

# Hester Prynne as a Rebel to Puritan Society in Hawthorne's Romance the Scarlet Letter

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## Abstract

'The Scarlet Letter' by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a classical novel in the 19th century American literature. Although it was written in the 18th century yet the setting is in the 17th century in Boston, America. The novel shows Puritanism's great impact on people's life and thought. It's a story of a woman named, Hester Prynne, who is punished for her adulteries with a young priest Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. She also has a daughter but denies disclosing her father's name. She fights against society system set by the Puritan Regime. She wears the scarlet letter 'A' which is a stigma showing her an 'adulteress'. This paper will give a picture of Hester as a rebel to a rigid Puritan society. It will show how the Puritans were strict in the matters of divinity and did not accept any rule violated. The paper will present the boldness and rebellion of the protagonist against so called established laws which were in fact a kind of ignominy of human beings who committed sins.

**Keywords:** Puritan Society, Strict Laws, Adulteries, Sin, Church, Punishment, Scarlet Letter, Violation, Bold, Rebel, Ignominy.

## Introduction :

The Scarlet Letter is a mirror to the society which existed in the 17th century Puritan America, which has been considered as a reflection of implementation of Puritan laws. That society did not give equality to men and women even though women were strong, brave, industrious, kindhearted, and with a lofty devoting spirit, their whole life was very tragic in the end. It deeply reveals not only the Puritan's bitterness and the women's hardship, but also the strength of the Puritan consciousness and the lowness of the women's status. This heroine of the novel, Hester Prynne, has such a noble character that she is undoubtedly recognized as having been determined to break the manacles of set traditions. Although Hester suffers enormously from the shame of her public disgrace and from the isolation of her punishment, in her inner heart she can never accept the Puritan interpretation of her act as she believes that her desire for love of freedom is not evil, but with dignity and grace. Hester retains her self-respect and survives her punishment with ever-growing strength of character.

## The Puritans and their dogmas :

Puritans were the more extreme Protestants within the Church of England in 16<sup>th</sup> century. These Protestants thought the English Reformation had not gone far enough in reforming the doctrines and structure of the church. They wanted to purify their church. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century many Puritans immigrated to America, where they set up a holy Commonwealth in New England. The Puritans did not allow holding different religious belief. They insisted that high position and achievements were signs of 'eternal grace', that is, favour of God. The Puritan era during which the action of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* takes place embodied a society in which the individual and his or her actions were often pitted against a social order determined to stamp out behaviours it considered immoral. The Puritans believed that devil was behind every evil deed. Constant watch needed to be kept in order to stay away from his clutches. Words of hell fire and brimstone flowed from mouths of eloquent ministers as they warned of the persuasiveness of the devil's power. Puritan law was extremely strict; men and women were severely punished for a variety of crimes. Those who committed crimes against the government were not only criminals but also sinners, and they were punished severely. Women did not participate in town meetings and were excluded from decision making in the church.

## HESTER AS A REBEL

### A. Hester's Reaction against Her Punishment

Living in that rigid society Hester shows a rebellious spirit coolly ignoring the comments passed by the people of that community. With this valuable spirit, she defies power and puts up a tenacious fight against the set traditions as she thinks that the Puritan society with its self denying doctrines cast dishonor upon human passions. They judge by external signs instead of the interior conscience of men. They cannot understand the heart of humanity, so everyone of the community must comply with rules of Puritanism. The rulers do not allow anyway breaking away with the "Holy Community", let alone to revolt it. Hester has violated this community by giving birth to a child by an unknown father. She is condemned to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her breast and suffer public shame on the scaffold. Hester rebels it, —by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character. When she walked to the scaffold from the prison, she holds her head high and remains in full public view without shedding a tear, —as if by her own will. Hester's rebellious spirit is also reflected in the elaborate needlework of the

scarlet letter. There are —fantastic flourished of gold-thread, and the letter is ornately decorative, significantly beyond the Puritan laws that call for somber, unadorned attire. She shows her skill in needling work, and it seems like that she takes pride in her token of isolation. Later, the young priest Author Dimmesdale, in fact Hester's love, implores Hester to name the father of the baby and this way her penance may be lightened. To people's astonishment, she says —Never. When asked again, she says, —I will not speak. while this declaration relieves Dimmesdale and he praises her under his breath, it also shows Hester's determination to stand alone despite the opinion of society. She uses individual rights and regards them as weapons to fire the Puritanism. Her beautiful hair is hidden under her cap; her beauty and warmth are gone, buried under the burden of the elaborate scarlet letter. When she removes the letter and takes off her cap in the forest, Hester once again becomes the radiant beauty. Symbolically, when Hester does these actions, she is in fact removing the harsh, stark, unbending puritan social and moral structure. Obviously, what Hester has done manifests her challenge to the whole dismal severity of the puritanical code of law. In her deepest heart, she can never accept the puritan rules and becomes a rebel against the rules. No wonder that some unkind puritans reproach her such as —what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment.

### **B. Hester's Desire To Escape**

Hester's rebellion against Puritan society is also reflected in her desire to escape with Dimmesdale to a new land. She utters "Is the world, then, so narrow? Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town? Wither leads yonder forest track? ... There thou art free! So brief a journey would bring thee from a world where thou hast been most wretched, to one where thou mayest still be happy!" It is much to be regretted that Dimmesdale dares not quit his post. At the crucial moment, for the sake of arousing him to pragmatic idealism, Hester fervently resolves to buoy him up with her own energy. She says continually and firmly, "Thou art crushed under the seven years' weight of misery. But thou shall leave it all behind thee! ... Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened. ... begin all anew! ... the future is yet full of trail and success. ... exchange this false life of thine for a true one... preach, Write, Act. Do anything save to lie down and die!" Encouraged by Hester, the minister eventually resolves to flee with her. In order to give Dimmesdale encouragement and hope further, Hester, without the least hesitation, takes the scarlet letter from her bosom and throws it off, and next, she heaves a long, deep sign, in which the burden of shame and anguish departs from her spirit.

### **C. Hester and Her Child Pearl**

In that society the illegitimate children were considered as a stigma and a symbol of shame and disgrace but Hester has a child and raises her by herself. She names the child pearl, —as being of great price purchased with all she had—her mother's only treasure. In Hester's opinion, —Providence, in the person of this little girl, has assigned to Hester's charge the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties. However, it has reached her ears that some of the leading inhabitants decide to deprive her of her child only because they cannot trust an immortal soul, such as Pearl, to the guidance of one who has stumbled and fallen amid the pitfalls of this world. Considering Hester, Pearl is her very life, her only treasure purchased with all she has. By the control of this idea, Hester defends her right to raise Pearl bravely while in the confrontation with Governor Bellingham. This is how she rebels and challenges the church and the secular ruler in public. Although Hester is isolated and cut off from help, and so conscious that it seems scarcely an unequal match between the puritanical magistrates, she still sets forth and is ready to defend them to the death. She cries with almost a fierce expression, "God gave me the child. He gave her in requital of all things else, which she had taken from me. She is my happiness". Clearly, Hester, as an ordinary woman, cries out for nothing else, but for her indefeasible rights, which shows her extraordinary courage and rebellious spirit. With Dimmesdale's interference, Hester succeeds in keeping her Pearl with her. She breaks the puritan rule permitting sons to have the right of succession, and accepts the inheritance from Roger. Thus Pearl becomes the richest heritress in the New Land. At last, she visits Europe and finds her lover. Pearl's happiness shows Hester's win to Puritanism and humanism's win to Puritanism.

### **D. Hester's Self-sufficiency**

In the Puritan society women are regarded as dependents upon men. This situation leads to women's tragic lives. With the lofty ideal of gaining self-reliance, women have to take action as soon as possible, just as what Hester thinks about:

"As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change ..."

By the control of this idea, Hester revolts against the social order of puritan society tenaciously. Not only has she

won the self-sufficiency in economy, but also in thought.

### **1. Hester's Independence in Earning**

In the Puritan society, success and who failure are not determined by man but by God. Man is divided into two groups. The good people and the bad people. The bad people cannot save or relieve themselves until they appeals to God's help. And this is a holy idea and cannot change but Hester breaks this this holy idea and changes it through her deeds. Though at her time, —It was the art almost the only one within a woman's grasp of needlework; Hester possesses it that —sufficed to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. —Her needlework was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarves, and the minister on his hand; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and molded away, in the coffins of the dead. These noble and holy places are decorated with her fine needle work. Undoubtedly, Hester gains her self-sufficiency in economy without appealing to God's help. She even does not turn to her lover Dimmesdale or her husband Chillingworth, who should have been responsible for her miserable life, for help. This is a clear proof of Hester's rebellion against the Puritans that women are not dependents upon men. They can earn their lives with their own hands and intelligence. Another Puritan strict principle which Hester breaks is that women cannot take delight. Hester's needle work is not only an art, but also a way for her to let off her emotions and passions. Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle; to Hester it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life.

### **2. Hester's Independence in Thinking**

In the puritan society, a woman must cling to her husband, even she has not a bit love for him. And furthermore, she should kill her natural love within her, instead of letting it release and spoil. However, Hester does not follow this rule at all. She breaks away from her husband whom she did not love and falls in love with Dimmesdale. She dares to purse her love freedom. It can be seen from her whole story that Hester never neglects such human values as individuality, personal freedom and private life. She has her own secret. When asked about her lover's name, she says —Never. Hester uses individual rights and regards them as weapons to fire the Puritanism. Her independence in thought is repeated again when she confronts Governor Bellingham over the issue of Pearl's guardianship. She defends the mighty power with unimagined great courage, “God gave her into my keeping, I will not give her up”. Hester's action proves that woman is not the weak, but to the opposite, the strong, who is able to find out methods to rescue herself. For the seven solitary years, —Hester never battled with the public, but submitted; incompactly ... she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her figure in the scarlet letter and passed on. Outwardly, she wears the letter that labels her as an evil woman. Inwardly, she exists in her speculations, her solitude, her quiet hours with Pearl, her needlework, and finds these good. Though —the scarlet letter by which man had marked Hester's sin had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, satirically, it is just the scarlet letter that becomes her passport into regions where others dare not to tread. As Hawthorne describes: “She looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators have established ... The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free ... Shame, despair, solitude. These had been her teachers, stern and wide ones, and they had made her strong”.

### **E. Conclusion**

Thus Hester's bold attitude against Puritan society brings fruit and Nathaniel Hawthorne succeeds in conveying the message to unveil the flaws of puritan society and the hypocrisy of their reactions to Hester. Living in same rigid society Hester creates her own recognition. She does not feel embarrassed but lives with dignity and pride. She damn cares about others' sarcastic looks on her but minds her own business to boost up herself. She defeats men in the field of men. Her husband Chillingworth and her lover Dimmesdale live in the same community afraid of the people and the norms of society but she surpasses them. Hester becomes a beacon for the coming races of women who want to be recognized and prove their mettle and worth not less than men in any way. She paves the way for the women who are trodden and considered worthless to rehabilitate their state and play their positive role in that particular patriarchal society of orthodox world.

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