

## **Lecture Seven:**

### **HESTER AT HER NEEDLE**

Chapter V offers additional insight on Hester's psychology and develops the various symbolic meanings associated with the scarlet letter. The sun is shining on the day of Hester's release from prison, but she cannot enjoy its warmth. Instead, she feels the sun's only goal is to form a spotlight on the scarlet letter. Until this moment, the law has held her up within the strength of its "iron arm," but now she must resume her daily life with only her own resources to support her. Hester realizes that she can no longer look to the future for solace, because she feels that she has no future: All comfort must come from the present moment, from living day by day. These thoughts prove that Hester is an insightful woman, one who has considered carefully the implications of her transgressions.

This chapter documents the various humiliations that Hester faces as she reenters the Puritan community that refuses to forget her sin: Children shun her, ministers use her as the subject of their sermons, and everyone feels they have the right to criticize her. Indeed, she begins to feel that all of nature knows her shame and shrieks it into the wind.

The symbol of the scarlet letter is developed in this chapter, and a variety of meanings become associated with it. For example, a legend grows in the town that the letter isn't simply a scarlet cloth but is red-hot with the fires of hell and glows in the dark. The narrator tells us

there is a certain element of truth in this rumor: The letter has seared more deeply into Hester's heart than a simple piece of red cloth could. As the bearer of the scarlet letter, Hester will lose her individuality and become a pure symbol: an emblem of woman's frailty and sinful passion. No longer will sin be merely an idea; it will now have a body and a reality. By gazing upon Hester, the Puritans will be reminded not to transgress the laws of their God. But the letter serves a different purpose for Hester, offering her a new, almost paranormal ability to know and understand the hidden sins in other people's hearts. Therefore, the letter leads her to greater understanding of human psychology and a clear recognition of the vast gulf between public virtue and private transgression. From the insights offered by the letter, Hester discovers that the outward show of purity by her fellow Puritans is often only a disguise. She learns that almost every person in Boston has committed a transgression as dire as hers, so almost every breast in Boston should blaze forth with a similar scarlet letter. These comments point to the narrator's own fairly negative view of human frailty and Puritan hypocrisy; it appears these people need to punish Hester as a method of keeping their own sins hidden. She is a scapegoat created by the town to appease God's need to punish sinners, and the obviousness of her sin—pregnancy—makes her a clearly defined target. The narrator also suggests that the scarlet letter is the devil's talisman, revealing other people's sins in order to chip away at Hester's belief in human purity and goodness.

Despite the growing evidence of the sinful nature of all humans, Hester struggles to believe that she is the only guilty member of the community.

Besides offering Hester psychological insights on fellow members of the community, the letter also indicates her skill as a needle-worker—her delicate and imaginative artistic abilities. In a blatant display of hypocrisy, the members of the community allow Hester to embroider their garments while rejecting her presence. Hester's magnificent embroidery would be valued even by aristocratic

women back in England, but the plain clothing worn by the Puritans makes it inappropriate for everyday wear in the New World. Hester's work instead graces the ceremonial garments used for public occasions in which her creations are appropriate. In another example of The vulgar, who, in those dreary old times, were always contributing a

grotesque horror to what interested their imaginations, had a story about

the scarlet letter which we might readily work up into a terrific legend.

They averred that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged in an

earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen

glowing all alight whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the nighttime.

And we must needs say it seared Hester's bosom so deeply, that perhaps

there was more truth in the rumour than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit.

### COMMENTARY

76 Chapter V CliffsComplete *The Scarlet Letter*

narrow-mindedness, the townsfolk allow Hester to embroider

garments for all ceremonies except weddings—

as if her sin would infect the new bride but not any other member of the community. Hester uses her spare time to fashion rough clothing for the poor; in return, they give her criticism and condemnation. These incidents prove Hester's strength of character, which allows her to continue

working despite constant criticism.

By examining Hester's work, which reflects her character, the narrator is able to give the reader a deeper understanding of her psychological makeup. "[R]ude handiwork" does not come naturally to Hester, whose nature is rich, voluptuous, and exotic, preferring the "gorgeously

beautiful" to the simple and plain. The narrator

suggests that Hester's exquisite needlework could be the one way she expresses her passion for life; all of the energy she might have invested in love, she now expends in creativity. Indeed, all of Hester's creativity seems

invested in her work and in her daughter's attire. Although Hester's inward passion and energy signal her difference from the other members of the Puritan community, she outwardly follows all their moral injunctions. For example, she feels her needlework is sinful because it gives

her pleasure. Her clothing connotes her Puritanical beliefs. Coarse, plain, and somber except for the blazing red letter, it contrasts sharply with Pearl's clothing, which is described as "fanciful," a "fantastic ingenuity," and an "airy charm." Thus, the narrator presents Hester's conflicted

nature: An imaginative, passionate woman, she is forced to live a repressed and lonely life. Why, the narrator wonders, does Hester not leave the village of Boston? Why remain and be subjected to the town's enmity? She could return to England or escape into the depths of the forest; no one is making her remain at the site of her infamy. The narrator suggests that the wildness of her nature might fit more closely with that of the Native

Americans who live beyond the boundaries of Puritan law. Peering into human psychology, the narrator offers several possible reasons for Hester's inertia. First, she may feel mentally chained to Boston—rooted to the spot of her disgrace—precisely because of the sin she has committed. Another possible reason for her inability to leave is that she loves Dimmesdale; even though they can't be together, she does get to see and hear him every day. Finally, living through the daily shame may allow her to purify her soul, to become more saint-like because of the martyrdom she experiences. By analyzing Hester's thoughts on this issue, the narrator emphasizes her complexity: Like most people, her sense of morality and correct action is tinged with both lofty ideals and trivial hopes. This is a book concerned less with plot than with delving into the secret workings of the human heart.

Hester is positioned between the village and the forest like Chillingworth, who lives on the border between the Europeans and the Native Americans. Her cottage is situated in an isolated borderland on the outskirts of town, separate from any other dwelling. The description of her home emphasizes her isolation and her association with the threat of contamination. Children, too young to understand

the nature of her sin, scamper away when they get too close to her cottage, as if afraid that her presence might defile them. Even the scrubby trees that surround the cottage denote that it houses an object that ought to be concealed. An “inquisitorial” watch is kept over her by the colony’s magistrates, and a “mystic shadow of suspicion”

attaches to the cottage, as if Hester’s presence has spread a contagion throughout the landscape near where she lives.

Thus, immediately after Hester’s release from prison, Hester and her scarlet letter connote fear, contagion, and suspicion. This connotation infects Hester herself, so that she feels separate from society, as if she inhabits a different

sphere. The emotional impact of her isolation is contained in the image of a series of lonely footsteps moving in solitary anguish toward a future that offers no hope of change or growth.