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AP Literature

12 October 2014

Feminism In *The Scarlet Letter*

Feminism is the idea that women are inherently equal to men and deserve equal rights and opportunities. In the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is a perfect example of what a feminist should be. She challenged the Puritans ideas of what a woman should and should not be. Hester Prynne executes these feminist ideas by overcoming her judgement, rising up against the Puritan ideas on women, and ultimately accepting who she is.

As punishment for Hester’s sin of adultery, the town publicly shamed her by making her wear a scarlet letter “A” on her chest. Although the community and herself were constantly reminded of her sin, Hester overcame her judgement. Because Hester has had her whole life strewn out for people to see, she has let everything go; all her reservations, expectations, and inhibitions. Hawthorne describes Hester’s reactions to those who judge her in this text, “She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it, in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies” (Hawthorne 112). This quote shows that Hester let the people gossip and slander her, but she did not care what they had to say. She did not try to fight back because she had come to terms with herself. Hester is soon seen by the people in town as a moral exemplar because of all the charity work she does for those in need. The scarlet “A” becomes a symbol, in other words, that throughout her life she wore her sin bravely, out in the open, on her chest (Johnson 46). Her “A” goes from being a sign of adulterer to a sign of being able.

Hester showed signs of a modern day feminist by openly going against the Puritan’s traditional ways and trying to give women more equal rights. She beats the stereotypes of women in Puritan society. Hawthorne wrote, “She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness. . . . The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude” (Hawthorne 155). This quote shows that Hester was not afraid to go against the normal everyday life of a Puritan woman. Women in that time simply did not raise a child on their own, but Hester did that with Pearl. Hester had to take on the father and the mother role while raising Pearl. Hawthorne gave Hester a typical woman’s job, needlework, but he transforms this often degrading work into a triumphant assertion of women's artistic power, as evidenced by the intricate patterns Hester produces (Johnson 46). Hester never publically rallied for women’s rights, but she showed it through her actions.

When Hester rips off her “A” in the woods, she truly accepts who she is. When Hester finally decides to accept who she in the woods and take off her “A”, she grows a “radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood” (Hawthorne 158). Even heaven recognizes this change and welcomes it with “a sudden smile of heaven” as so “forth burst the sunshine” (Hawthorne 158). This shows how nature as well as heaven has accepted Hester because she is finally herself*.* No scarlet letter; she is open about who she is and is no longer letting her sin define her. Hester Prynne can be seen as Hawthorne's literary contemplation of what happens when women break cultural bounds and gain personal power (Seabrook).

Hester Prynne shows feminist qualities in *The Scarlet Letter* by overcoming her judgement, rising up against the Puritan ideas on women, and ultimately accepting who she is. Hester proved to the women in her town that they do not need a man in order to do things. By setting her own standards and not following societies normal, Hester set an example for women to go out and get the rights they deserve.

Works Cited

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