

The Scarlet Letter Essay

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Within *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne artfully juxtaposes the forest and the Puritan town in order to develop the idea of one's true self versus the persona one might actively try to portray. He emphasizes how each location eventually changes Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale and influences their behaviors. The forest stands firmly as a place of truth and free expression of self, while the town is characterized by deceit and falsehood. Within the forest, Hester is freed from the burdens of the scarlet letter that she must wear in the town, and her kind and loving character is seen. On the other hand, Dimmesdale's sin that is hidden from the town is exposed within the boundaries of the forest. Hiding one's true character is a significant theme that extends throughout history. Thus, Hawthorne creates a timeless and insightful critique on society based on its tendency to stray from reality and venture into creating a fake and dishonest character.

The dark and mysterious forest that Hawthorne depicts stays true to the Romantic aspect of his writing. The forest is portrayed very ominously, described with words such as "black and dense" (Hawthorne 162). Within Puritan society, the forest represents evil, darkness, and sin. There are even myths about the "Black Man," an alias for Satan himself, "haunt[ing] the forest" (163). For this reason, the Puritans fear the mysterious darkness surrounding the forest and completely avoid the area. They look upon those who venture into the woods, like Mistress Hibbins, with disdain and claim that she spends her time consorting with the devil (214).

Hawthorne does not view the forest in that manner and conversely uses this specific location to describe an arena where one's true self can be revealed, without society's influence. For example, throughout the novel, the interaction with nature within the forest exposes the genuine characters of those who enter it. When Hester meets Dimmesdale inside the forest, they are able to cast off their false identities and be who they truly are, fully unashamed. Although "the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up" by the burden of the scarlet letter, Hester is freed and able to present an authentic version of herself (143). The forest provided a setting for Hester to regain "the whole richness of her beauty" and strip off the shame and hurt accompanying the scarlet letter (178-179). Although Hester is viewed as a horrible sinner and disgrace in the town, her inner beauty and grace shines through within the forest. However, the opposite can also take place. Dimmesdale is viewed as a good and pious man, but inside the forest his status as a sinner is plainly revealed. Perhaps this possibility contributes to the

Puritans' overwhelming scorn and fear of the forest; they realize that the forest will reveal their true selves, stripping them of any pretense of holiness.

To further emphasize the purity and authenticity found in the forest, Hawthorne contrasts it with the home of the Puritans: the Massachusetts Bay colony. The town is full of "bearded men, in sad colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats" who put on façades of holiness when in actuality they are all sinners at heart (39). The townspeople project the idea of a perfectly pious, almost God-like being onto Reverend Dimmesdale and expect him to live according to their beliefs. Inevitably, Dimmesdale falls victim to this culture of faking piety as seen by his constant efforts to be the holy man the citizens demand him to be. The Puritans viewed him as "a miracle of holiness" and "sanctified the ground on which he trod" when in reality he was just as much of a sinner as they were (125). Even young Pearl acknowledges the

distinction between the man she knows in the forest and man she sees walking alongside members of the highest class in the town. She asks Hester, “Mother, was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook? I would not be sure that it was he, so strange he looked [outside the forest]” (213). Inside the town, Reverend Dimmesdale finds himself having to conform to a standard set by society and present an unrealistic and false picture of his own character.

Hawthorne uses the starkly different locations within the novel to make a statement about the Puritan way of life. He presents the idea that the persona the citizens put on in the town is often not reflective of their truly sinful selves. This duplicity is applicable to contemporary society as well. Social media is the modern day equivalent to the Puritan town in the sense that it is quite easy, and often necessary to create this façade of perfection in order to be accepted by others. Photoshop, filters, and all other avenues for editing aid the average millennial in attempting to depict this perfect life behind a computer screen. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter are teeming with people striving to portray an unrealistic and false image of perfection. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to discern whether or not someone is legitimately being authentic about his or her true character. Hawthorne’s critique about society’s tendency to mask reality and present an incorrect version of one’s identity is an extremely applicable lesson to contemporary society.

Throughout the novel, Hawthorne emphasizes the duplicity of the Puritans and the ability of the forest to extract one’s genuine character. He expresses how society tends to put up a front of perfection and masks the innate quality of sinfulness found in all humans. Dimmesdale and Hester both undergo immense changes in their demeanor and attempt to present a false version of themselves when they shift from the forest, a place of truth, to the town, a place of deception.

Hawthorne ultimately uses the contrasting locations of the forest and the town to provide insightful criticism about Puritan society that can be carried over and applied in modern day life.

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Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2015. Print.

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

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GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

PAGE 1



Pronoun This pronoun may be incorrect.



P/V You have used the passive voice in this sentence. Depending upon what you wish to emphasize in the sentence, you may want to revise it using the active voice.



Comment 1

nice intro

very fluid and well developed

PAGE 2



Comment 2

no comment



Frag. This sentence may be a fragment or may have incorrect punctuation. Proofread the sent to be sure that it has correct punctuation and that it has an independent clause with a complete subject and predicate.



Comment 3

boom material!

PAGE 3



Article Error You may need to remove this article.



Comment 4

good contemporary tie



Prep. You may be using the wrong preposition.

PAGE 4



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PAGE 5
