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# A Critique of Puritan Values and Social Restrictions

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### A Critique of Puritan Values and Social Restrictions

When examining the topic of feminism in relation to Nathaniel Hawthorne, it is imperative to remember that conclusions are but conjecture, no matter how certain a critic feels of his or her reasoning. Nevertheless, it is important to investigate the potential meanings and inflections hidden within Hawthorne's crowning work, *The Scarlet Letter*, in an attempt to shed light on feminist passages in the text. These passages serve to underline the complex relationship between the primary characters of the story and the narrator. Hawthorne's treatment of both genders reinforces typical gender norms of the time while simultaneously rejecting these norms. As such, it is possible that Hawthorne presented his story and his characters in such a way as to refute the justice of a society that so cruelly bound the natural actions of human beings. Although it is doubtful that Hawthorne meant to challenge the institution of marriage itself, as was the fear of certain critical contemporaries of his, it can be argued that he was attempting to shed light on the various cruelties placed on each gender within the Puritan model. By examining the complex treatment and relationship between the four principle characters of *The Scarlet Letter* and their narrator, a reader can understand Hawthorne's use of a feminist critique as a wider criticism of Puritan, and, by extension, mid-nineteenth century, social and moral restrictions and expectations.

During the time of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the first wave of feminism was gaining momentum by pushing for the political and economic equality of the sexes. Although there was not a formal feminist movement during the time period of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne nevertheless uses the arguments of his own time period to create a plot and characters that seek to challenge the norms of gender, sexuality, and society in their Puritanical corner of the world. In a similar vein, a Marxist critique poses questions of socioeconomic status, exploitation, and the roles available within different social classes, naturally including those of women, while Cultural Studies criticism examines the experiences of social outsiders and human nature. As such, each of these critiques works well together, particularly within the context of Hawthorne's work, and therefore allows for an examination of the expectations of each gender within the different classes and roles of Puritan society.

In mid-seventeenth century New England, Puritanism was by far the dominant religion of the area, having originated in Britain along with the vast majority of colonists. An extreme branch of Protestant Christianity, Puritanism advocated the complete "purification" of Catholic practices from the Church of England, which included the abolition of gambling, drama, and the celebration of Christmas. Popular culture of the modern era has done much to exaggerate the Puritan reputation for severity, repression, and rejection of any kind of fun. However, in Bruce C. Daniels's article on Puritan leisure, he notes the portrayal of the Puritan in works by Hawthorne, Miller, and Lowell as a figure which "is no longer the caricature of a guilt-ridden, hypocritical killjoy; their Puritan is just as sober, just as serious, but far more believable with far more of a sinister effect on subsequent American development" (Daniels 8). Puritanism operated largely

on the idea that man was inherently evil, lacking God's grace in light of the Fall of Man. This concept was emphasized to encourage the necessity of a close relationship with God as the only source of salvation. Sexuality within the Puritan social-scape is also a topic of deep debate for scholars due to the relationship stressed between man and wife, which depended on the submission of woman before God and her husband. Sex outside of marriage was stringently and expressly forbidden, with punishment being highly public and degrading. It was into this suppressive and bleak society that Hawthorne placed his story of a lone mother condemned for the love that brought life within her.

As the most glaring opposition to Puritan standards, the relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale is the source of primary conflict within the story as the origin for their illegitimate daughter's very being. Not only are the two not married, but Hester is actually married to another man, his character not yet known in Boston, but his existence a double insult to their action nonetheless. However, given that the magistrates of Boston believe her husband to be long dead, they refrain from putting her to death, as is the prescribed penalty for adultery. Although Hester says that Dimmesdale was once a man of youth and vigor, by the thirteenth chapter, "his moral force was abased into more than childish weakness" (Hawthorne 104), which therefore prompted Hester to simultaneously occupy not only the role of mother and father, but also that of woman and man as the only one left with any strength of character or will. In fact, Nina Baym argues that her 2004 article had "interpreted Dimmesdale as Hester's foil—weak, orthodox, conventional—and as her temptation rather than she his" (453). With this interpretation in mind, Hester comes to embody a much more dominant role in their relationship as the one striving to protect her lover from the law, which flies directly in the face of Puritan

values of female submission and obedience to men. As such, multiple instances exist where Dimmesdale's weakness allows for Hester's strength to manifest and undermine the principles to which he so guiltily clings. The first of these instances occurs in the third chapter wherein Hester is forced to stand on the town scaffold for three hours to bear the scrutiny and judgment of all those assembled. Rather than confess his own involvement in the affair and shoulder his portion of the blame, Dimmesdale lays the choice of confessing the identity of her fellow sinner on Hester, even saying to Pearl years later that "the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!" (Hawthorne 101). Despite his invitation to confess, Hester resolves to keep her silence and his identity anonymous, thus feeding the image of feminine defense and defiance. Later in the story, after a period of some seven years, Dimmesdale meets Hester and Pearl in the forest to discuss the possibility of their escape from Boston. As Dimmesdale attempts to interact with the increasingly flighty and unresponsive Pearl, he at last implores Hester to "pacify her, if thou lovest me!" (Hawthorne 134). Such a request is an admission of his own futility in dealing with children as well as a manipulative ultimatum by owing the responsibility of discipline to Hester as proof of her love for him. The irony of Dimmesdale's discomfort around children is glaring when considering how often the narrator likens his appearance, mannerisms, and actions to that of a child's as well as when he confesses to Hester that "children are not readily won to be familiar with me" (Hawthorne 132-133). The final and greatest display of Dimmesdale's weakness occurs in the penultimate chapter in which he makes his great confession eight long years after the fact and subsequently goes eagerly into the next life, leaving Hester to once again pick up the pieces without him. The inherent selfishness of his desire to remain in

Boston to give his ceremonial speech aside, Dimmesdale's relinquishment of life is a final testament to his distaste for enduring the consequences for his actions and opting instead for others to shoulder the blame, namely Hester herself. Throughout the course of the novel, the relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale is often less of that between lovers and more often of that between mother and son in an Oedipal connection that seeks to condemn the gender archetypes within Puritan society.

Standing in opposition to her relationship with Dimmesdale, Hester's connection to Chillingworth is at once sinister and sanctified by the very society that seeks to condemn her. Ironies abound over the idea of a society consecrating her marriage to a man so consumed with revenge while simultaneously denouncing a union born of love and mutual affection. From their first interaction in the text to the final mention of his character in the conclusion, Chillingworth is cruel, calculating, and distant, a constant reminder of the monstrous side of human nature, whereas Hester is the personification of love, intellectual freedom, and humanity. While visiting his former wife in her prison cell only moments after her public shaming, Chillingworth interrogates Hester for the identity of her secret lover, but just as before, she is resolute in her silence. Although Amory Dwight Mayo lays the blame of their ill-founded relationship on Hester in his article for *Universalist Quarterly* by commenting that "she committed that sin which women are every day repeating...of giving her hand to a man she did not entirely love" (269), his appraisal is both sexist and short-sighted given that men commanded more marital autonomy than did women at the time. Nevertheless, Chillingworth's desire to learn who Hester's lover is signifies the beginning of his mental and spiritual perversity and the growing chasm between the former husband and wife. Hawthorne's distaste for

Puritan marriage restrictions, which propagate similar unhappy unions, is most tellingly displayed by the relationship between Hester and Chillingworth. Arguably the most disturbing scene within the whole book takes place in chapter ten with Chillingworth's revelation of what lies on Dimmesdale's chest, which "he was often observed...to put his hand on his chest, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain" (Hawthorne 81). The scene has been called both demonic and homoerotic, by suggesting a corruption of the same attraction felt by Hester for Dimmesdale. In doing so, the male stereotype of independence and self-sufficiency is subverted by Dimmesdale's helplessness while the female stereotype of being the caregiver is destroyed by Chillingworth's hypocrisy of such.

Despite her mother's obvious disparities with Puritan society, no other character exemplifies the physical and emotional freedom so mistrusted and discouraged by Puritan practices as Pearl. With her lack of any kind of father figure and the proximity of her home to the wild forest, it is no wonder that Pearl enjoys a kind of kinship with nature. She is described alternatively as a bird, a faerie, and an imp, each of which draws from stories, fairytales, or mythologies to signify their otherworldliness. The use of such references stresses Pearl's removal from daily or ordinary life as well as her exceptional nature for the laws and customs of her mother's people. By establishing this disconnect, the narrator draws attention to the differences even between Pearl and Hester, including the emotional freedom of the former as opposed to the emotional slavery of the latter. Although Pearl's relationship with her mother is by far the most important and influential in her life, Pearl's connection to both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are worthy of appraisal. In their first interaction inside the prison cell only months after Pearl's birth,

Chillingworth employs the use of his alchemic knowledge to create a draught capable of relieving the stress of the baby and sending it into a peaceful slumber. Just as Dimmesdale would require Hester's help to control the child years later, Chillingworth must also use external aid to render Pearl controllable, a clear testament to her strength of will and loyalty to self. This need for additional help to curb the willpower of a young girl is a direct defiance of Puritan ideals about obedience and subservience for women and children. Instead, Pearl is presented as the most self-possessed and independent character of the entire story, despite her age and sex.

The most intricate relationship of all lies between the narrator, Hester, and Pearl. Hawthorne uses the narrator to explore the themes of gender roles, social classes, and religious values within New England culture. Foremost among these themes is the conundrum examined by Neal Frank Doubleday in his essay on Hester and feminism, in which he observes Hester's realization of feminism's futility and adds the conclusion that "not only will these impossible changes have to precede the effective operation of feminist ideals, but woman will have to change her own essential nature" (Doubleday 826). Hester's feminine nature is refuted by the narrator who claims that "she who had once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration" (Hawthorne 107); however, it is Dimmesdale's own strength and nature that returns after experiencing the forgiving touch of his former lover. Doubleday's discovery would seem to underline Hawthorne's rejection of feminism's ideals as unattainable as David Leverenz argues in his article for *Nineteenth Century Literature*, but this discovery instead lends itself to the idea that Hawthorne's primary complaint is made against the society that breeds such insidious



misogyny and gender inequality. Over the course of the novel, the narrator appears to switch tones and sympathies several times by first referring to Chillingworth as a poor old man with Hester represented as young and strong-willed in her defiance to later commenting on the sick and twisted appearance of Chillingworth and the eventual loss of Hester's vitality and beauty as the very source of her womanhood. In doing so, Leverenz observes the narrator's "covert fascination with violating her inwardness and humbling her strength" (476). This is a cruel treatment of Hester by the narrator, and seems to undermine her value as a character, just as Pearl's treatment at the moment of Dimmesdale's death is also a kind of betrayal of her true nature. By reducing the image of woman to a figure who must not fight the world but rather weep and accept her fate, the narrator is seeming to refute the very essence of Pearl's self; this passage is but the most poignant example of Hawthorne's attitude toward the society that dilutes the strength of a woman to a passive creature, easily molded and swayed by the men who dominate her life.

Throughout the course of the novel, Hawthorne uses multiple tactics to explore the themes of his setting and characters from the inherent sexism of Puritan practices to the role of the narrator as a subtly disguised voice of social commentary. By combining the methods of feminist critique with a Social-Marxist critique, a reader may discover greater meaning hidden within the text, which may succeed in altering the reader's very perception of the novel as a whole. The idea of critiquing the underhanded misogyny and betrayal of women's roles came after reading Nina Baym's 2004 edition of her article in which she lays out various instances of Hawthorne's obvious feminism. The use and attitude toward gender roles in the story seemed initially at odds with her claims, despite

their grounding in the text, until the origin of Hawthorne's family tree became known. Once the truth of Hawthorne's familial shame was discovered, the entirety of *The Scarlet Letter* seemed to be written anew with a different intention behind every line. Suddenly, this was a novel that strove to prove the fundamental faults of Puritan restrictions. Rather than rewrite the morals of sexual freedom as many of his contemporaries feared, Hawthorne was much more concerned with displaying the hypocrisy and innate wrongness of a society that condemns love, free will, and self-possession and attempts to instill subservience, uniformity, and unnatural order in its place.

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