

Scarlet letter review



Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* remains one of the best examples of Puritan literature, a novel, which points to the inadequacy of the Puritan beliefs and the moral duality of the Puritan culture. This paper reviews the author's novel from a new, conformity vs. individuality angle. The context in which the novel was created is discussed. Hester's silent challenge against conformity is evaluated. The goal of this paper is to understand what message the writer's novel sends to readers.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* remains one of the brightest reflections of the conformity vs. identity conflict in the Puritan society. Written by a person of the highest moral order, the novel reveals the complexity of the Puritan ideals and beliefs and points to the moral inadequacy of the Puritan culture. The novel itself was created during one of the most difficult moments in the litterateur's life – his fight against the prejudiced conventions of the Puritan society added rigor and pain to the moral and physical tortures of his characters. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's characters constantly fight to maintain a balance of uniqueness and conformity. The appearance versus purity contradiction accompanies the protagonists in their way to self-actualization and happiness.

Hawthorne's novel is profoundly philosophical and exposes the deficiencies of the Puritan world. In this literary work, Nathaniel sends the final message of duality in the Puritan culture, in which society tries to achieve the ultimate point of conformity, and individuals use silence and physical tortures to construct and reproduce their identity in the repressive realities of life.

Hester Prynne: Silence as a Passive Revolt against Conformity

The duality of the Puritan society and an ongoing fight between conformity and individuality are the main threads of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Better than anyone else, jobless writer realized that any attempt to stand out from the Puritan conformity would be inevitably crushed by conformity. In the first chapter of the analyzed work, Hawthorne (2005) compares "the colony to a kind of utopia, where a portion of the virgin soil must be allotted as a cemetery, and another portion of the soil become a site for a prison" (Hawthorne 2005). In other words, in a small community torn between a prison and a cemetery, there is no place left to individuality, self-realization, and achievements. All members of the author's society are bound to comply with the rules set by the Puritan majority. This is probably because the Puritan culture consciously tries to separate individuals from subjective feelings and meanings. The Puritan community deprives people of their right to freedom – freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and even freedom of thought. This, however, is the most problematic aspect of Puritan existence, since even the strictest rules cannot guarantee the destruction of individuality. In his novel, Nathaniel Hawthorn sends a message of ineradicable, inconsumable individuality, which people try to preserve through silence and physical tortures against the repressive realities of Puritan life.

The novel centers on the discussion of Hester Prynne and her moral failure. Guilty of adultery, Hester carries the red letter A and must spend the rest of her life in isolation and humility. With a small child in her hands, Hester has no chance to escape Puritan condemnation. Her feelings do not matter, as <https://assignbuster.com/scarlet-letter-review/>

far as she is a member of the Puritan community and must abide to its laws and principles. Hester is subjected to public judgment. She is faced with the realities of the Puritan life, which leave no room for individuality. The heroine is used as an example of immorality and religious non-compliance – a lesson, which other women of the colony must learn by heart: “ It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Heter Prynne” (Hawthorne 2005). Hester Prynne is what should and should not be done by those, who want to be (or to look?) church members in good repute (Hawthorne 2005). In Hawthorne’s novel, this passage speaks of the role of public humiliation and condemnation, which show how the Puritans must behave. It is a good lesson for goodwives, who want to escape the fear of public humiliation and live their lives in accordance with the basic conventions of the Puritan church.

Hester is silent, and her silence creates an impression of humility, obedience, and agreement with what is happening to her in the viewed community. The woman refuses to reveal the name of her lover and assumes a role of a speechless, impersonal being that experiences the sense of guilt and wants to redeem her fault by all possible means. She stands in front of the crowd, keeping her baby close to her bosom (Hawthorne 2005). Lady-like, tall, and elegant, she is blushing and smiling at the same time (Hawthorne 2005). She looks unusual and unused to wearing a letter A, embroidered on her gown with red and gold threads (Hawthorne 2005). At this moment, the main character looks as if she has given up her individuality. From now on, the scarlet letter A is her name, title, and status. Coupled with Hester’s physical

beauty, *The Scarlet Letter* creates an effect of a spell (Ghasemi and Abbasi 2009). It takes her out of the ordinary system of Puritan relations, inclosing her in a unique sphere closed from the rest of the Puritans (Hawthorne 2005).

Certainly, Hester's silence is not without controversy. She confines herself to the world of her own ideas, preferences and illusions. However, her silence causes much suffering to her lover Dimmesdale. Moreover, it aids Chillingworth in his revenge on Dimmesdale: with Hester's being silent, Chillingworth confirms his suspicions about Dimmesdale and leads the young minister to the tragic end. Yet, no revolution is possible without losses. No revenge is possible without blood. No revolt happens without suffering and, probably, Dimmesdale is a logical sacrifice. Hester's "interview with the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, on the night of his vigil, had given her a new theme of reflection, and held her up to her an object that appeared worthy of any exertion and sacrifice for its attainment" (Hawthorne 2005). The heroine's interview suggests that any sacrifice is justified, when freedom and individuality are at stake. Dimmesdale's death is partially the product of his conscious choice and the inadequacy of the Puritan norms. It is a sacrifice which is inevitable, given Hester and Dimmesdale's mutual striving to preserve their individuality against the conformity of Puritanism. It is the ultimate expression of their mutual success in meeting their "individuality" goals.

Dimmesdale, Man's Law, and Individuality

Where Hester chooses silence to rebel against the conformity of the Puritan norms, Dimmesdale tries to preserve his individuality through physical and moral suffering. The latter indicates Reverend's willingness to withstand the pressure of the the viewed ideology. Like no other character, Dimmesdale exemplifies the quality of life in the Puritan society and exposes the power of individuality behind the mask of conformity in the Puritan colony. This hero's features are much more complicated than that of Hester and Chillingworth. In his acts and endeavors, Dimmesdale confirms the complexity of his mind and spirit and reveals profound knowledge of human vulnerabilities. His decision to subject himself to moral tortures suggests that he, like Hester, does not want to give up his individuality. Through fasting and torturing himself, the man creates and reproduces a new reality of his life.

At the other side of his moral continuum, Dimmesdale also confirms the power of conformity in the society, to which he belongs. His role of a Reverend and his public image will never give him a second chance if he decides to confess. His role is that of a remorseful hypocrite, as Hawthorne (2005) calls him. That Dimmesdale does not confess means that (a) he is too weak to rebel against the Puritan conventions and (b) the power of conformity is too strong to let him go. This hypocrisy is just another form of punishing the hero for his sin. Negative connotations aside, the choice of hypocrisy can be reasonable and acceptable, given the social pressure of norms in the colony. What Dimmesdale does to save his individuality is also necessary to protect Hester from further condemnation and punishment. In the meantime, he wants to speak out the truth about Hester and himself (Hawthorne 2005). He longs to confess and alleviate the burden of moral

pain. However, his public image of sanctity and holiness makes it extremely difficult to speak out. The man does not have enough courage to tell people what he really is. He is a coward and hypocrite, but these features are merely products of the social and religious conformity, which borders on hegemony and moral totalitarianism. In case of Dimmesdale, hypocrisy and cowardice serve a reliable shield against the destructive power of conformity. Both are justified to the extent, which lets the Reverend preserve his individuality. Both send a message of duality in the Puritan society and suggest that individuals prefer to choose to create and reproduce their own realities, rather than sacrifice their uniqueness for the sake of public approval.

The man's law, which Hawthorne mentions in his novel, has far-reaching implications for understanding the individuality against conformity conflict. What is a man and what role does he play in the evolution of the Puritan society? These are the questions which Hawthorne (2005) is trying to answer. These "man's" laws are not created by men who are unique, sensual, and individual in their decisions, but by men who are abstract, moral, political, and, as a result, artificial. This artificiality creates a mass of indistinct humans, who are vexed with the ambiguity of impressions, but never reveal their concerns (Hawthorne 2005). These laws distort the power of the Biblical world and turn love into a sin. In a society of conformity, no one is allowed to speak out his truth. No one is allowed to stand out and against the hegemony of Puritanism. However, even against the overwhelming potency of the religious and social norms, humans have everything needed to be and act like individuals. Hester uses silence to

preserve her individuality. Dimmesdale's uniqueness expresses and reflects through continuous agony, physical pain, suffering, hypocrisy and cowardice. None of these features is bad, as long as it gives people another chance to stand out of the crowd. Neither Dimmesdale, nor Hester is guilty of sin, hypocrisy or cowardice: as it is because of the hegemony of Puritanism that they are fated to create and reproduce their own realities for the sake of attaining the goal of individuality and uniqueness.

Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the brightest reflections of the conformity against identity conflict in the Puritan society. In his novel, the writer sends the final message of duality in the Puritan culture, where society fights to achieve the ultimate point of conformity, whereas individuals seek to preserve their identity by constructing and reproducing new realities of life. Through silence and self-torture, Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale subject themselves to the hegemony of Puritanism and simultaneously manage to preserve their individuality. In case of Dimmesdale, hypocrisy and cowardice serve a reliable shield against the destructive power of conformity. Both are justified to the extent, which lets the Reverend preserve his individuality. However, even against the overwhelming potency of the religious and social norms, humans have everything needed to be and act like individuals. Hester uses silence to preserve her individuality.

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