

The scarlet letter – character analysis

Business



A Character Analysis of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

Though Hester Prynne is undoubtedly the main protagonist in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it would be fair to argue that rather than being an intimate exploration of the character's innate emotions and nature, the narrative is instead an expose of the different and varying external forces that work to transform and shape Hester from the character we see in the beginning of the novel to the character we see at the end. The reader is given very little detail of Hester's life prior to the revelation of her affair with Dimmesdale and subsequent public exile. We learn that in her younger years Hester's parents used to frequently pick her up on her perceivably bad behavior, and this can lead to assumptions that she was a strong willed, impulsive and even reckless young lady, and this is further evidenced by the very fact that she has had an affair to bring her to her current situation. The woman and character with whom the reader is truly acquainted, however, is the Hester Prynne that is created by the townsfolk after her sins are revealed. Forced to spend much time alone after being publicly shamed and exiled from her community, Hester is provided with much time to contemplate her own life and consider broader topics such as morality, human nature and social order.

As a result of this imposed thinking time, Hester becomes something of an introspective, stoic 'maverick' who is shown to be a freethinker who the rest of the community regard as dangerous. Though the narrator of the story is shown to outwardly disapprove of Hester's freethinking attitude, the reader can indicate in some of the narrator's tone that he in fact privately admires the independence that Hester has gained through her alienation. Through

the birth and experience of her illegitimate child, Hester is shown to become much more of a sympathetic maternal figure. Her once rash and sharp tendencies are curtailed as she becomes very aware that her personal actions could trigger the loss of her daughter. Not only does she become maternal toward her offspring, but she also begins to undertake a maternal role with regards to wider society.

The reader hears how she cares for the poor of the town and provides them with clothing and food, and towards the conclusion of the novel we see that Hester has in fact become one of the leading and most respected mother figures in the entire community. Hester's character changed within the novel far earlier than the town's people realized, and it was only when the rest of the community looked beyond her public 'shame' and realized her real value that the stigma of the Scarlet Letter was diminished. Overall, the key takeaway that can be ascertained from this series of events is the fact that it was the fault of the town father's sexist nature that forced Hester in to exile, and it was these extraordinary and tasking circumstances that molded her in to the figure that is present at the novel's climax.