

The Scarlet Letter Essay

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The Alienation of Hester Prynne

From the beginning of literature, people have been captivated by the strong feelings that consume human life and affect daily decision making—the stark coldness of fear; the burning passion of lust; the numbing sensation of sorrow; the probing fingers of guilt. Everyone alive and dead has experienced these. Yet, there is another powerful emotion that grips only a select few as its victim. This is the feeling of isolation, or loss caused by alienation. In many dictionaries, alienation is described as loneliness so acute that it is condemning; in others, it is the act of being cut off from society. Nathaniel Hawthorne explores this phenomenon of alienation in *The Scarlet Letter* with Hester Prynne, her treatment, and how this reflects on society.

Hester Prynne, the main character of the novel, is a woman marked by both misfortune and strength. She is the one who must publicly deal with the consequences of her and Dimmesdale's actions. The Puritan society responds to her coldly, treating her as less than and making her feel "as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by organs and senses than the rest of human kind" (Hawthorne 63). Despite being renowned for her needlework, Hester begins to feel as if "terror and horrible repugnance" was "the only sole portion that she retained in the universal heart" (63). Hester believes that her only reason for living—indeed, her "sole treasure to keep her heart alive"—was Pearl. However,

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by reminding her of her guilt even more than the scarlet letter did, Pearl was both her daughter and her “punishment” (84). In a society that prizes perfection, she is a picture of shame; in a society that has many possessions and secrets, Hester’s only possession doubles as a source of her dread.

This alienation was caused by the way she looks, the place she lives and the way others treat her following her ignominy. Even before she had sinned, she had been beautiful and different in a way that set her apart from the broad-shouldered “boldness and rotundity” of her fellow countrywomen (38). The scarlet letter simply gave a valid reason for everyone to abandon her. She even dressed differently from them as the novel went on. She covered her “rich and abundant” hair (40) and from then on wore “a garment of coarse gray cloth” (170), never accentuating herself or her beauty. Hawthorne compares this behavior with that of the Puritans, whom, if they were in her position, would not react with as much dignity or humility. She also is sent to live at the edge of the woods, in a time where the forest symbolized sinfulness in the form of death and heathenism. This dwelling is described as “lonesome” and having a “mystic shadow of suspicion” (61). Children that didn’t even understand the meaning behind the letter A would creep up to the window and run away with a “strange contagious fear” (61). In the beginning, the people would taunt her and Pearl, and children would “pursue her at a distance with shrill cries” (64) and throw mud at them, as if in their eyes it was okay to fling mud at people who were, in their eyes, not worth anymore than the dirt beneath their feet.

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The behavior of the townspeople towards Hester after she is branded for her sin works as commentary about the sinfulness of the society as a whole. Despite the Bible saying that one should not help another try to get the stick out of their eye without first taking the log out of their own, these religious Puritans are condemning Hester without paying attention to their own

hypocrisy and sinfulness. At the Election Day sermon seven years after the scarlet letter was first bestowed on Hester, the townspeople even ogle at Hester and her scarlet letter as if they had never seen it before—more than that, as if they had never witnessed someone who had sinned before, because they were so holy themselves. It's showing that their focus was to condemn the sins of others rather than to work on improving themselves. Hawthorne shows this in his descriptions of the governor's mansion and of the towns leaders—in a society that prizes themselves on being close to God, they value material wealth and were “distinguished by a ponderous sobriety, rather than the activity of intellect” (178). By isolating Hester from their society, Hawthorne is proposing the idea that being hypocritical is more terrible of a sin than the act of adulterous love they were punishing.

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In today's society, this hypocrisy is shown daily in modern school systems. Everywhere media is spreading the message to be yourself, develop your own sense of style and be your best you. Yet, in public schools across America, there is an expectation to conform. One must conform to how others dress, where others live and how others behave, the very aspects why Hester was alienated. If a child doesn't wear as trendy clothes as others do or lives in a lower income neighborhood, they often feel isolated and insecure because they don't fit into the expectations of their peers. As a result of this alienation, suicide rates are increasing among teenagers. Teenagers, who thought that society wanted them to be an individual, realize that society is truly saying they should be like everyone else. This isn't far from the hostility felt by Hester, because in both cases people are looked upon as unworthy simply for not following society's unwritten yet imposed expectations.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester was alienated in every way from society. And yet, this served to make her stronger than she could have been otherwise. She was no longer bound to

follow societal norms because no judgment could make her worse off than she was. Thus, she was refined by this alienation and “the world’s law was no law for her mind”. She doesn’t conform with “most perfect quietude” to society as Hawthorne says those who “speculate most boldly” do (123). Despite being forever marked by her sin, and forever attached to “the stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness” (196) even in death, her life was a representation of how alienation from society wasn’t the worst possible outcome. When society is as laden with hypocrisy as hers was, it sometimes is more beneficial to be excluded from it.



Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Wordsworth Classics, 1992.

The Scarlet Letter Essay

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GENERAL COMMENTS

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PAGE 1



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this is a wonderful essay that is very well thought out. the analysis is also spot on.

nice job

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