

# The scarlet letter: relevance in the digital age

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The Scarlet Letter: Relevance in the Digital Age Over the centuries between the Puritan settlement as depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the present, society has evolved in ways of acceptance and integration of diverse groups of people. In the physical world, diversity of experience now shapes communities and is embraced by them.

However, the rise of the importance of the internet in people's lives has created a virtual world, where the sense of being connected to nearly all people intensifies the human tendencies toward judgement and idolization. The virtual world set back the acceptance of the physical world, as online communities can behave in unrestricted ways, avoiding consequences to their disagreeable behavior, as they hide behind the anonymous aspect of the internet. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne presents the realities of the 17th century Massachusetts Bay Colony, exploring themes such as the role of the artist in society and society-enforced consequences of breaking the moral code. In many ways, these central themes of *The Scarlet Letter* as they relate to the paradigm between the individual and the society are relevant to and reflective of the environment created on the internet between individuals and online communities, which allows the novel's morals to remain relevant in the digital age, because the behavior of the Puritan society creates an environment that reflects the present day human tendencies toward idolization and hypocritical judgement of digital society. Admiration of mainstream celebrities has been common for generations of young individuals, but as the internet provides access to the lives of celebrities, this tendency of admiration intensifies and transcends the age of the admirer.

This admiration echoes the admiration the Boston colony residents experienced for the artist of the soul, Reverend Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale “was considered by his more fervent admirers as little less than a heavenly-ordained apostle, destined... to do as great deeds for the nor feeble New England Church, as the early Fathers have achieved for the infancy of the Christian faith” (Hawthorne 80). The Puritan community relied on the Reverend to personify the apex of its religious fervor, as a representative of the “a miracle of holiness” (Hawthorne 94), in order to, by proxy, deem the community holy. Dimmesdale’s congregation can see the man for the “holy” artistry that they want him to represent, but their admiration is amplified by his physical presence, which humanizes him to the public. This aspect of tangibility of the admired artist has evolved into online exposure of an artist’s life in the digital world.

Accessible connection to anyone gives the public the impression of knowing the people it admires, which is a human tendency that continues through to the digital age. For example, a high school student in Honolulu is more prone to knowing what an actress like Blake Lively had for breakfast, as this information comes in a constant stream, despite its inutility. Thus the modern artists or the celebrities of the entertainment industry play a more significant role in the lives of online communities. Namely, it has become much easier for an online presence to break into mainstream media, for models like Gigi Hadid, with online followings of millions, who are able to advance their careers based on the pseudo-real relationship they have with their admirers. However, the generation that has had the internet and access of this extent is often not aware that in the online pseudo-reality celebrities

still extrapolate the kind of image they want their fans to see to promote their careers rather than to share the reality of their lives.

This disconnect and the sense of false reality is directly parallel to the role of the artist in the Puritanical colony, especially in the role of Reverend Dimmesdale as an artist of the soul in the religious community of the Puritans, due to the contrast between Dimmesdale's outer and inner worlds. The admired artists in the modern world often embrace their faults or personal problems, whether real or not, to appeal to their admirers by relating to the latter's normal lives with challenges as a means of getting more attraction. This means of attraction humanizes the artist and compels the public to praise the work of the artist to an even more dedicated extent. Even though Dimmesdale's charismatic presence in *The Scarlet Letter* was not calculated to be manipulative, it did have a resonating effect on his admirers. This instance deals directly with the case of Dimmesdale's ability to relate to his congregation and the public by articulating his sins that would not have been embraced by the religion.

In fact, Dimmesdale's openness and frankness " kept him down on the level with the lowest; him, the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might have listened to and answered!" (Hawthorne 94). Dimmesdale " sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence" (Hawthorne 94). That is to say, his talent in oration affects people who should not be affected, as they either committed sins that their society deems unforgivable, or they consider themselves above sin; on either end of the spectrum, he persuades the parishioners to continue their intensifying admiration. Nonetheless, on many occasions the uneven <https://assignbuster.com/the-scarlet-letter-relevance-in-the-digital-age/>

distribution of control between the admired artist and the public brings forth an aspect of hypocrisy, which benefits the former, but compromises the perception of reality for the latter. In *The Scarlet Letter*, “the virgins of [Dimmesdale’s] church grew pale around him, victims of a passion of imbued with religious sentiment that they imagined it to be all religion, and brought it openly, in their white bosoms, as their most acceptable sacrifice before the altar” (Hawthorne 95).

This example presents a deep-rooted irony in the relationship between the “artist,” in this case, of the soul, and the society. In Dimmesdale’s situation, the public is unaware of the sin he committed, but its perception of him affects the most innocent of people: virgins, who grow pale and ashamed in the presence of the Reverend, characterizing him as more pure, which can be attributed to the society’s blatant obliviousness to the reality of the Reverend’s personal circumstances. This trend of irony symbolized in the behavior of the virgins around Dimmesdale, continues in the contemporary world, especially with the facilitation of social media, where “artists” are praised. The appraisal of work by the real public, in their unawareness of the production that goes into creating an online persona for every artist, compels the public feel ashamed for its own reality. Even though there are centuries between the two of the aforementioned worlds, society has not transformed the role of the artist, the problems with which enable *The Scarlet Letter*’s central theme to remain relevant in the online world.

However, people’s tendency toward extensive idolization is not the limit of the relevance of Hawthorne’s work in the digital age. Online communities in general display hypocritical judgement toward individuals with a similar <https://assignbuster.com/the-scarlet-letter-relevance-in-the-digital-age/>

fervor to that of *The Scarlet Letter*. The conflict between the individual and the online community is recorded and leaves a digital footprint, which leaves traces as evidence that cannot be avoided when the problems of the digital world surpass to the physical world. Whence such a conflict of interest becomes a conflict of breaking the human moral code, modern society uses the imprint left online by those breaking the moral code as a basis for shaming. This response to public shame for sins translates to one of the central themes in *The Scarlet Letter*, as the protagonist Hester Prynne faces the consequences of breaking the Puritan moral code.

One recent example presents itself in the “Ashley Madison” scandal, wherein the names of individuals engaged in adultery online were exposed to the public through a hacking incident. This scandal caused an uproar in many communities, as the individuals whose names were exposed were reprimanded for their actions. This digital record of the aforementioned individuals embodies the scaffold of shame that marks public consequences to sinning in the Puritan society of *The Scarlet Letter*, as the exposed individuals faced the backlash of judgement from communities online. However, as in the Puritan times, the symbol of sin in the letter “A” imprinted on Hester Prynne, brought forth the suspicion that “if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom aside Hester Prynne’s?... a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself...” (Hawthorne 60). That is to say, even in the Puritan society, the public is hypocritical, as many sins have not been admitted to by the public.

In a similar way, the individuals in the Ashley Madison controversy were immediately attacked online for their actions; however, many people forget <https://assignbuster.com/the-scarlet-letter-relevance-in-the-digital-age/>

that others commit the same “ sins” of adultery, yet they do not have to face the shameful consequences of society, as their actions were not exposed online. Themes central to The Scarlet Letter are reflective of the current societal behavior and environment created in the digital world, thus making them relevant and significant in the educational curriculum. Nonetheless, after centuries of students studying this text, society has not evolved enough to use the moral lessons of the past to prevent similar conflict in the future, especially as the innovation and unrestricted access of the digital world allowed many individuals to get back to the past societal tendencies toward exclusion and persecution. Work Cited Hawthorne, Nathaniel, and Leland S. Person. The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism.

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