

The Market Place

Commentary

While the description of the Puritans, the prison, and the wild rosebush in the previous scene set the general tone of the novel, the opening paragraph in this chapter places the events of the novel in a specific time

and place: This is Puritan Boston, two centuries before Hawthorne wrote the novel. This chapter offers further insight into the character and beliefs of the Puritans by emphasizing the severity of the people; here their faces are “petrified” with “grim rigidity,” and they are “ironvisaged” and “unkindly-visaged.” Hawthorne skillfully

piles on images that portray the severe, inflexible attitude of the early Puritans, who are dour in even the most casual situations. Part of their inflexibility grows from the fact that law and religion are inseparable for these people. Indeed, so deep is their reliance on religion and law that even the mildest transgression meets with discipline that is “venerable and awful.” The Puritans’ rigid sense of law also leaves them unable to feel compassion for anyone who has the misfortune to transgress their rigid legal code, partly because they believe that any transgression of law is also a transgression against God. As in the previous chapter, the narrator’s tone once again implicitly criticizes the “early severity” of our Puritan forefathers by emphasizing their intolerance.

After painting this grim picture of the people gathered outside the prison door, the narrator narrows his focus, examining the women in the group. He notes that the audience is made up primarily of women, who seem to take a particular interest in the criminal who is about to step out of the prison door. Their conversation reveals that the prisoner’s name is Hester Prynne and that she

must wear a marking on her breast. The reader also gains insight on the characters of these Puritan women.

According to the narrator, these women are both morally and physically coarser, or tougher, than the women of today. For them, for example, it was natural to watch a hanging or any other type of “penal infliction.” Indeed, their lack of sympathy for Hester makes them appear inhumanly tough. In the narrator’s opinion, each new generation of New England women has been more delicate, having less character and force, than these sturdy, first-generation immigrants. He connects them with the “man-like” Queen Elizabeth I, “the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex,” who ruled England from 1558 to 1603. Their firm, sturdy physical appearance—broad shoulders and “well-developed busts”—is matched by a “boldness and rotundity” in their speech, which is both loud and tactless. These sturdy women as Hester Prynne’s womanly fancy failed not to recall, was slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle higher than the right. Next rose before her in memory’s picture-gallery, the intricate and narrow thoroughfares, the tall, grey houses, the huge cathedrals, and the public edifices, ancient in date and quaint in architecture, of a continental city; where new life had awaited her, still in connexion with the misshapen scholar: a new life, but feeding itself on time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall. Lastly, in lieu of these shifting scenes, came back the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement, with all the townspeople assembled, and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne—yes, at herself—who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom. Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and

even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes!—these were her realities—all else had vanished!

argue that Hester's punishment was too lenient. Rather than the scarlet letter on her breast, they would like to see a brand on her forehead. Only one woman, a young wife, feels any sympathy for Hester; she recognizes that Hester's self-punishment will always be greater than anything the legal authorities can dole out. The conversation of these women offers more specific insight on the thoughts and beliefs of the early New Englanders, along with the narrator's views of gender differences and differences between the peasant inhabitants of England and the colonists in the New World. Obviously, these women feel morally superior to Hester and, therefore, feel they can condemn her actions.

Perhaps they are even harsher critics than the male magistrates because Hester's sin could be used to suggest women's generally sinful and passionate nature (an association made in Chapter V), which makes all women look suspect.

Finally, the prison door opens and Hester, the novel's protagonist, is about to enter the novel. Before she appears, though, this chapter offers another look at a representative of Puritan legal authority: the town beadle.

Charged with administering all legal punishments, this man is like a "black shadow"—"grim and grisly." Once again, the darkness of Puritan punishment is emphasized and critiqued. Can a society that creates a cruel criminal system be just or fair? According to the narrator, the dismal beadle represents the severity of Puritan law. By presenting this man in such a negative light, the narrator creates additional sympathy for Hester, the prisoner of this legal system.

Just behind this man walks Hester with her threemonth- old baby in her arms. From the first glimpse of her, the reader immediately sees the strength and beauty of Hester’s appearance and character. Even while walking across the scaffold at this moment of public disgrace,

Hester smiles haughtily and looks unabashed. Unlike the women in the audience, depicted as large and matronly, Hester is a figure of “perfect elegance.” Her dark and abundant hair gleams in the sunshine, her face is beautiful and impressive, and her stature is lady-like and dignified.

Her beauty is not delicate; it is regal and solid. The narrator emphasizes that prison and disgrace seem to have enhanced Hester’s beauty, rather than dimming or diminishing it, again emphasizing the strength of her character.

The terms associated with Hester—beauty, grace, and dignity—provide a strong, positive contrast to the terms used to describe the other inhabitants of Boston. But there is also an edge to her attractiveness: Just as the beauty of the rosebush sprung partially from its wild nature, Hester’s spirit shows “desperate recklessness” and “wild and picturesque peculiarity.” Both her beauty and her personality brand her as a rebel and an individual in a community that tolerates only absolute conformity. Hester’s free spirit is exemplified in the symbol of the scarlet letter, which Hester must wear indefinitely as part of her punishment for adultery. Not the austere and simple “A” that might be expected of a Puritan woman, Hester’s red “A” is embroidered with “fantastic flourishes of gold thread” and with “fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy” that demonstrate her imagination. These attributes also indicate an embrace of excess—an impulsivity

CliffsComplete *The Scarlet Letter* Chapter II **53**

and passion that combat the severe austerity of the Puritan imagination. Remember from the previous chapter

that the people surrounding the prison door were dressed in “sad-colored,” gray clothing: Obviously, Hester’s flamboyant red and gold contrasts with communal norms.

Later in this chapter, the narrator tells us that all of Hester’s clothing is made in her unique style.

The scarlet letter places a sort of spell upon the crowd, removing Hester from the community and placing her in a sphere by herself. Again, the narrator emphasizes Hester’s difference—her inability to conform with the rules of the Puritan community. The word *spell* implicitly links her with men and women who were accused of witchcraft, primarily because of their nonconformity.

Of course, the female spectators in the crowd don’t look favorably upon Hester’s flamboyant “A.” In their opinion, her fantastic design is a symbol of pride that makes a mockery of her punishment. Their comments, together with the description of the letter, suggest the different meanings associated with the letter by the community and by Hester: For them it is a sign of humiliation and loss of identity, while for her it symbolizes artistry, pride, and individuality.

wood and iron devices were the symbols of crime and punishment to a society in which all legal transgressions were publicly punished and the body of the criminal was the focus of punishment. For example, the pillory kept the criminal’s head firmly confined, so that he or she was unable to hide it in shame. While Hester’s punishment does not involve this particular implement of torture, she is required to stand on the platform of the scaffold as a public symbol of shame and dishonor. But the image of Hester on the platform does not invoke exactly the negative feelings the Puritan fathers might have hoped for. In her beauty and dignity, she could, the narrator suggests, be compared to the Virgin Mary.

All the weightiness that was earlier attributed to the

wooden doors of the prison has now become invested in the looks of the spectators who stare at Hester with “heavy,” “unrelenting,” “leaden” eyes. Although the gazes of the spectators discompose Hester, she is, at moments, able to distance herself from this uncomfortable scene. In particular, she remembers her early life in England, offering additional insights into her character. For example, her family, once part of the upper classes, fell on hard times. Hester’s recollections also reveal that she married an older man, a scholar whose eyes have a “strange, penetrating power” that allows him to read into the human soul. (This detail foreshadows the arrival of her husband, an odd, deformed man, and signals the role he will play in the drama of Hester’s life.) After their marriage, the couple lived in Amsterdam, which offered Hester a new life, but one that fed “on time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall.” In creating this contrast between new and old, between green moss and crumbling wall, the narrator hints at the problem in Hester’s marriage: Her older husband lived on dusty scholarship, while the youthful Hester longed for fresh, new ideas. The details gleaned through Hester’s reminiscing infer that Hester was forced into an unhappy marriage due to her family’s poverty.

After this first glimpse of Hester, the scene’s focus shifts back to the legal authorities and to the machinery of penal authority: the scaffold and the pillory. These wood and iron devices were the symbols of crime and punishment to a society in which all legal transgressions were publicly punished and the body of the criminal was the focus of punishment. For example, the pillory kept the criminal’s head firmly confined, so that he or she was unable to hide it in shame. While Hester’s punishment does not involve this particular implement of torture, she is required to stand on the platform of the scaffold as a

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