

The scarlet letter



Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* challenges the general perception of Puritans. Through the issues of the story's protagonists, Hawthorne is able to analyze the Puritans' strengths and weaknesses from his social commentary of their lifestyle. Set in a New England colony during the seventeenth century, the novel explains how one infamous crime impacts the members of the community in very different ways. *The Scarlet Letter* honestly depicts the aspects of hypocrisy, required self reliance and obedience, and the influential beliefs within the Puritan society through irony.

In a Puritan community, society casts out on individuals whose ideas differ from the common value that is intended to provide pleasure but ultimately causes inner turmoil. The Puritans' entire basis circles around religious enlightenment in which religion absolutely governs all. The virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion, so 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, 131). The Puritans were taught to ignore human emotions and their own judgment. Love, care, and compassion were only recognized within the boundaries of religion. An underlying fear of God eliminates any open minded thoughts or creativity which left the congregation to remain faithful to the teachings of the church.

In reality freedom of expression is a key point in maintaining a happy environment. For example, in Dimmesdale's case silence isn't golden at all. Instead of confessing himself he attempts to persuade Hester to disclose the truth. Be not silent from any mistaken pity and

tenderness for him; believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him. Yea, compel him, as it were to add hypocrisy to sin?" (63). Dimmesdale is completely aware of the pain he causes himself for not admitting his fault but his cowardice which invariably drew back, with her tremulous gripe, just when the other impulse had hurried him to the verge of disclosure" (136).

Dimmesdale is caught between his own conscience and the high standards of religion and law society forces upon him which eventually leads to his failure. The Scarlet Letter demonstrates that sin is much more difficult to heal from when it is not publicly acknowledged because unlike Hester, Dimmesdale suffers the most. Nathaniel Hawthorne couldn't have said it better when he wrote, "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred." (236). Hawthorne describes the difficulty that Dimmesdale encounters while trying to portray two different facades to the world. No matter how severe the punishment or how much the truth contradicts values and opinions people should remain honest with themselves and everyone else.

The consequences that are expected as opposed to what's actually fulfilled from any outlaw draws attention to the hypocritical nature of the Puritan society throughout The Scarlet Letter. Although the Puritans are presumed to be such firm believers in Christianity, a prison is the first thing they decide to reserve space for during the construction of a new city. Their

own guide to a prosperous life, The Bible, preaches forgiveness; meanwhile as sinners are proclaimed, the town's officials' initial thoughts that form are methods to punish the rebels. The Puritans are even harsher when creating penalties intentionally connecting with public ridicule like in Hester's situation.

Hester may be the only punished, but the town's very own Reverend Dimmesdale is also involved in the crime. The town does not recognize his suspicious behavior that implies that Dimmesdale is, in fact, the father of Hester's child. He even confesses of his wrongful ways in his sermons, but the congregation interprets his statements incorrectly or they pretend like they don't understand. ??? Could there be plainer speech than this? Would not the people start up in their seat, by a simultaneous impulse, and tear him down out of the pulpit, which he defiled? Not so, indeed! They heard it all, and but reverence him the more. They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those self-condemning words.

??? (132). The community has set their minds to convince themselves that Dimmesdale never took part in anything secular. His unusual, guilty outburst, to the citizens, only shows humility. This behavior only makes him more divine. In the audience's opinion, how could someone like Dimmesdale be even capable of such a thing as adultery? For he is, ??? the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might else have listened to and answered! They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouthpiece of heaven's messages of wisdom, end rebuke, and love. In their eyes, the very ground on which he trod was sanctified.

?? (131). The minister??™s secret could never be revealed because it??™s absence protects not only Dimmesdale??™s reputation, but also the community??™s good standing as well. Therefore as Hester??™s character is tarnished, forever scarred with the scarlet letter, Dimmesdale walks freely, idolized as the leader of the town. Fortunately for Hester she is not always perceived to be what the town originally labeled her as. The initial purpose of the scarlet letter provided Hester with a lifetime brand of shame, often discouraging other from following her same path of infidelity. As time progressed the once ignominious symbol transformed its definition.

It now literally means able, characterizing Hester as a kind woman of strength. Hester only gains this title when she starts to contribute positively to the community. When she had nothing to offer Hester was viewed upon as a disgrace, but ??? The public is despotic in its temper; it is capable of denying common justice, when too strenuously demanded is made, as despots love to have made entirely to its generosity as a right; but quite frequently it awards more than justice when the appeal.

?? (149). The town is more willing to forgive people who express their repentance through modesty and charity than those who demand amnesty as a right. If previously Hester was not worthy of the town??™s commends, why does she currently deserve their praise For Christians, like the Puritans, forgiveness is their trademark.

The Bible emphasizes that forgiving someone should come naturally but the Puritans feel you must first earn it. In a Puritan world all positive outcomes are rewarded gradually but negative effects are handed out instinctively.