

Punishment in Nathaniel Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 11

Special Issue: 5

Month: March

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 25.01.2024

Accepted: 15.02.2024

Published: 01.03.2024

Citation:

Jeni Nirmala, A., and S. Narmatha. "Punishment in Nathaniel Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter."

Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities, vol. 11, no. S5, 2024, pp. 37–40.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v11iS5-Mar.7649>

A. Jeni Nirmala

Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English
Sakthi College of Arts and Science for Women, Oddanchatram

S. Narmatha

MA Student, Department of English
Sakthi college of Arts and Science for Women, Oddanchatram

Abstract

Author Nathaniel Hawthorne is well-known for his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, which was first published in the nineteenth century and is set in mid-seventeenth-century New England Boston Puritan society in the United States. Hester Prynne, the book's protagonist, and the male and female characters that surround her Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, Pearl, Clergymen, and others are at the centre of the narrative. In the discipline of feminist studies, the portrayal of female characters in literature is a vital topic. Feminist critics have harshly criticized the long-standing, traditional patriarchal methods of depicting women characters as patriarchal, and they are not good practices. Hester's transgression and the resulting penalty, accordingly this study has taken into account her self-development, independence from male partners, ups and downs in the patriarchal society, and exclusion from social circles. The representation of female characters in this essay has been interpreted as a protest against the patriarchal customs that are still in place. Because the author has a position of patriarchal power, the feminist analysis of the author's portrayal of Hester Prynne and Pearl views it as a protest against established customs.

Keywords: Politics of Presentation, Patriarchal Tradition, Feminist Viewpoint, Author's Protest, Patriarchal Behavior, Representation of Women.

The scarlet Letter is renowned writer Nathaniel Hawthorne penned this classic novel, which became available in 1850 and is among the most well-known examples of historical fiction. The story is set in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1642 and 1649 and revolves around the life of Hester Prynne, who, after having a daughter with a man she is not married to, attempts to start over with regret and dignity. Throughout the scarlet letter, there are several references to religious figures and historical figures that discuss punishment, sin, and guilt. A sizable gathering took place in the Puritan town of Boston in June 1642 to see a punishment. After being found guilty of adultery, Hester Prynne, a young woman, was forced to wear a "Scarlet A" to symbolize her humiliation. She also has to endure standing on the scaffold for three hours in front of the public, uncovered. Because of Hester's quiet dignity and attractiveness, many of the women in the audience are incensed when she approaches the scaffold. When forced to reveal the identity of her child's father, Hester refuses to comply.

Hester, looking through the crowd in search of her long-lost husband who is said to have been lost at sea discovers a small, deformed man. A man in the audience answers the husband's question about Hester after he sees how embarrassed she is, and he finds out the specifics of his wife's adultery. With a fierce exclamation, "The child's father, the accomplice in the adulterous act, should also be punished," he vows to track out the man. He chooses to assume the persona of Roger Chillingworth in order to further his plot. Reverend John Wilson and her church's pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, question Hester, but she refuses to reveal who her boyfriend is. The jailer summons in a doctor named Roger Chillingworth to help Hester and her baby feel better when she gets back to her cell in the jail using his roots and herbs. After dismissing the jailer and seeing to Hester's infant Pearl, Chillingworth inquires as to the child's father. Hester is instructed to conceal her husband's identity, but she disobeys. If she ever does that, he threatens to kill the child's father. Hester acknowledges that she would someday regret it, yet she chooses to accept Chillingworth's disability.

Hester stays into a cottage on the outskirts of the city after being released from prison and makes a menial living by needlepoint. She lives a peaceful and sober lifestyle with her daughter Pearl. Her daughter's strange personality worries her. Pearl is fascinated by the Scarlet A when she is young. As she ages, Pearl becomes increasingly unpredictable. It is not surprising that the churchgoers ask that Pearl be removed from Hester because of the reports that her acts propagate. When Hester found out that Pearl might be lost, she went to see Governor Bellingham. He is accompanied by Reverends Wilson and Dimmesdale. Pearl knows the right answers to Wilson's catechism exam, but she declines to offer them, endangering her guardianship. Answering Hester's question Reverend Dimmesdale pleading with the governor in a desperate attempt to retain Pearl under Hester's supervision. The residents are thrilled to have Chillingworth, a newly arrived doctor, move in with their beloved priest because Reverend Dimmesdale's health is failing. Because of their close contact, Chillingworth begins to suspect that Dimmesdale's illness is the result of some unspoken guilt. He puts psychological pressure on the pastor because he believes Dimmesdale is Pearl's father. One evening, when Chillingworth lifts the vestment covering Dimmesdale, he finds a startling object on the pale breast of the sleeping minister: a red A.

Dimmesdale, plagued with a guilty conscience, goes to the square where Hester has punished her. He spots Hester and Pearl and calls them to join him as he climbs the scaffold. He lacks the confidence to confess to others, even if he does so to them. Pearl motions to Roger Chillingworth shadowy figure as Dimmesdale abruptly spots a meteor creating what appears to be a huge A in the sky. Horrified by Dimmesdale's downfall, Hester makes the decision to break her silence promise to her husband. She talks to Chillingworth about this and tells him to stop his obsession with revenge in order to save his own soul. Hester meets Dimmesdale in the woods a few days later. There, she reveals her husband's identity and his desire for retribution while removing the red letter from her attire. She convinces Dimmesdale to smuggle out of Boston and join a ship bound for Europe so they can start over there during their conversation. This suggestion seemed to energize the minister even more. However, she won't give them any credit until Hester fixes Pearl's shame stain on her clothing.

Dimmesdale has a significant shift in his ideas and comes to terms with his situation after returning to town. He accepts that he will pass away and realizes that the arrangement he had with Hester is no longer feasible. In their conversation, the captain of the ship Hester had booked explains to her that Roger Chillingworth, the man who had been torturing Dimmesdale, will also be on the same voyage. Dimmesdale delivers a powerful sermon on election day, receiving high praise from the congregation. However, he stumbles and nearly falls, foreshadowing the dramatic turn of events that will follow. Overwhelmed with guilt and a desire for redemption, Dimmesdale

mounts the scaffold where Hester had been publicly shamed for her sin years ago. In a moment of catharsis, he confesses his sin to the crowd, and witnesses report a remarkable phenomenon. A crimson, A shaped stigmata on Dimmesdale's breast, symbolizing his hidden sin and torment. Roger chilling worth, consumed by his quest for revenge, meets his own demise and his purpose in life is extinguished. In his will, Chilling worth leaves Pearl a substantial inheritance, providing her with the means to pursue a prosperous future. Hester and Pearl embark on a journey to Europe in search of a wealthy suitor for Pearl.

Several years after her journey to Europe, Hester Prynne returns to Boston, her place of origin, where she once again dons the scarlet letter that had symbolized her sin and shame. However, the meaning behind the letter has transformed, and Hester now embraces it as a symbol of her strength, resilience, and empathy towards others who have faced similar struggles. Hester's return to Boston brings about a significant change in her public perception. She becomes a well-known and respected figure, particularly among women who find solace and comfort in her presence. Hester's own experiences of enduring scorn and judgment have allowed her to develop a deep understanding and compassion for those who have been marginalized or burdened by society's condemnation. Upon her death, Hester is buried near the tomb of her beloved, Arthur Dimmesdale. The simple slate burial plaque that marks their final resting place bears the inscription, "On a field, sable, the letter A gules." This concise yet poignant epitaph serves as a lasting testament to their intertwined lives and the enduring impact of their shared secret. The "field, sable" refers to the black background of the plaque, while the "letter A gules" represents the scarlet letter, reminding all who encounter their graves of the profound significance it held in their lives.

Hester's return to Boston and her subsequent role as a comforting figure for other women exemplify her personal growth and the transformation she undergoes throughout the novel. Her decision to once again wear the scarlet letter represents her acceptance of her past and her determination to use her experiences to help others navigate their own struggles. By embracing her identity and owning her story, Hester becomes a beacon of strength and resilience in a society that had once condemned her. The burial plaque shared by Hester and Dimmesdale serves as a powerful symbol of their intertwined destinies and the enduring impact of their shared secret. It encapsulates the complex emotions and themes of guilt, redemption, and forgiveness that permeate the novel. The scarlet letter, once a mark of shame, now becomes a lasting emblem of the profound transformation and ultimate redemption of its wearers. Hester's return to Boston, her remarkable transformation into a comforting figure for other women, and the shared burial plaque that marks her and Dimmesdale's final resting place all contribute to the overarching themes of redemption and forgiveness in "The Scarlet Letter". These elements highlight the power of personal growth and the potential for individuals to rise above societal expectations and find solace, compassion, and meaning in their own unique journeys. This ending to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a culmination of the characters' journeys and themes explored throughout the novel, showcasing the transformative power of confession and the consequences of harboring guilt and seeking revenge.

People are punished for their misdeeds, not in spite of them. Whether it's a public humiliation or a conscience-driven penalty, punishment is always a result of one's own misdeeds. Several characters in Hawthorne's beloved novel *The Scarlet Letter* face both right and unfair punishment for their transgressions. Chilling worth is punished by pursuing retribution for Dimmesdale's transgression against him, Hester is punished both openly and privately, and Dimmesdale is punished by keeping his fault hidden. Hester's infidelity earns her both rightful and unfair punishment in public and private. Hester is shown getting released from prison for her public punishment at the start of the narrative. I assure you that Mistress Prynne will be positioned so that every man, woman, and child can see her courageous attire from now until one hour after the meridian. Hester is being punished

for her wrongdoing, but because she is the only one getting punished, it doesn't seem fair. The sin is this just one is receiving punishment out of two. In her society, Hester has turned into an outsider. She is distinguished by her sin. Like an outcast, she stood alone in the world, independent of society and with only Pearl to lead and protect. She was alone and without hope of regaining her place, even if she hadn't been disdained to think it desirable, so she threw away the broken chain fragment.

She is wrongfully expelled from society, leaving her to raise Pearl by herself without any assistance. Because her wrongdoing is now impacting her kid, who did not transgress with her, the punishment she is getting in this section of the tale is unfair. Hester is ready to have Pearl removed from her at the governor's mansion. Hester expresses her affection for Pearl while also complaining because Pearl is always punishing her. Hester's transgression is a fitting punishment. This penalty is a direct result of what she did. Dimmesdale only suffered just punishment for his transgression, but Hester experienced both just and unjust punishment for hers. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale's infidelity gives him only fair and personal retribution. Dimmesdale argues that his penalty is heavier, even if Hester argues that hers is worse since she has lost her excellent reputation. Dimmesdale deserves his punishment. Since he hasn't admitted his wrongdoing, he ought to feel guilty. Because he is concealing a sin and is receiving due punishment for it, he is unable to live in peace. Dimmesdale's Physical disease is one way that shame manifests. He appeared increasingly disheveled and thin compared to how we had portrayed him during Hester's public humiliation and regardless of the reason be it his deteriorating health or something else entirely his big, dark eyes held a world of suffering within their troubled, sorrowful depth.

His unresolved sin is weighing heavily on his heart, which is why he is sick. This is only retribution since he need to own up to his wrongdoing. This is how his body responds to guilt by nature . In an attempt to persuade Dimmesdale to admit to getting his retribution, Chilling worth has become friends with him. In an attempt to exhaust Dimmesdale and force him to confess, he badgers him nonstop. And so, Roger Chilling worth went on, in a tone that did not change in response to the interruption. Even though Chilling worth is aware of Dimmesdale's secret, Dimmesdale receives discreet punishment. Chilling worth's persistent pestering of Dimmesdale prevents him from finding peace of mind. Given that he must acknowledge his transgression, this is a fair penalty. Even if Dimmesdale ought to have confessed, Chilling worth had no right to exact retribution on Dimmesdale. Hester was given proper punishment in private, but unfair punishment in public. Dimmesdale's only reason for a private punishment was that he had to own up to his transgression. Chilling worth's punishment was simply that he paid a price at the end of his life for sacrificing his life to sin. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, all three of these characters suffered the consequences of their transgressions. In actuality, people are punished for their faults, not for committing them. The conscience is punished by sin before the public is. A righteous punishment is a guilty conscience.

References

1. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Boston, J.R. Osgood and company, 1878. Print.
2. <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/scarlet/summary/>