

Puritan influence in contemporary american society

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



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Puritans are often mischaracterized as overly strict and moral persons whose lives revolve around killjoy attitudes and laws against all innocent social pleasures. Qualities of sympathy, charity, and compassion are rarely tied to Puritanism or seen as characteristics that exemplified their way of life. (Newberry, 101) In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" however, these traits are exemplified as recessive, as opposed to nonexistent, in the actions and lives of Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale. These are outcasts shunned by society because they failed to live up to the Puritans' strict and unwavering standards of moral behavior. However, the Puritans' narrow moralism and social repression still had a much deeper influence in the United States than did the recessive qualities depicted in Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale (Barzun, 283). The current role of women in society and attitudes toward deception and scandal today exemplify Puritans thinking. Numerous events in "The Scarlet Letter" help us paint a clearer picture about the role of women in Puritan society. Cindy Lou Daniels writes about one reoccurring example, "In Hawthorne's novel, the strict authoritarianism of Puritan patriarchy finds its object in the child Pearl, who...becomes the target of the Puritans' efforts to control both human sexuality, and its literary, historical expression." A patriarchic position results because the Puritans assume they have the authority to determine how Hester, and therefore Pearl, should live the rest of their lives. Hester is assigned a lesser value than the rest of society not only by living in seclusion, but also the very mark of the scarlet letter serves to set her apart from everyone else. Pearl however, is able to break away from this patriarchy because the community leaves it up to Hester to control her. Ironically, Pearl remains wild and free,

and is not restrained by either the Puritan community or Hester, but rather continues to thrive unrestricted in nature (Daniels). Another example of Puritan patriarchy in "The Scarlet Letter" resides in the governor and the positions of power within the town. The governor's breast plate of armor that Hester and Pearl find within the palace illustrates how the positions of power within the town are dominated by masculine ideas such as strict punishment and patriarchic rules (Easton, 114-5). This is exemplified in today's society through the domination of men in areas such as politics, corporate leadership, and physically demanding jobs and activities. Likewise in contemporary society, we have seen the rise of women in these areas. The status quo position of women as being subjugated to males runs parallel to the dominant patriarchy that existed in Puritan society. At the same time however, Pearl, who personifies the recessive Puritan qualities of "sympathy, charity, and gaiety", (Newberry, 101) exists in today's world through the rise of women and their opposition to dominant male norms. Daniels also brings up Pearl's "grace" as reflecting a changing role in women by "provid[ing] the impetus toward "good" for Dimmesdale, and in doing so, provid[ing] a new view of the power of the female in a male-dominated society." In this way, going against the norm of patriarchy is a Puritan characteristic in and of itself, and is a "direct result of the Puritan moral code that served as a catalyst for this [Pearl's transformation] profound change, a change still reverberating in today's society" (Daniels). Our generation is replete with examples of scandal and deception, which although not objects of praise or worship, provide the opportunity to draw a myriad of parallels between the Puritans' response to these occurrences, and

the reactions of present-day society. There is no clearer illustration of scandal and deception in our world than what we see in the media. At any given moment one can find the latest scandal or newest government deception with just the click of a button or turn of a page (Robinson). Shock and disapproval are strongly defended, and responses to scandal range from mere head shaking to public protests that seek concrete action. This is not to say that society today has a high moral standard, for that is certainly a controversial debate, but rather society is exemplary of one's judgment of the beliefs and actions of others. Barzun describes this as "...suspicion of other's faith and morals. The smallest divergence from the absolute is grave error and wickedness. From there it is a short step to declaring war on the misbelievers." (271-2) People today constantly seek to criticize others, especially those in a position of power, for any minor fault. The Puritans embodied this same criticism through their exclusion and persecution of others, as shown in "The Scarlet Letter". Hester and Pearl are excluded from society precisely because Hester identifies herself as being different by being caught in the act of adultery. In their quest to define themselves as morally upstanding citizens, the Puritans in "The Scarlet Letter" ostracize Hester. Much like people today, the Puritans' found no better way to boost up their self-confidence than by degrading that of another, regardless of the reason. Hawthorne criticizes this warrant for punishment by portraying the Puritans "as men and women in sad-colored garments with looks of grim rigidity." (Mills) Their quest to punish at any excuse appeals to the letter of the law in such a way that it detracts them from living the true spirit of their faith, the spirit that lies in Hester and Pearl's sympathy and charity. Hester's response

to this shunning yet again exemplifies less stereotypical qualities of Puritans. Rather than giving in to their criticism and allowing her life to collapse into shambles, Hester tries her best to allow Pearl to live a life as she wishes, free of society's rules and criticisms. Despite what may at first seem to be an oxymoron, society embodies both the dominant Puritan characteristics of criticism and exclusion based on minor faults as well as the recessive Puritan characteristics, personified by Hester and Pearl, of coping with the criticism without being bothered by the backlash from society. The influence of the Puritan lifestyle on today's world seems full of contradictions. Ranging from intolerance, persecution, and patriarchy to sympathy, compassion, and rebellion against dominant hierarchies, "The Scarlet Letter" embodies not only the characteristics typical of Puritan society, but also serves as a criticism for those characteristics in its account of Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale. Hawthorne's account of these three social outcasts demonstrates that some sought to change the dominant Puritan ideals, and the qualities they exemplified were more widespread than often believed. Despite these opposing qualities of Puritanism clashing and co-existing for many years and in many more instances than simply the town of Hester and Pearl, dominant patriarchy, narrow moralism, and the suppression of dissent have affected contemporary American society significantly more than their opposites (Barzun, 282-3). Works Cited Barzun, Jacques. From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life (1500-Present.) New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2000 Daniels, Cindy Lou. "Hawthorne's Pearl: woman-child of the future." The American Transcendental Quarterly 19. 3 (2005): 221 Easton, Alison. "A Critique of Puritan Society." Reading on The

Scarlet Letter. Ed. Bruno Leone. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1998. 114-26

Mills, Nicolaus. "Commentary; A Useful Lesson About Sex From a Victorian; Scandal: President Clinton Won't Be Wearing a Scarlet Letter, But He Might as well be by the Time the Gossip Subsides" Los Angeles Times, 17 Aug. 1998: B5

Newberry, Frederick. "Hawthorne Examines English Traditions." Reading on The Scarlet Letter. Ed. Bruno Leone. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1998. 100-13

Robinson, Danny. "The Primary Color: How 'The Scarlet Letter' Captures the Mood of the Capital Today." Pittsburg Post-Gazette, 1 Aug. 1998: A13