

Spheres in scarlet letter

Literature, Russian Literature



It was once said that “ the only living societies are those which are animated by inequality and injustice. ” A man named Paul Claudel wrote this in his work, *Conversations dans le Loir-et-Cher*, and he criticizes the ability to have a functional society. Societies are meant to organize the values of people into a system with uniform laws and expectations; however, societies can never fully achieve this. Claudel only sees societies with dysfunctional characteristics like inequality and injustice. There are always exceptions to the social order because all people are individuals with different life experiences that help define who they are.

Nathaniel Hawthorne also criticizes the Utopian ideals that societies often hold in his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. The main character, Hester goes astray from the rules of her Puritan town and must wear a scarlet letter on her chest to declare her sin. The scarlet letter isolates Hester from the pressures to conform to society, giving her the opportunity to find her individualistic moral perspective in life and she shares this revelation with Dimmesdale. Hawthorne conveys this concept of individualism through the motif of spheres.

Initially, Hawthorne conveys Hester’s isolation from society which is brought on by the scarlet letter, by putting her in her own sphere. The most noticeable feature of Hester as she exits the prison is the elaborate scarlet letter that is embroidered on her chest. Immediately, Hawthorne mentions that the letter “[takes Hester] out of the ordinary relations with humanity and [encloses] her in a sphere by herself” (46). The language here shows the isolation brought on by the letter because Hester no longer has the same

relations with humanity, which in this case signifies the uniform Puritan society.

Her interactions with others are altered now that she is by herself. The letter puts Hester in a different world, away from that of society and causes her to be alone. Even people that do not understand the reason for Hester's isolation participate in it. The children of the town only understand that Hester is "shut out from the sphere of human charities," but they do not know why and yet when they see "the scarlet letter on her breast, [they] scamper off with a strange contagious fear" (72). This furthers the idea that Hester is completely ostracized from society because even those that are naive of the letter's meaning will not accept her.

Hawthorne illustrates the isolation Hester experiences, as a result of wearing the scarlet letter, with the symbol of the sphere. Along with the negative aspects of isolation, Hester realizes that being in her own sphere takes away many societal pressures to conform to a set of beliefs. When Hester starts to come back in contact with society, she still feels as if she does not belong. Hester feels that all contact she has with others demonstrates that she is "as much alone as if she inhabit[s] another sphere" (74). Even though she is physically in contact with others, Hester is still alone.

She no longer has to conform to the beliefs of her Puritan town because she "communicate[s] with the common nature" in different ways than "the rest of human kind" (74). Because she is isolated, Hester "[stands] apart from [society's] moral interests, yet close beside them," meaning she can take a step back to look at the views of the majority, but she has the option to

make her own choices (74). Even though she feels separated from society, Hester can still feel the influence of its beliefs. This idea is also illustrated with the location of Hester's cottage.

The cottage is on the outskirts of the town, yet still within its limits and this parallels the influence that society has on Hester. The remoteness of the cottage “ put it out of the sphere of social activity,” yet Hester still had to go into town to sustain herself with supplies. Therefore, just as the cottage keeps Hester at a distance from the town, the letter takes her away from many pressures to conform to the values of society. Hester sees that the accepted beliefs and morals of society are not the only options as a result of being isolated from the sphere of their influence, due to the scarlet letter she wears.

Hester's isolation and realization that she does not have to follow society, give her a new perspective on the beliefs of individuals and she shares this with Dimmesdale. Hawthorne conveys this through their temporary coexistence in the same sphere. Through her isolation, Hester realizes that individuals can have their own belief systems away from those of society and uses this to find peace with her sin. Dimmesdale however, never experiences public shame or isolation and struggles to find peace with his sin.

He does not see leaving the town as an option like Hester does because he feels that “ Providence hath placed” him in a specific “ sphere” where he needs to live out his “ earthly existence” and he has no choice in the matter (180). Dimmesdale does not see that there are other options besides those of society, but Hester exposes him to this idea. While they are in the

foresttogether, she gives him a new perspective to consider; that the ways of society do not always work for everyone. At the time when both Hester and Dimmesdale can see things from this perspective, “ they [feel] themselves, [...] inhabitants of the same sphere” (173).

They are in the sphere together because even though they may not possess the same moral values in the end, at this time they both understand that they have options apart from societal beliefs. Even though they both have the same perspective they have to pursue their separate spheres in distinct ways. As Dimmesdale walks home “ his inner man [gives] him [...] evidences of a revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling,” indicating the changes already taking place from what Hester instilled in him (198). The revolution in Dimmesdale’s thoughts and feelings takes place because Hester enlightens him to the idea of individual belief systems.

He sees things in a whole new way with many more possibilities now that he can choose for himself what he wants to believe. He clearly undergoes a “ total change of dynasty and moral code” due to the ideas Hester exposes to him in the forest. Both Hester and Dimmesdale see new possibilities in individual beliefs due to Hester’s isolation and realization that society’s beliefs are not perfect. Although both Hester and Dimmesdale learn that individuals can have their own belief systems through Hester’s isolation and relief from the pressures of society, they must ultimately find their own individual spheres.

After being exposed to a new perspective by Hester, Dimmesdale has time to think and realizes that he is not the same as her. Dimmesdale knows that

they can not reside in the same sphere and Hester, too, realizes this at the procession. As Dimmesdale walks by, Hester understands that he is “ remote from her own sphere, and utterly beyond her reach” (218). Hester hoped that her influence over Dimmesdale when she enlightened him would continue on in his decisions and they would reside in a sphere together, but this was not the case.

Just as Hester needed to find her place apart from the influence of others, Dimmesdale did as well. In order to find peace, Dimmesdale needed to find his own moral code and sphere and when he did, he reached “ an epoch of life more brilliant and full of triumph than any previous one, or than any which could hereafter be” (227). This great success that comes from finding his own sphere shows how strongly Hawthorne believes in the individual and the pathway to get to individualism.

Dimmesdale can not be any more at peace with his life than he is when he discovers his individualized moral system. Hawthorne also shows his support for individualism when he breaks the forth wall and speaks directly to the reader. He says the only thing to be learned from the minister’s experience is to “ be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world if not your worst, yet some trait whereby your worst may be inferred” (236). With this, Hawthorne wants people to find peace within themselves and says they need to expose themselves fully to the world to do so.

In the novel, Hester experiences public shame and shows it freely to the world whereas Dimmesdale keeps his sin hidden. That is why Hester is able to be at a better peace with herself and her sin whereas Dimmesdale’s fate

is to only be peaceful in death. There can be no set sphere for all of society because of different life experiences. Hester and Dimmesdale both find separate, individualized belief systems, apart from those of society, due to the public shame and isolation Hester experiences wearing the scarlet letter.

Hawthorne uses the motif of spheres to convey the message that society can not meet the needs of all individuals. The spheres in the novel never function properly when they attempt to envelop the moral perspectives of more than one person. Society tries to only have one uniform set of beliefs for all, but this is unsuccessful because everyone has their own thoughts and feelings based upon experience. Just as Claudel said, the only way societies can exist is with flaws; Utopian and Puritan ideals are unattainable. Hawthorne values individualism and the differences between all people.