

The redemption of hester prynne in the scarlet letter

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



In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne accepts that she has sinned and realizes that she must pay the price for her crime. In doing so she becomes overwhelmed with courage and conviction and assumes a redemption that is denied to most of her fellow townspeople. For a woman who possesses Hester's strength of character, the route toward the wilderness of escape would also be a route toward the wilderness of admitting that those who judge her are her superiors. Hester Prynne's strength of character as well as her willingness to accept her fate prove to be valuable qualities necessary to succeed in an environment of conformity.

Hester comprehends that she must compensate for her offense, but her deeds reveal a veiled disobedience. Although Hester herself is not allowed to dress in anything but drab clothing with the only spot of light being her bright red letter, she rebels by dressing her daughter Pearl in gaily colored clothes that express a "wild, desperate, defiant mood" (66). A similar example of Hester's silent rebellion and steely independence is showcased in the form of her behavior when she leaves prison; her audacity compares favorably to the rather gloomy assemblage she walks past. Within Hester at this moment is a glow of self-awareness and dignity is far from what is expected of her by the other townsfolk as she moves with a determination that she will be the master of her fate.

Throughout *The Scarlet Letter* Hester continues publicly defying the strict moral culture that defines her society and its laws. While strolling through the street, it is the other people who react with contempt toward the red letter she wears, but Hester herself never makes an attempt to camouflage

the manifestation of her sin even by covering it with her hand. Isolation from those who would inflict their perverse values and mores upon her may be Hester's greatest companion. While loneliness is hardly a desired state of affairs for most people, it has its advantages. The way a person thinks about the world is not instinctual; there is nothing natural about it. Thoughts, opinions and philosophies are not formed in a vacuum, but are created as a result of what one learns and acquires through interpersonal interaction. Seclusion provides the distinct advantage of being free from the mindless clutter of so many nattering nabobs. Freed from the counsel of those who would drain her of intelligence, Hester starts to view the scarlet letter she wears as having a kind of supernatural power that endows her with far more empathy and sympathy for the sins committed by others than those people have toward her. " Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness. . . . The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,-stern and wild ones,-and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss." It is the sense of relief that washes over her that she may still be in the Puritan society, but she is not of the Puritan society that frees Hester from the bondage of wearing the letter even while it is constantly draped around her. At the same time, she remains fully aware of her own sin and remains convinced that she is most guilty of all. This awareness,

however, only serves to further encourage her determination to accept her fate and move on, not to let it eat away at her and destroy her.

Hester's commitment to maintaining her individualism and independence from the Puritan thought police is truly admirable and her determination and resolve to keep her pride and dignity in the face of submitting to the rule of short-sighted and hypocritical leaders makes her a truly exceptional heroine. It is Hester's consciousness of her sin and her ability to accept it with distinction that transforms her perspective on both herself and the others in her society. Hester concedes that committing adultery was a sin, but instead of giving herself over to the wickedness behind the power structure that has hypocritically made her sin worse than theirs, she undertakes the challenge of accepting her punishment and becoming both a stronger and better person. It would appear from her acquiescence to wearing the letter at all times that Hester has submitted to the rigid controls of her society just as much as Winston Smith seems to by the end of 1984. In fact, there is a certain acknowledgement that Hester accepts and lives by the strained conformist mindset that is the hallmark of the Puritan way of life. For example, Hester behaves with such prudence that she is freed from the rumors and gossip and scandal for the rest of her life. In addition, she contributes to helping the poor and anyone whose needs it without responding to their insults and the implied deprivations of her own moral character. Hester's acceptance is a personification of the novel's conception that "It is to the credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates. Hatred, by a gradual

and quiet process, will even be transformed to love, unless the change be impeded by a continually new irritation of the original feeling of hostility.”

The application of the scarlet letter upon Hester is a punishment, of course, but it is also meant to be a subtle instrument of coercion. The wearing of the symbol is intended not only to reaffirm in Hester’s mind her iniquities against God and the Puritan system, it is also designed because of its exterior appearance to coerce others into the realization that they too will suffer the same fate should they betray the system. Hester is defiant on the outside as her pride will not allow her to bend to the submissive will of the majority, but emotionally she gradually experiences the need to change and evolve. What is at stake in this evolution of Hester is what is commonly known as redemption. Hester becomes an affectionate and proficient nurse to people and as a result her red letter also transforms. To those sick people who need Hester’s counseling, scarlet letter takes on an almost heavenly glow that invokes Christian charity of the truest kind. At the beginning, Hester appeared merely as a dissenting voice against the shame of adultery. She was a one-crime violator and forced to wear the letter as punishment. But instead of making her acquiesce and submit to the rule of law and the ethical provisos that the punishment intended, Hester reacted rebelliously against her penalty. Unlike Winston Smith, who remained locked in the death throes of fear and trepidation, Hester challenges not the punishment itself, but the fundamental theoretical basis behind the punishment. Like many a good New Englander to come, Hester eschews the role of simple dissent and moves toward outright heresy. Only Hester’s heresy is to dare to act more

like a Christian instead of less like one. The actions she commits to are ones that serve pure Christian charity; she is far more Christlike in her acceptance and admission of her guilt than the Puritan leaders who punish her one transgression. Hester is able to accomplish what seems impossible for the Puritan power structure: true redemption and salvation. While Hester outwardly assumes the role of the obedient Puritan, she is a stronger and even more willful person by the end of her story than she was at the beginning.