

The Scarlet Letter - Hester's Alienation

Throughout his book *The Scarlet Letter* Nathaniel Hawthorne is preoccupied with the relationship between the individual and society. Hester's sin and subsequent condemnation alienate her. No where is this alienation more apparent than in Chapter 5,

"Hester at her Needle". Condemned by her sin of passion, Hester is separated from her

community, not only physically, as she lives on the edge of the town, and socially, as she

this chapter Hawthorne presents the most profoundly destructive aspect of her

estrangement in her psychological condition. Hester, deemed a social pariah, is left

alone in the world, with only her thoughts to keep her company. In her present condition

it becomes apparent that her outlook on life has changed for the worst.

Hester's life becomes a pitiful mess as she feels she must reject any happiness she might gain from her meager subsistence. She does not accept any joy into her life and

she constantly punishes herself for committing her sin. Having been alienated from and

by her community Hester forces herself to live plainly and simply. She "stroved to cast

["passionate and desperate joy"] from her." She loves to sew, as women such as herself

"derive a pleasure...from the delicate toil of the needle," but she feels she does not

deserve the gratification. Though sewing could be "soothing, the passion of her

life ...Like all other joys, she rejected it as a sin." Hester no longer feels worthy to wear

the finery she is capable of sewing for herself. All of the "gorgeously beautiful" things

she has "a taste for" are sold to others, they "found nothing... in...her life to exercise

[themselves] upon." Instead of applying her time towards "the better efforts of her art",

which she would enjoy, she employs in "making coarse garments for the poor" in order

to repent for her sin. Hester's "own dress was of the coarsest materials and most sombre

hue." Through her sewing, the wretched outcast makes enough money to live in a good

deal of luxury but she feels she does not deserve it. She sought not to acquire anything

beyond subsistence, of the plainest and most ascetic description." All her "superfluous

means" were "bestowed... in charity," given to wretches unappreciative of her talents,

who "not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them."

Hester's isolation from others causes her to concoct her own demons that are a constant haunting reminder of her sin and her punishment. She feels she is bound by

iron chains that surround her heart and soul. "Through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy," while she was in prison, the "iron arm" of the law "held her up." Unable to

free herself of the guilt, in her heart Hester perceives herself to be trapped by a

"chain...of iron links", which "galling to her inmost soul...could never be broken."

Hester begins to believe "that all nature knew of [her sin]" and her surroundings take

on manifestations of evil. The sunshine, usually accepted as a pleasing omen

"...seemed...as if meant for no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her

breast." In her tiny house on the edge of the dark forest, "not in close vicinity to any other

habitation" Hester imagines that "the trees whispered the dark story [of her sin] among

themselves" and she wonders if "the wintry blast shrieked [her sin] aloud."

Because of her initial estrangement and disparagement by others Hester develops

an overwhelming paranoia which leads to her hopelessness, loss of faith and further

separation from her community. Though Hester remains physically in the town, she is as

good as invisible to the Puritans and she feels she haunts the town like a ghost. She has

lost faith in her own tangibility. She stands apart "...like a ghost that...can no longer

make itself seen or felt." Though Hester is not dead, not a spirit, she believes "it is an

inevitable fatality...[of] human beings to linger around and haunt ghostlike, the spot

where some great marked event has given color to their lifetime." She remains like a

phantom, though she is still flesh and blood. Hester's banishment and constant solitude

cause her to lose confidence in herself. She wants to leave but she cannot. She lacks too

much trust in her own good judgment to leave her lover, the only friend she may still

have. Though she is free to leave the town, "hide her character and identify under a new

exterior" she has to stay by her lover to whom "she deemed herself connected in a union." She hopes that, though they are unrecognized on earth, once dead they will be

joined at the "marriage altar" of "final judgment" and will have a "joint futurity of

endless retribution." Hester doesn't have enough confidence to strike out on her own, she

feels she needs to stay to repent for her sin, "the scene of her guilt" being the unrelenting "scene of her earthly punishment" and cannot get on with her life. The

young mother's "sin, her ignominy, were roots which she had struck into the soil."

Besides struggling with her own self doubt, Hester deals with a loss of

confidence in other people as well, and becomes distrustful of human nature. She develops a strange apprehension of her surroundings, a desperation in her soul, saddened

by the bleak attitude others express towards her, she is constantly suspicious of everyone's opinions of her. When Hester ventures into town to sell her wares, she feels

"the silence of those with whom she came in contact...often expressed that she was

banished." She imagines she is a repulsive outcast, taunted by the laughter of children

and torn by the frigid stares of passersby. Hester believes that as she walks the streets

the "preacher[s] and moralist[s]" point at her to "embody their images of women's...

sinful passion." Hester's hopelessness at her situation leads her to lose faith in other

human beings. She commences to believe that all other humans are guilty of some sin,

that they share a common thread. She feels "the cold stare of familiarity" when some

look at her and sometimes the lonely woman "felt an eye ...upon the...brand...that

seemed to give a momentary relief as if half her agony was shared." Hester has certainly

misplaced what faith she had in others as their "outward guise of purity was but a lie, and

that, if the truth were...to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom

besides [her own]." Sadly Hester's loss of assurance in the goodness of mankind isolates

her further from her community because she is no longer part of their kinship.

Hester, for committing the terrible crime of adultery, receives the ignominious

brand of outcast. Forced to wear a permanent reminder of her sin, she becomes detached

from the only home she knows and loses her conviction in all that is moral and unsullied.

Wherever she goes, she is estranged, her mind tormented, driven to the very brink of

insanity. Hester not only dismisses all thoughts of mirth and happiness that threaten to

trespass through the doors of her home, but she conjures up images to torment her soul.

She is bound by no earthly bonds, but by the manacles in her mind. The poor girl is left

without a friend in the world and her trust in humans falters and becomes tainted. Her

self confidence is a shattered mess as well. Because of her psychological alienation

Hester's outlook on life has become a murky pit with no hope of escape and no optimism

for the future.