
Fundamentalism and Puritanism in The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter and the Fundamentalist System of the Time

The Scarlet Letter written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a American Literature classic. The story of Hester Prynne's adulterous affair with Mr. Dimmesdale, and the twisted tale that follows, however entertaining and is the bulk of written work, is not the main theme of the book. The Scarlet Letter is a novel based upon the unjust mindset of hypocritical Puritans, as they governed Boston with a fundamentalist regime, possessed an eagerness to exact sadistic punishment on it's rule breakers. The adultery is just an instrument used to educate subsequent generations of the once masochistic settlers that have seeded the population of America.

In the beginning of the novel, all of the residents from the Colony of Boston are gathered and compacted together in the Town Square. This mob of sad-colored and gray dressed people are congregating to witness the public ridicule and sentencing of a young lady named Hester Prynne, who has been found guilty of adultery. The majority of women present, being thick and unattractive; "...The man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether a suitable representative of the sex. They were her country woman; and the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet and not a whit refined, entered largely into their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well developed busts, and on round ruddy cheeks" (pg. 48), have a jealousy of Hester's beauty. To compensate for their self-dignity, the women begin to envisage various significantly more painful punishments; "At the very least they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead.... "What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?" cried another female, the ugliest of these self constituted judges. "This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die. Is there not a law for it? Truly, there is, both in Scripture and Statebook." (pg. 48). However much the woman scold Hester for breaking a commandment, these women have broken one also, and one more serious then adultery: Thou shalt not use the Lord's name in vain. They are using Scriptures as an excuse to attempt to put a woman to death for their own self satisfaction.

Throughout the Scarlet Letter, laws and opinions are stated as one. When Hester visit's the Governor's mansion to deliver a pair of embroidered gloves to Governor Bellingham, she insists to see him about the rumors circulating that the Magistrates may take Pearl away from her. This potential seizure is based solely upon the official's opinion's that Pearl is not being raised and taught properly, the way a perfect Puritan should be; "We will judge warily, and look to see if she hath had such Christian nurture as befits a child of her age."(pg102). The decision to take Hester's own child away didn't fly over to well with her, because once Pearl answered the questions wrong deliberately, and losing became closer and closer to reality, she went frantic; "Hester caught hold of Pearl, and drew her forcibly into her arms, confronting the old Puritan magistrate with an almost fierce expression. Alone in the world, cast of by it, and with this sole treasure to keep her heart alive, she felt that she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to the earth."(pg103). However reluctant the magistrates were to letting Hester Prynne keep Pearl, Mr. Dimmesdale's mini-sermon influenced the magistrate's judgment, which was the last and final word in the matter either way.

In Boston, God and Law was twisted together amazing compactly, to the point of when formed one whole. God was always present, for their laws were based on their strict interpretation of their religion. For example, a practice which modern lawyers commonly perform to solve a case is called interrogation. In this colonial Puritan Society, a priest carried out a modern lawyers job; " "Speak to the woman, my brother," said Mr. Wilson. "... Exhort her to confess the truth!" The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale bent his head, silent prayer, as it seemed, and then came forward. "Hester Prynne," said he, leaning over the balcony and looking down steadfastly into her eyes, "thou hearest what this good man says, and seest the accountability under which I labour. If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him-yea, compel him, as it were-to add hypocrisy to sin? Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him-who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself-the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips! ""(pg 63). Since Church and State are one, they are able to hand out guilt burdens; such as "God is watching you" , and " your damned hell". These are effective punishments as the reader has seen, because guilt and guilt alone forced the other sinner to confess his partnership in the adultery.

The Scarlet Letter, proves to be a valuable instrument in showing the once fundamentalist system of rule which was constructed in Massachusetts. The Scarlet Letter displays the Puritan's hypocrisy and their eagerness to utilize sadistic punishment on its criminals. The Puritans did all of this, but nevertheless persisted to be called Holy, when in fact they were bigger hypocrites in doing so.