

# A comparison between nathaniel hawthorne's scarlet letter and arthur miller's cru...

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Both the Scarlet Letter and the Crucible describe the hysteria generated by the highly restrictive and stifling Puritanical society.

The Scarlet Letter portrays the situation of a woman and man who have committed adultery and shows the consequences that they have to endure. Hester Prynne wears a symbolical scarlet letter which is the mark of social opprobrium; because she confronts society openly, her spirit is freed from prejudice and she is able to perceive the truth about the society she lives in. Arthur Dimmesdale is blinded by the corruption of the society and cannot see himself and his deed in a true light. Because he is not able to admit his sin and live in honesty he is destroyed by his own inner tumult and by the power of the social condemnation.

The Crucible also describes a society in which witchcraft is used as a screen to cover the thirst of a Puritanical society for cruelty and revenge. Abigail Williams and the other girls fling accusations at innocent people in the society, delighted by the power they acquire in this way. This shows the way in which the outward show of justice and goodness are used to cover sin and evil. There is a profound reversal of values in the Puritanical world. John Proctor refuses to lie and live in falsehood and is among the few characters who try to uproot prejudice and reveal the truth to the society. After he and other two innocent people are executed, the society seems to realize its blindness and the injustice that hid beyond the witches' trials. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter and Arthur Miller's Crucible are studies of religious superstition which caused a mass delirium in the seventeenth century Puritanical America.

The witchcraft trials that took place at that time are an instance of the contagious effect that superstition had on society. Both the *Scarlet Letter* and the *Crucible* portray, at the same time, the society that made possible a number of crimes to be committed in the name of religion and good and several individuals that struggle with prejudice and mass superstition. The Puritanical society of the seventeenth century America attempted to stifle human passion and to numb imagination. The society's severe condemnation of sin and of any sign of liberal thought placed a great constraint on the individual.

In this suffocating environment, passion became a crime and superstition and prejudice rose rapidly. However, there was only a pretense at holiness and purity in the Puritanical society. In order to dissimulate their own passions, people began looking for sin in the other members of community. Inebriated by what they saw as their holy mission, which required them to purge the community of evil, the people of Salem began sacrificing other members of the society to satisfy their desire for punishment and revenge.

Arthur Dimmesdale in the *Scarlet Letter* and John Proctor in the *Crucible* are similar in many ways. As it shall be shown however, Dimmesdale is tormented by his sin while Proctor, although he condemns himself for his mistake, sees the rampant spread of prejudice in Salem and understands that the sins of those that pretend holiness are much greater. Both of the stories therefore deal with mass delirium and show man to be prone on corrupting even religion and the principles of good and justice. Interestingly, both of the works are centered on the idea of adultery.

Arthur Dimmesdale, a priest, commits adultery with Hester Prynne and has to live with this spot on his conscience while preaching holiness to others. John Proctor, an ordinary man living in Salem, has an adulterous relationship with Abigail Williams, the reverend Parris's niece. In both cases, the adultery sets the scene for the social delirium that feeds on the suspicion of sin and evil inside the community. In the *Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne gives birth to a little girl while her husband is missing from the village.

While Hester's sin is easily discovered by the eager society, Dimmesdale's adultery remains hidden. This is symbolized by the letter "A", the scarlet letter, that Hester has to wear over her chest for the rest of her life.

Accusations of witchcraft soon arise as well, and the adulterous woman is fiercely banished from society. She ends up living on the outskirts of the town, where she raises Pearl on her own. The little girl is almost taken from her by the people of the town, but she manages to keep her with the help of Dimmesdale.

Hester has openly admitted her sin and while she stubbornly displays her shame in front of the other people but Dimmesdale has to keep his true nature hidden. This is not only the result of circumstances however. Hester's mind and her spirit allow her to be free. She believes in life and the possibility of good and happiness beyond sin. For Dimmesdale however, his sin is also the end and it foreshadows his death. His spirit cannot feel free anymore: as a Christian he knows that it is impossible to erase his past and leave his sin behind.

All through the book, Dimmesdale struggles with an unmovable reality. He knows he is guilty and also knows that his sin cannot be redeemed through earthly penance, yet he still searches for a ray of light to illuminate him and guide him towards salvation. The permanent pretense and act he has to put in front of the community is what eventually crushes his spirit. He knows that he cannot transform himself so as to escape knowledge of his sin. Ultimately, Dimmesdale cannot think of acquiring a new identity and leaving the town, as Hester urges him to.

Symbolically, he refuses to give up his name and thus escape the opprobrium of the community: “ Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame” (Hawthorne, 1980, p. 242). Because of the weight of social conventions and demands, a name is attached to the individual but does not necessarily speak of a person’s character. Dimmesdale’s dilemma is that, as a believer and an essentially good man, he is torn apart by the knowledge that he is a sinner and he can no longer perform truly good deeds.

This is also why he is incapable of leaving the place as Hester had urged him: Dimmesdale is tied to the community because of his sin. He cannot escape thus the space that torments him and keeps him imprisoned. By contrast, Hester, who wears the scarlet letter as the symbol of sin and social rejection, has a passport to freedom. Because she is marginalized by the Puritanical society of Boston, she is able to enjoy a spiritual freedom that the other women cannot even imagine: “ The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread” (Hawthorne, 1980, p. 300).

On the other hand, Dimmesdale cannot free his mind and think beyond the conventional social standards and laws: “ The minister ... had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws...” (Hawthorne, 1980, p. 300). The Scarlet Letter studies therefore the inner corruption and falsehood of the Puritanical society in America. The two main characters, who are united through their sin, reveal two different attitudes when confronted with the force of mass superstition and prejudice. Hester, who wears the burning scarlet letter on her chest, is able to free her mind.

She sees that the society is corrupt and that her sin is not a tremendous one. On the other, Arthur Dimmesdale has to wear the mark of his sin secretly. The symbolic scarlet letter is burning in his soul and the shame eventually destroys him. The letter that the two lovers wear is a symbol of the action of social force in an agitated time. It represents the thirst of the Puritanical society for exposing and cruelly condemning sin. Arthur Miller’s *Crucible* portrays the same Puritanical society in America in an even more revealing way.

The title is very significant: on the one hand, the crucible is an allusion to the witches’ melting pot, the cauldron they use in order to prepare the spells; on the other hand, the crucible is a symbol for the Puritanical hysteria that was itself a melting pot where innocent people were sacrificed to satisfy social prejudice, prudishness and revenge. Miller depicts the development of the witchcraft hysteria with great artistry. Significantly, the social delirium is

caused by Abigail Williams, a selfish and passionate young woman who cannot accept the fact that John Proctor rejects her.

As the protagonists in the Scarlet Letter, Abigail Williams and Proctor have committed adultery. However, Proctor is very different from Dimmesdale. While he regrets his deed, he maintains his sobriety and reason in the midst of the Puritanical hysteria. He is a believer and he also loves his wife, and therefore discontinues the relationship with Abigail. When the young girl is caught in the forest with a gathering of women and people begin to suspect witchcraft, she saves herself and blames Tituba for having “compacted with the devil”.

The hysteria begins as the girls who were caught dancing in the woods declare having been lured by witches. This generates a complicated web of accusations and subsequent trials. People are condemned with no visible proof when the girls state they have been lured by dark spirits. Under the outward show of purity, the society judges and condemns the innocent with no other proof than the persuasive acting skills of young girls who faint, scream and fall ill in the presence of those who are supposedly evil. In the end, all the people who had managed to maintain their rational thinking and their sanity during these proceedings are condemned.

John Proctor and his wife are also waiting to be hanged, along with other honest people who perceive the intricate web of lying and deception and refuse to bend to it. Their spirits reject the demands of the society to betray the other people in order to satisfy their thirst for revenge: “You must

understand sir, that a person is either with this court or must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is a sharp time now, a precise time – we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world.

Now, by God's grace, the shining sun is up..."(Miller, 2003, p. 93 ) As the judge describes it, the Puritanical society attempted to destroy evil completely and maintain only the good. Interestingly, when John Proctor is faced with a similar dilemma to that of Dimmesdale, he reacts in the same way. The court tempts John Proctor to sign a declaration of guilt and to continue his life with his pregnant wife. The temptation is even greater as the two have just forgiven each other and rediscovered their love and their desire to live.

Ultimately however, Proctor cannot sign his name to a lie: " Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! " (Miller, 2003, p. 167). Like Dimmesdale, he cannot adopt a false position in society in order to save himself and therefore chooses death over falsehood. Both the Scarlet Letter and the Crucible reveal the inner workings of the stifling Puritanical world. Attempting to destroy evil completely, the Puritanical world actually destroys justice and honesty.