

The pastor and his parishioner



In Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlet Letter*, life is centered on a strict Puritan society in which one is unable to express his or her innermost thoughts and secrets.

If everyone doesn't get the chance to express how he or she feels, then emotions will become bottled up and people may become unstable.

Unfortunately, Puritan society didn't allow this kind of expression, so characters had to find different ways to relieve their personal pain and desires. Luckily Hawthorne provides such a sanctuary in the form of the mysterious forest. Hawthorne uses the forest to provide a kind of shelter for members of society in need of a respite from daily Puritan life.

In the deep parts of the forest a few of the characters bring forth hidden thoughts and emotions. The forest tracks lead to a place where civilization has vanished. This route is the perfect escape from the strict enforcements of law and religion, where men and women can open up and be themselves.

It is here that Dimmesdale openly acknowledges Hester and his undying love for her. It's also here that Hester can do the same for Dimmesdale.

Finally it is here, in the forest, that the two of them can openly have a conversation without being preoccupied with the pressure that the Puritan society places on them. The forest itself symbolizes freedom. Nobody watches the forest to report misbehavior, which makes this a place where people may do as they wish.

Hester Prynne has a good independent spirit and the wilderness calls to her, Throw off the shackles of law and religion. What good have they

done you anyways Look at you, a young vibrant woman, grown old before your time. And no wonder, hemmed in, as you are, on every side by prohibitions. Why, you can hardly walk without tripping over one commandment or another. Come to me, and be masterless.??? (p. 179). All of the laws and religious views of the Puritan society have done no good but made Hester??™s spirit grow old.

Truly, Hester takes advantage of this, when Dimmesdale appears. She openly talks with him about subjects that would never be mentioned in any other place, but the forest. ??? What we did??|??? she reminds him, ??? had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said it to each other.??? (p. 179). This statement shocked Dimmesdale and he tells Hester to hush, but he eventually realizes that he is in an environment where he can openly express his emotions. The thought of Hester and Dimmesdale having an intimate conversation, in the confines of the society in which they live in, is incomprehensible.

Yet here, in the forest, they can throw away everything and finally be themselves. In the Puritan society, self reliance is stressed among many other things. However, self reliance is more than stressed, it is assumed. Assumed that you need only yourself and should have no emotional necessity for a ??? shoulder to cry on??™. It would be unthinkable for Hester and Dimmesdale to comfort each other. Yet, in the forest, all those cares are thrown away. ??? Be though strong for me,??? Dimmesdale pleads, ??? Advise me what to do.

??? (p. 180). This cry for help from Dimmesdale, finally admitting he cannot go through this ordeal by himself. His plea makes an interesting role-reversal, when he cries for help, he is no longer sustaining the belief that he is above Hester. He??? s finally admitting that she is equal, or even above him. Hester, assuming a new position of power, gives a heartfelt, moving speech. The expression of her words cannot be overemphasized.

Hester??™s speech turns out to bear a remarkable resemblance to one of Dimmesdale??™s sermons. ??? Being all anew!... Preach! Write! Act!??? (p. 181). The questions she asks are also like the clear questions which Dimmesdale would pose during his sermons.

The answer is obvious, yet looking at it closer they seem to give unexpected results. ??? Whither leads yonder forest-track Backward to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes; but onward, too! Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness??| until, some few miles hence, the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man??™s tread??|??? (p. 181). If you look at the title of this chapter, the meaning becomes much clearer. ??? The Pastor and His Parishioner,??? reveals that the roles are now reversed. Where else could an inappropriateness such as this occur, but in an accepting environment What other platform is here for a man of high regard in the community to pour his soul to a woman who is shunned by the public for a grave sin Nowhere else but in the forest, could an event such as this occur.

Finally, the forest brings out the natural appearance and the natural personality of the people who use it correctly. We see a new person when Hester takes off her cap and loosens her hair. We see the real Hester, who

has been hidden this whole time under a shield of shame. Her eyes grow radiant and a flush comes to her cheeks. We recognize her as Hester from the beginning of the book. A beautiful woman who is not afraid to show her hair and not afraid to display her beauty.

The sunlight, which previously shunned Hester, now seeks her out, and the forest seems to glow. Dimmesdale has come back to life also, if only for a short time, and he is now hopeful and energetic. ??? Do I feel joy again??? cried he, wondering at himself. ??? Methought the germ of it was dead in me! O Hester, thou art my better angel!

.. This is the better life! Why did we not find it sooner??? (p. 185). We have not seen this from Dimmesdale for a while, and most likely will not see it again. Puritan society can be harsh and crippling to one's inner self. Hawthorne created the forest to give the characters a place to escape and express their true thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. It was here that emotions were as wild as the forest itself and thoughts were as free flowing as the endless brook side.

There are no restraints in the natural world, because it is just that, natural. No intrusions from people meant no disturbances, and it serves to bring its natural peacefulness to the people who are trying to travel away and escape the real world.