely monitored and influenced by elements of feminism, and though she's more of a typical woman at the beginning of the book, Hester becomes more and more feminist as the plot thickens. Her early representation in the novel is perfectly interpreted by Hawthorne in Chapter V., right after Hester is released from prison and is seen donning the infamous Scarlet Letter: "Throughout them all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of women's frailty and sinful passion" (67). In this quote Hawthorne is ultimately trying to criticize society, that suggests that women are supposed to be weak and oblige to the standard regulation. Regardless of her perception, Hester's role across *The Scarlet Letter* compliments Hawthorne's somewhat philosophical beliefs, and likewise confirms the notion that *The Scarlet Letter* is a true forerunner of American feminism, conveyed through Hester's unorthodox sexual ambitions, interchange of gender roles, and her infamous act of adultery.

Contrary to most obedient woman of the Puritan community at the time, Hester chose to follow her sexual desires despite the rigorous Puritan regulations; and ultimately agreed to take on the consequences for her

actions. Despite the vast disapproval of the community, Hester's independence prevails as she sews a refined "A" upon her dress, establishing her view on the punishment, and giving the Letter an apparent double meaning; both to represent Hester's punishment as well as a form of Hester to restate her backing of her previous actions. She refuses to allow her bold persona and actions to be diminished by the Puritan society. Instead, Hester (along with Pearl) moves to the outskirts of town and with the help of her needle begins to produce slightly contentious fashion. She sews ornate gloves and other items for the leaders of the community; then, with her heart so sympathetic to misery, she tends the sick and dying. As a result, her tenderness and sympathy win her the admiration of many who come to develop their views on her letter and furthermore reinforce Hester's growing dominance based on her actions across the community.

Across the novel, countless of times we see Hawthorne interchange the characteristics of the different genders. He expresses such interchangement with the narrator's and the reader's perception of men and women by swapping the male and female traits of character. For example, across the text we see Dimmesdale develop a sensitivity and submissiveness which were not the typical masculine qualities, while Hester is given full charge in the dilemma. She is the one who decides that they would leave Boston, and the one who is responsible for executing all the necessary arrangements. Such example is an accurate showing of the clear switch in roles between Dimmesdale and Hester. Hester is sought out to be the stronger one. This mental alteration in the two main characters is coupled by a physical

alteration. Dimmesdale's health is on the decline throughout the romance, while Hawthorne points out how Hester gradually becomes unattractive to men when he says that, "Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a women." (163) This quote evidently shows her inheritance of some very masculine qualities, which can be interpreted as a form of mental independence and once again poses Hester as the overpowering character in the novel, regardless of the gender.

An essential theme that appears time and time again across the novel is adultery, and how that impacts Hester's relationship with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. By committing adultery in her past marriage, Hester goes against her moral obligations towards her husband. When he arrives in Boston however, she affirms her submissiveness to him by promising to keep his true identity concealed. Chillingworth's torture on Dimmesdale proves to be too much of a burden for Hester to bare, and ultimately leads her to break her silence. By going against Chillingworth's wishes, Hester is able to gain full independence from her husband, a rare feat for a woman at the time. We see in Chapter 8 how she explicitly analyzes the situation she has at hand, in which she decides to go against Chillingworth due to the sinful man he has become when Hawthorne states that, "She determined to redeem her error, so far as it might yet be possible. Strengthened by years of hard and solemn trial, she felt herself no longer so inadequate to cope with Roger Chillingworth . . . She had climbed her way, since then, to a higher point." (157) In the end, it is shown again how she does not abide to Chillingworth

preferences even though he is the “ dominant gender” in this dilemma, similarly to how she did not abide to the Puritan authorities in the the beginning of the novel. This repeated behavior to how Hester reacts to a higher law is a signature characteristic of a Hester across the book, as well as one of a strong and stubborn women. Not only is her resistance to higher (male) authority due her gender and social status amongst the community alarming, the fact that she continues such resilience with the Scarlet letter bounded to her is considered unheard of at the time. Hawthorne indicates to the reader the minimal impact that the letter has done to Hester in Chapter 8 when he mentions that, “ The Scarlet letter had not done its office.” (166) Such letter was supposed to intimidate Hester and put her in her respective subordinate place, but instead it has ignited a revolutionary feeling within. The inequality she ultimately goes through causes Hester to question the existing balance of power. It sparks an internal feeling and encourages her to formulate alternatives in regard to the traditional patriarchal society. Such alternatives are just another take on her opposed views on the traditional women’s roles. Hawthorne relates Hester’s point of view to a broader topic, one in which we finally see Hester question the severity of her actions, and whether or not the Scarlet letter is indeed repentful as portrayed when it is stated that, “ She assumed a freedom of speculation . . . which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the Scarlet letter” (154) Hester starts to piece things together, and realize that she did not need any justification for her actions, and that although the Scarlet letter is supposed to be holding her back, it instead propels her forward.

Hester's evolution from a young woman with fiery and rebellious exterior to a more introvert, wiser lady who over time developed controversial and bold thoughts regarding women's roles in her society is the crucial progression that Hawthorne uses to emphasize feminism throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. What started out as a battle between Hester and the Puritan officials evolved into a power struggle between Hester and all women versus society's norm for a women's gender role, shown through Hester's change in role from a advocate through her actions and behavior to an advocate through her words of wisdom. Hester undoubtedly altered the way of life throughout her city (Massachusetts Bay Colony) by siding with her original beliefs and ambitions, something a women had never been able to accomplish at the time, furthermore encouraging the notion that the Scarlet Letter is a true forerunner of American feminism.