

The scarlet letter: the role of shame in puritan society by nathaniel hawthorne

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Throughout the infamous novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author, illuminates relationships between individuals and a society. Often, roles or themes Hawthorne has included profoundly emanate those relationships; roles and themes include revenge, bravery, boldness, and practicality.

Each of these important themes create more articulate relationships between core characters, like Hester and Dimmesdale, and a society; the society most included being Puritan, the most dominate throughout the setting of the book. Though all themes are significant and play large parts in the book, it is found arguable that shame plays the most significant role between Hester Prynne and Puritan society. Of all characters in the novel, shame is the most reoccurring role in Hester's relationship with Puritan society. As we know from the book, a majority of Hester Prynne's shame comes from the society she lives in: since she has committed the sin of adultery, she is shamed by society. This is one of the most prominent supporting details of shame being such a significant role in her relationship with Puritan society is the shame reflected on her by the society itself. In today's society, 'cheating' is often looked down upon as unethical in a relationship; however, in Puritan society, law and religion coincided, often making sins in the Bible illegal in statute.

For years, Hester was cruelly shunned and harassed for her wrongdoing. In the beginning of Chapter One, waiting before Hester to be watched and stared at before being given a public sermon addressed to her wrongdoing, one woman spoke that "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead." (38). Along with Hester's continual
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harassment and shunning by the community around her, them as well as the governor, doubt Hester's capability of her daughters decent upbringing, and attempt to remove Pearl from Hester's care. When Hester goes to the governor's mansion to plead to him and others for her right to her daughters care, Bellingham states " Woman, it is thy badge of shame!" replied the stern magistrate.

" It is because of the stain which that letter indicates, that we would transfer thy child into other hands." (84). Because of her sin, she is denied rights many other citizens would normally have, such as the right to care for her own child. While Hester does her best to stand against the society that ruthlessly condemns, she is cast down in certain moments when it is impossible to avoid the scar Puritan society has left. " Her prison-door was thrown open, and she came forth into the sunshine, which falling on all alike, seemed to her sick and morbid heart, as if meant for no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast.

" (59). Hester's fight to resist the stain the society she lives in attempts to leave enforces her shameful relationship with society. Although Puritan society does a solid job of attempting to control Hester and mold her into a victim of oppression, Hester stands against it. Hester refuses to allow Puritan society to control her life because of her sin. While the shame society brings to her is an obvious contention of it being so significant in her relationship with Puritan society, this is possible one of the most important supporting details of such a thesis. Her boycott against Puritan tendencies begin at her appearance before the public sermon: when nearly demanded to reveal the "

co-sinner” to her crime, Hester slams Wilson and Dimmesdale by saying “ And my child must seek a Heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!” (51).

She believes and voices her stance that a Heavenly Father will always be free of the judgment and shaming a father or man would not be free of on Earth. Her act shows Hester’s bravery and boldness about what is being done to her. Instead of hanging her head in sadness and shame, she wears her scarlet letter with pride, and holds her child to match. While making sure Puritan societies attempt to ruin her spirit fails, she does not oppose all Puritan morals. She is a strong believer in God, and is the least bit stubborn.

Hester strives to learn from her mistakes and her sins. Her strongest case for keeping her daughter, Pearl, is shown when she arrives at the governor’s mansion. She states, “ Nevertheless, this badge hath taught me—it daily teaches me—it is teaching me at this moment lessons whereof my child may be wiser, and better.” (84). She knows what she did was wrong according to Biblical “ law”, and plans on making herself a better person, rather than letting the profound role of shame destroy her, and even her child. The shame the society around her brings, as well as the way she uses it to create a learning curve and become so much a role model to the people around her, reveals much about Puritan society itself.

The Puritans were English Protestants acting against the Church in England whose emphasis on religion being included in the daily life of everyone, even to the point of bringing religious law into government. This is explained within the first few chapters. In Chapter 2, punishments were explained and

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mentioned for breaking religious law and how they punished in Colonial law.

“ It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post.” To analyze the relationship between Hester and Puritan society, it’s important to understand how Puritan society affects her.

For these reasons, it is notably arguable that shame plays the most significant role between Hester Prynne and Puritan society.