


# Hester's role as both the sinner and saint

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



“What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us,” stated Oliver Wendell Holmes. This eventually proves to be especially true for Hester Prynne, the main character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne, a fair young maiden whose husband had disappeared two years prior to the opening of the novel, has an affair with the pastor of her Puritan church, resulting in the birth of her uncontrollable child Pearl. Because of this act of adultery, Hester Prynne is branded by the scarlet letter “A,” which she is forced to forever wear upon her attire. The plot thickens as Hester's former husband returns to New England and becomes fixated upon the idea of revenge towards Hester's anonymous partner in sin. At the same time, the feeble pastor slowly begins to waste away towards the gloomy gates of death. However, as those around her grow ever weaker or morally decayed, Hester grows ever stronger. Hester grows so strong and morally righteous that it appears that she is actually favored by Hawthorne despite her <sup>3</sup>sin.<sup>2</sup> The qualities which cause Hester to be favored are her traits of helpfulness towards others, her intense maternal love towards Pearl, and her defiance and pride demonstrated towards those who attempt to impose their values upon her. Even as those she assisted were cruel towards her, Hester remained generous and helpful towards others. For example, after becoming recognized as a talented seamstress and gradually beginning to earn fairly large sums of money, <sup>3</sup>Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them.<sup>2</sup> This proves that although Hester was rejected by society, she continued to care for this same community. She had such a kind nature and

willingness to assist others that the fact that those whom she fed often returned the generosity with nothing but insults did not cause her to cease in her endeavors. Then, towards the end of the novel, after returning from Europe to the New England town in which she had sinned and repented numerous years before, Hester began to counsel other unfaithful women. For example, <sup>3</sup>Hester comforted and counseled them as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." This also demonstrates Hester's generosity and helpfulness. Although the New England town harbored such unpleasant memories for her, she was willing to return in order to assist others in need. She was willing to relive her own pain and absorb the pain of others in order to benefit future generations, and she was willing to give back to a society which had given nothing to her. Hester harbored an intense love for her child Pearl although the child's mischievous and imp-like qualities brought nothing but pain to the child's mother. This is demonstrated as Hester, after having her talents as a seamstress publicized, began to change the attire of her family. For example, <sup>3</sup>Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most somber hue; with only that one ornament,–the scarlet letter,–which it was her doom to wear. The child's attire, on the other hand, was distinguished by a fanciful, or, we may rather say, a fantastic ingenuity, which served, indeed, to heighten the airy charm that early began to develop itself in the little girl.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates that although Hester herself would dress only plainly in order to redeem her lost

purity, she wished to make her child stand out. She had such an intense love for the child that she wanted only the absolute best for Pearl. Also, Hester was simply astounded and horrified at the idea of Pearl being taken away from her when this question was brought to the governor. This is demonstrated in the line, “‘ Speak thou for me!’ cried she. ‘ Thou wast my pastor, and hadst charge of my soul, and knowest me better than these men can. I will not lose the child! Speak for me! Thou knowest, – for thou hast sympathies which these men lack! – thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother’s rights, and how much the stronger they are, when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter! Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!’” Hester’s speech demonstrated that her only true reason for life was the child, and that if that one richness of her life was devoured by Puritan thought and society, she would have lost all. Her child was her heart, love, and life. It was all that she had left to lose, and she would do anything to protect her Pearl. Though Hester was accused of what Puritans considered to be an extraordinarily serious crime, she remained proud and defiant. While on the scaffold, Hester <sup>3</sup>with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbors.<sup>2</sup> Although the burning stares of the townspeople were upon her, Hester remained strong and managed a grin in order to anger the public and maintain her dignity. Also whilst upon the scaffold, Hester revealed upon her gown <sup>3</sup>in fine red cloth surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of thread,...the letter A.’ ” Although Hester was meant to be chastised by the letter <sup>3</sup>A,<sup>2</sup> rather than submissively creating a dark and bitter badge of shame, she devised a lavish

embroidery more suited for an affluent queen than an outcaste of society. This lawful and silent act of rebellion proved her defiance and pride, because rather than hiding from the cruel crowd, Hester proudly displayed herself before it. Hence, due to her generous and compassionate nature, her extreme love for her daughter Pearl, and her defiance towards the narrow-minded townspeople of her community, Hester came across as a character loved and admired by the author. In the quote mentioned in the introduction to this essay, Oliver Wendall Holmes stated that what previously had occurred and what are yet to occur are not important when compared with a person's true nature. For Hester Prynne, though she had sinned in her past, she came across as strong and admirable because she was a benevolent person on the inside. She sought purity and truth to compensate for her unalterable past. Therefore, her wrongdoings were eventually overlooked in enlightenment of her better qualities. A coward can hide in the shadows of reputations and prejudgments, but only a hero can overcome these and manage to step into the daylight.