

2013

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Recommended Citation

Arnold, Tessa (2013) "*The Scarlet Letter: A Façade for Subversion of Patriarchy*," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 14, Article 8.

Available at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol14/iss1/8>

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The Scarlet Letter: A Façade for Subversion of Patriarchy

This essay will work in two parts. First, it will examine *The Scarlet Letter* as representing a dystopian society created by political and religious leaders' thirst for power and control above the needs and desires of the people whom they are supposed to protect. Because *The Scarlet Letter's* Puritan authorities enforce a totalitarian system of government, using extreme psychological and physical policing methods to promote ideologies, exert power, and control citizens, their once utopian goals become blurred, instead becoming dystopian.

The second part of this essay will examine the effects of the dystopian Puritan society specifically as it relates to Hester Prynne. As a result of Puritan domination over every aspect of Hester's life, she is physically forced to modify her outward character and conform to Puritan expectations. However, at the same time, Hester's removal from society leaves her with "nothing but the interiority of [her] own mind," allowing her to critique and question Puritan authority, and also to speculate on future possibilities of utopia (Murphy 474). I have specifically chosen to examine the society of *The Scarlet Letter* from a dystopian perspective so as to more closely examine the effects of this society on Hester's thought process. Ultimately this essay will show that Hester becomes the master of the scarlet A, and uses it as a loophole through which she is able to secretly rebel against and subvert patriarchal Puritanism. Also, throughout this essay George Orwell's novel *1984* will be used draw parallels between *The Scarlet Letter* and the dystopian genre specifically because of its familiarity among readers, and because it encompasses many common themes found within the dystopian genre.

PURITANISM: FROM UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA

Puritanism was created by English Protestants, and began in England in protest of Catholicism and the institution of its practices as part of the Church of England. Originally, Puritans left England for the American colonies so as to practice religious freedom separate from the influences of any other religious practices but their own, in hopes of creating their own small utopia. The narrator, however, immediately points out a fundamental problem in the creation of this Puritan utopia, stating in the first chapter: “The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion...as the site of a prison” (Hawthorne 45). For this reason the Puritan utopian experiment is flawed from the beginning, because for it to succeed every person would have to base all their thoughts and actions on what Puritanism deemed morally right, and served the greater good of the colony.

In America and with the English government across the Atlantic, the Puritan authorities had complete, unchecked power over the Puritan colonists. “The church joined the government in supervising [...] standards of behavior that they imposed on every person,” and as the authorities became more and more aware of their ability to control and dominate the colonists, they placed their personal desire for power before the greater good of the colony, thus entering into the realm of dystopia (Berkin 55).

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL POLICING

The male characters Governors Richard Bellingham and John Winthrop and Ministers John Wilson and Arthur Dimmesdale work together, serving as the religious and political authorities of *The Scarlet Letter*'s fictional colony, and are essential to the formation of the dystopian universe within the text. These men as the colonist leaders fail to “understand the

heights and the depths of human nature” (Zuckert 164). For Puritan leaders it was not enough to just pass laws; they had to be able to enforce these laws through policing. The policing approach that is taken by Puritans is first imaginary and symbolic: “Through tactics of mystification, it manipulates persons and groups into believing that it is much more powerful and efficient than it really is” (Brodeur 196). When these first policing tactics fail to prevent unwanted behavior, as they do with Hester, then Puritans resort to physical and often public punishment which serves to correct the offender’s behavior and to warn the public against this behavior.

GOD: THE PURITANS’ BIG BROTHER

In *The Scarlet Letter* the primary tool for policing the colonist is the Bible, specifically God. For Puritans, “religion and law were almost identical” (Hawthorne 47). The town ministers, Arthur Dimmesdale and John Wilson, are responsible for ensuring that every colonist believes that God is all-seeing, all-knowing, and omnipotent. Colonists were taught that God, paradoxically, exists in the past, present, and future, and “no thought can be withheld from [Him]” (Job 42.2). God acts as an invisible, imaginary tool for instilling religious and political fear into the colonist. By indoctrinating Puritan citizens with an innate fear of God, and the belief that God knows all of their thoughts and actions—especially those considered sinful or immoral—Puritan leaders were able to hold power and exert control over Puritan people, even when no one is present to report any wrong doing.

The Puritans’ use of God to police citizens is similar to the tactic used in George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. “Big Brother” is the name of the political figurehead of Oceania who, like God, no person has actually seen or heard. Also similar to God, with the help of cameras and microphones in every public and private space, “the inhabitants of Oceania are under constant observation or threat of observation by Big Brother” (Murphy 475). In the same

way that God's ability to see into the mind is used to limit thought, "Newspeak" uses language to literally limit the thoughts of the people of Oceania. Both of these systems parallel each other in their use of imagined figures of power to control their citizens. The major flaw in this type of policing is that it forces those subjected to it to retreat into their mind, allowing them to more critically think about and question the legitimacy of society's authority.

HESTER: A WARNING TO WOMEN

Hester Prynne's sentence for her crime of adultery, under Puritan law, should have been banishment or death. As one woman in the crowd states, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the scripture and the statute-book" (Hawthorne 49). However, as the wives of the town call for the death of Hester for her sin, the men of the town advocate for mercy, which is granted to her by the magistrates. It is striking that the male Puritan authorities who are known for extremely brutal punishment of sin allow Hester to keep her life. The men realize that Hester's death would instill fear for a period of time, but alive, Hester is a constant reminder to the colonists of the consequences of committing sin.

Hester's punishment consists of several hours on the scaffold, wearing the scarlet "A" on her chest, and removal to the outskirts of the town. As Hester stands on the scaffold wearing the "SCARLET LETTER" for her crime of adultery, her physical body, the child in her arms, and the "A" on her chest all become symbols promoting the power and control of Puritan leaders over the colonists (51). During Hester's time on the scaffold the clergyman further instigates fear within the Puritan community, addressing "a discourse on sin...with continual reference to the ignominious letter" (63). By the end of the clergyman's sermon the scarlet letter had "assumed new terrors in their imagination, and seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the infernal pit" (63).

As Hester leaves the scaffold, she no longer has any value as a member within the Puritan community other than to serve as a visible, physical warning to the Puritans against sin. Hester's branding strips her of all traditional Puritan roles of women within the community, and forces her to exist on the borders of society, literally and figuratively. Dystopian society views Hester, and her daughter Pearl, as having no worth as human beings; they are symbols with the purpose of instilling fear of retribution into every person that encounters them.

“PLATFORM OF PILLORY”

The final tool Puritan leaders use as a constant reminder of their totalitarian authority over the colonist is the scaffold. The scaffold, on which Hester fully embodies the magnitude of her crime while observed by the town, is located in the marketplace of the town. The scaffold was built in this location for the precisely because the marketplace is the center of all activity in the town. While the townspeople went about their daily business, they are reminded of the consequences of sin. The narrator states that the scaffold is “as effectual an agent in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France [...] the very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron” (Hawthorne 52). The comparison of the scaffold to the guillotine of the French revolution speaks to the level of fear that both the religious and political leaders had imbued the scaffold with.

RE-THINKING UTOPIA

What Puritans, French monarchies, and Oceania fail to take into account is that people are emotional; they have internal, personal desires and feelings that exist outside of those idealized and promoted within any particular society. When these dystopian societies go too far in projecting their authority over every aspect of citizens' lives, they often isolate citizens to the extent that they inadvertently create underground dissension against their own political authority.

This is exactly what happens to Winston Smith in *1984*. Because of fear of retribution from others and Big Brother for minor offenses, Winston isolates himself from people. In this isolation Winston is left to “nothing of himself but the interiority of his own mind,” allowing him to critique Big Brother and his society as an outsider looking in. As a result of this critical analysis of his society, Smith is able to “make room for [utopia’s] reconsideration and refunctioning in even the worst of times” (Murphy 473).

ANOTHER VIEW OF HESTER

Hester Prynne embodies the “heights and the depths of human nature” that dystopian societies fail to take into account (Zuckert 164). Hester Prynne, from the moment that she exits the prison door, stands out as being separate from the harsh and unforgiving Puritan society that has come to view her punishment. As has been previously discussed in this essay, Hester walks off the scaffold into a life of isolation and separation from society. She has no outlet for her feelings and thoughts other than Pearl, and since Pearl is a child the possibilities for conversation are limited. Hester is forced to internalize her thoughts, and as a result she has a mental shift in her personal view of the world in which she exists.

The narrator tells the reader, “In [Hester’s] lonesome cottage, by the sea-shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England” (Hawthorne 143). The “thoughts” that the narrator is speaking of focus on “attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment” (144). In the same way that Winston’s isolation allows him to critique Big Brother, Hester’s isolation allows her critique the entire system of Puritanism. These thoughts are so dangerous that if a member of Puritan society became aware of them, they would accuse her of being a witch, as if they had seen “demons” entering Hester’s house.

Hester's primary focus in her examination of Puritan society is the "dark question...with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?" (144) Hester is not only thinking of her own place in society as a woman, or even solely as a Puritan woman. She is considering the "whole race" and what it means to be a woman. Hester questions if life is worth living, even for the "happiest," when even the best-treated and happy women are still essentially property and objects to be possessed.

Hester's analytical thoughts progress beyond those of speculation and questioning and develop into her "hopeless task," a plan to subvert not only Puritanism, but also all of patriarchal society with the goal of creating equality for all women (144). Hester states:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position, Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. (144-45)

Hester realizes that her plan to dismantle the dystopian society of Puritanism and patriarchy that rules her and all women in this era cannot be put into action until women begin to think about themselves differently. Hester believes that for women to demand the equality that they deserve, women as a whole must begin to think critically for and about themselves, and not accept how patriarchy defines them. However, "exercise of thought" alone is not enough; for these thoughts to have any meaning or value in the world, women must put them into action. Ultimately, in the

same way that Winston was able to “reconsider” utopia, Hester also “reconsiders” utopia, and women’s place in that world (Murphy 473).

DISMANTLING SOCIETY BRICK BY BRICK

Not surprisingly, after the deaths of her husband Chillingworth and her lover Dimmesdale, Hester leaves New England with Pearl. However, in the conclusion, many years later, Hester returns to New England without Pearl and again “takes up her long-forsaken shame” (Hawthorne 226). The reason for her return to a society that isolated and demoralized her entire existence has been one of much critical speculation. Popular criticism argues that “all [Hawthorne’s] strategies of ambiguity and irony require Hester’s conversion to the letter” (Bercovitch 2). The narrator believes that she returned to Puritan society because “here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence” (Hawthorne 227). Both of these arguments agree that the letter forced upon Hester so many years before had come to dominate the once beautiful and free-spirited Hester Prynne. However, the remainder of this essay will show through the text that Hester returns not because she has become the subject of the A, but because she has mastered it, and through the A plans to implement her “hopeless task” (146).

While wearing the A, “all the light and graceful foliage of [Hester’s] character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away” (142). However, as Hester’s physical beauty and grace deteriorated her mental power evolved. Hester left New England not to hide from her shame, but to protect Pearl from the tyrannical society of Puritanism, and Hester is able to return to New England and her plan after she has secured Pearl in an “unknown region where [she] had found a home” (227). Hester Prynne does not return to New England simply to take up her old friend, but instead, she returns under the veil of the scarlet letter so as to begin her hopeless task of subverting and dismantling the dystopian society of Puritanism. The scarlet

letter A on Hester's chest becomes a loophole that allows her to hide in plain sight of patriarchal leaders while simultaneously subverting and challenging their authority and encouraging other women to do the same.

Before she left New England, Hester was known as caring and compassionate. She delivered the town's babies, cared for the sick, took care of the poor, and made clothes for others, and because of this the meaning of the A was transformed such that some people thought it meant "able" (141). After her return to New England the "scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma;" she resumed her old works of charity, and to these she added one: mentor and counselor. By assuming to role of counselor to the Puritan women, Hester is able to secretly undermine Puritan rule, specifically male Puritan rule that actively worked to ensure the oppression and debasement of women. Earlier in the text the narrator states, "It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society" (144). Now, many years later Hester is no longer just speculating; she is taking action, and her little cottage becomes her base camp for dissension.

Hester's little cottage by the sea that had once been her place of isolation is transformed into a place of safe haven and protection for the women of New England who came "demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy!" (227) Because Hester's only retreat from the oppression she suffered at the hands of Puritanism had been her own mind, she recognizes the need for a place for women similar to herself. The women sought Hester's counsel "as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble" and similarly the women that came to Hester were "wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion – or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought" (227).

Hester believed that for women to assume a “fair and suitable position” in society, they must first begin to think about themselves differently, and more importantly they must learn to value themselves beyond the little value Puritanism placed upon women. By inviting these women into her home to be “comforted and counseled” Hester creates the opportunity needed for her to teach Puritan women to question patriarchal Puritan laws which are designed to demoralize, devalue, and oppress women. Hester states as her greatest assurance to these broken women that “at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (227).

CONCLUSION

In the end the narrator that has guided the reader through the text fails to see the value of Hester, and fails to understand the magnitude of Hester’s actions. The narrator claims that it is “impossible that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confined to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow” (228). The narrator is unknowingly participating in the Puritanical thought that Hester is attempting to destroy, because even after conveying the excellent character of Hester Prynne, he can still only view her as consisting of her one fault. However, the narrator’s ultimate inability to perceive the extraordinary power of Hester shows how well Hester had disguised her mission. As *The Scarlet Letter* concludes, Hester may not have achieved her ultimate goal of destroying Puritanism and all other perceivably patriarchal societies within her lifetime, but from her little cottage of dissent, Hester has begun to weaken the system of patriarchy.

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