

# Criticism of puritan society: nature in Hawthorne's "the scarlet letter"

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



Throughout the late 18th century and 19th century, Romanticism was a highly popular literary style adopted by many novelists. Nature, a prominent element of Romanticism, is used in these authors' writings not just for descriptions and images, but also to emphasize major ideas. One gifted author influenced by Romanticism was Nathaniel Hawthorne, the creator of "The Scarlet Letter". In "The Scarlet Letter", Hawthorne uses nature as a romantic source for critiquing Puritan life: the harshness of its society, the unjust laws of the Puritan theocracy, and the corruption of the Puritan humanity.

Hawthorne uses a strongly romantic view of nature to emphasize the Puritans' harshness and lack of compassion. For instance, in the first chapter, Hawthorne describes the town as "the black flower of civilized society" (45). In this passage, he uses a flower, an element of nature, to symbolize the despair of the prison town. He further emphasizes this symbol by describing the prison's plot of as "overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation" (45). By representing the prison and scaffold as a gloomy place of punishment, Hawthorne foreshadows the immoral events that are soon to take place.

The use of nature to symbolize the prison also establishes a dark atmosphere that sets up the scene by the scaffold, the place of punishment. During this scene, the women watching take a "peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction might be expected to ensue" (48). The supposedly moral Puritans are portrayed as people with no compassion for Hester, the "criminal". One of the women even demands that they brand Hester's

forehead with the letter “ A” (49). These women are depicted as merciless people whose religion emphasizes God’s wrath, not God’s love. Hawthorne contrasts the prison and scaffold, the evil symbols of Puritan society, with the “ wild rose-bush...[which] might be imagined to offer its fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in...in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him” (46). The rose-bush, a symbol of Nature, is a completely pure component that has not been “ tainted” by the harshness of Puritan society. It is also used as a symbol of hope for the town, contrasting with the evil and darkness of the prison and scaffold. Hawthorne effectively uses nature to criticize Puritan society by illustrating the prison and scaffold as the embodiment of societal evil. Hawthorne purposefully uses these descriptions in the beginning of the novel to establish the mood. By contrasting nature with Puritan society, Hawthorne successfully criticizes the Puritans.

In “ The Scarlet Letter”, the forest, a symbol of freedom, is contrasted with the town in order to criticize the cruel, strict laws of the theocracy. Hawthorne’s use of the forest also emphasizes the Romantic aspect of the novel. The forest is considered a place of evil, where the Black Man dwells. However, Hawthorne describes the Nature of the forest as a “ wild, heathen Nature...never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth” (177). Even though the Puritans believe the forest is an evil place, Hawthorne depicts it as an almost holy sanctuary that contrasts with the destructive and unforgiving town. Furthermore, Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale and Hester’s love to depict the forest as a place of happiness and freedom.

In the forest, Hester and Dimmesdale can be alone for the first time in seven years. The two lovers unite and Hester undoes “ the clasp that fastens the scarlet letter, and taking it from her bosom, throws it to a distance among the withered leaves” (176). Hester is defying the town and the Puritan faith by removing the scarlet letter from her bosom. She can only do this in the forest, a place free from boundaries and laws. Once again, Hawthorne uses the forest as a contrast to the strict Puritan society.

This contrast is elucidated further during the scene where Pearl points out that the sunlight in the forest does “ not love [Hester]. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on [Hester’s] bosom” (160). The scarlet letter symbolizes the laws of the town, and therefore the destructiveness of the Puritans. The sunshine in the forest, a component of nature, shuns Hester because of this letter but fills the forest with light when Hester removes the letter from her chest (177). The sunshine in the forest is shown as a symbol of happiness and holiness, where the sunshine only shines upon the good. The Puritans believe that their town is a sacred village, and that the forest is a place of evil and sin; however, Hawthorne shows the forest as a place of pureness, freedom, and happiness. Through the forest, he exploits the Puritans’ ignorance, once again criticizing Puritan society through the use of nature.

Hawthorne’s final criticism of Puritanism uses nature to reveal the corruption of Puritan society. Hawthorne achieves this by revealing that the Puritan view of Pearl is unjust. The Puritans of the town scorn Pearl and think of her as an “ imp of evil” because she is an “ emblem and product of sin” (84).

Because Pearl is the result of the sin Hester and Dimmesdale committed, the people of the town look down on her. Nevertheless, Hawthorne uses nature to transform Pearl into a sacred figure. During the sunshine episode, Pearl exclaims that Hester is not loved by the sunshine, but Pearl “ actually catch[es] the sunshine, and st[ands] laughing in the midst of it, all brightened by its splendor” (160). The sunshine only runs from the corrupted; it does not run from Pearl, a completely pure child. This event contrasts the Puritan opinion of Pearl as an evil child who is no more than the product of a sin. Hawthorne criticizes the corruption of Puritan humanity by attacking the Puritans’ unjust attitude towards Pearl.

Hawthorne expands on Pearl’s purity during the scene where Pearl sees her own reflection in the brook. Pearl is “ glorified with a ray of sunshine” (181) and is depicted as a pure child free from the corruption of Puritan society. Her purity is again shown when the forest becomes the “ playmate of the lonely infant, as well as it knew how” and “ it put[s] on the kindest of its moods to welcome her” (178). Pearl is engulfed by the wilderness, and actually becomes part of the wild. By exalting in Pearl’s purity, Hawthorne draws attention to the corruption of Puritan humanity. Again, Hawthorne criticizes the Puritans’ humanity through nature and the purity of Pearl.

In “ The Scarlet Letter”, Hawthorne effectively criticizes Puritan society through the use of nature. Christianity, a faith commonly thought of as very forgiving, is depicted as a caustic, punishing religion. Hawthorne uses the flower of the rosebush to criticize the Puritans’ vicious ways, and the forest and Pearl to criticize the laws of their theocracy. Because of his effective use

of nature, Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" qualifies as the work of a Romantic author.