

# Sinners at the hands of an oppressive society

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In *The Scarlet Letter*, author Nathaniel Hawthorne uses Hester Prynne, an unhappily married seamstress, and Arthur Dimmesdale, the local Puritan clergyman, to prove that a community that forcefully suppresses the natural desires of an individual is dangerous, both to the individual and to the community. The story is centered around Hester's public punishment for adultery: she is forced to wear a scarlet "A" on her chest at all times. She is caught because she becomes pregnant while her husband is away, but the name of the other guilty party – the father, Dimmesdale – is withheld by Hester from the entire community. Stemming from this situation, which gradually increases in complexity, are the human symbols used to personify the theme; because of the oppressive community, Hester undergoes mental deterioration, Dimmesdale suffers physical ailments, and both of them ultimately undermine the Puritan system. Hester's character speaks to the psychological side effects that can arise as byproducts of submission to an oppressive community. These side effects – which include rebelliousness and resentment – are dangerous to individuals within a society. Because of her "sin," Hester becomes ostracized, is forced to wear the scarlet "A," and is shunned, shamed and ridiculed, all because there was no acceptable outlet within her society to address her needs as an unhappily married woman. Although she commits adultery, she is not necessarily an immoral woman, as evidenced by her refusal to expose Dimmesdale. She is so firm in her refusal to reveal – and thereby taint – his name that, when pressed for the name of her lover, she exclaims, "I will not speak!...And my child must seek a heavenly father; she shall never know an earthly one!" (66). Such loyalty in the name of love and of God cannot exist in a person of low personal morals

or spirit. Rather, she is a desperate and frustrated woman who lives in a community that is either unable or unwilling to reasonably deal with her position. Ironically, this highly religious society fails to offer Hester compassion and understanding, greeting her only with hatred and ridicule. One of the women in the Puritan community, who theoretically lives by the slogan “ Love thy neighbor,” even suggests that “ The magistrates...should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead” (49).

Meanwhile, she acts with compassion by not exposing Dimmesdale as the father of her child. Living with this hypocrisy in the hostile Puritan society is the most significant force in her psychological afflictions, for what she believes to be a moral act often directly contradicts with her community’s ideals. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, represents not the brute end of the social system but the society’s inherent hypocrisy. A Puritan clergyman, presumably of high moral character, Dimmesdale becomes like Hester: unable to find refuge within his Puritan society. While Hester is publicly ridiculed and ostracized, Dimmesdale has to live a lie and play the part of a highly moral community leader. He suffers none of the ostracism and humiliation of Hester, but is driven to suffer just as deeply due to personal conflicts. Not only is he too weak to resist a desperate woman for whom society has offered no outlet, but he lacks the moral character to admit his shortcomings and weaknesses. His situation is almost worse than Hester’s because at least she has come clean and feels that she is doing the best thing; Dimmesdale is living in anguish over the sin that he carries. Hester’s public ridicule and ostracism may have resulted in psychological rebellion and deterioration, but Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy – which is symbolic of the

hypocrisy of Puritan society – and secret immorality lead him to physical sickness. Despite fasting and prayer, he can not live under such a facade, and it eventually kills him. Although ostracized, Hester actually displays higher moral character and stronger Christian values than Dimmesdale. She is a frustrated woman, unhappy in her marriage with no outlet to escape from her misery. Dimmesdale, being a clergyman, should fully shoulder the blame, for he ought not to have any cause for romantic frustration. Hester displays her moral character by not exposing her lover and accepting with humility and suffering the ramifications of her actions, but though he is very holy Dimmesdale does not have the courage or moral fortitude to “come clean” to the community. His weakness causes him considerable personal pain in that he is forced to watch his daughter Pearl grow up from a distance, and he is forced to live with a guilty conscience, knowing that he failed his community, his faith, and Hester. What he does not realize is that he is Hawthorne’s symbol of Puritan hypocrisy. The whole situation foretells the demise of the Puritan society. There are two ideal characters that enable a Puritan society to function effectively: a holy, influential preacher, and an obedient, equally holy congregation. A moral clergyman would strengthen the community, but Dimmesdale’s lack of conviction weakens it and exposes the hypocrisy of the Puritan society. He undermines the community by abusing his highly important position as a preacher and by not abiding by the rules of the society. Hester, finding no appropriate way to rectify her situation, undermines the system by asserting her individuality and rebelling against the impossible norms mandated by that society. Dimmesdale’s physical ailments and Hester’s psychological rebellion are indicative of the

danger that an oppressive society presents to the individual. On another level, the two represent the hypocritical extremes inherent in a society wholly contradictory to human nature. Hawthorne uses these symbols to show how strict rules and lack of tolerance result in a sickened, miserable social system.