



**THE RE-READING OF PURITAN DICHOTOMY IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S
*THE SCARLET LETTER***

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Introduction:

In literature, ideologies—or 'isms'—are powerful forces that shape both characters and narratives. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* provides an insightful portrayal of Puritanism, one such rigid belief system. Through the lives of Hester Prynne, Reverend Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, Hawthorne critiques Puritan values such as sin, punishment, and predestination, which dictate every aspect of the characters' actions. By analysing how these values manifest in the novel, we understand not only the impact of Puritanism but also how ideologies, in general, serve to control and restrict personal freedom, shaping the choices and destinies of individuals. This paper examines how Puritanism, as an 'ism', functions in the narrative and how the critique of such belief systems resonates beyond the confines of Hawthorne's work.

Puritanism: An Ideological Framework:

Puritanism emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries as a reform movement within the Church of England. The Puritans sought to eliminate practices they deemed unbiblical, focusing instead on strict adherence to the Bible. At the core of Puritan beliefs were ideas such as predestination, total depravity, and unconditional election—all of which underscored their deterministic view of human nature and salvation.

Puritans believed that all humans were inherently sinful, having fallen from grace since Adam and Eve's original sin. As such, they viewed earthly life as a constant battle between sin and redemption. In this worldview, salvation was not earned through good works but was preordained by God and only those chosen by God—the "elect"—could be saved. Those who were not chosen were doomed to eternal damnation. The Puritans believed that any deviation from these rigid standards—especially in the form of public sin—required punishment, and that punishment was often meted out in public as a form of both personal atonement and communal warning. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Puritanism is not just a background setting; it is the driving force behind the actions of the characters. Through the lens of this ideology, we see how the Puritans view sin, guilt, punishment, and redemption, and how these beliefs shape the lives of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth.

Puritanism in *The Scarlet Letter*: Ideologies in Action:

Puritanism is a central theme in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, shaping the characters, plot, and moral dilemmas of the novel. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* provides a compelling portrayal of how Puritanism functions as a controlling 'ism', shaping the lives of its characters. This section explores how Puritan beliefs are reflected in the characters' actions and the societal



pressures they face, emphasises on strict moral codes, predestination, and the inherent sinfulness of humanity.

Puritan belief is justifying in public accountability and jurisprudence and the importance of a close-knit, morally upright community. Hawthorne's personal experience and connection to Puritanism is also reflected directly in the text. Hawthorne's ancestors were Puritans, and he often critiqued their harshness and hypocrisy in his works. The *Scarlet Letter* is set in 17th-century Boston, a Puritan settlement, and reflects the rigid social and religious norms of the contemporary time.

Public Punishment: The Mark of Sin and Guilt:

One of the most defining features of Puritanism is its insistence that sin be publicly acknowledged and punished. Hester Prynne's punishment for committing adultery is a vivid example of this belief. Forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" as a symbol of her shame, Hester is subjected to public ridicule and ostracism. The Puritans believed that public punishment was necessary for both the sinner's atonement and as a warning to the community about the consequences of moral transgressions. Ironically, however, the scarlet letter transforms over time. Initially, it is a symbol of Hester's shame, but as she grows stronger and becomes a symbol of resilience, it takes on new meaning—even becoming associated with strength and dignity. Hawthorne critiques this Puritan practice by showing that the harsh imposition of shame does not lead to healing or redemption; instead, it limits personal growth and keeps individuals trapped in a cycle of guilt and punishment.

So far, Hester Prynne's Sin is the central to the theme and action of the text. Hester's adultery is a clear violation of Puritan moral law which leading to her public shaming and ostracism. The scarlet letter "A" symbolizes her sin but also becomes a tool for her personal growth and resilience. In the context of religious hypocrisy, Arthur Dimmesdale's Guilt is more convincing than Hester. Dimmesdale, the town's minister, hides his sin, leading to intense psychological and physical suffering. His private guilt contrasts with Hester's public punishment, highlighting the hypocrisy of Puritan society. Through the tragic web of love, family and betrayal, Roger Chillingworth's revenge remains more human. Chillingworth's obsession with revenge represents the darker side of Puritan morality, where justice becomes vengeance.

Predestination: The Concept of Fate:

Another central tenet of Puritanism is the idea of predestination, the belief that one's eternal fate is already determined by God. This belief has profound effects on the characters, particularly Reverend Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. Dimmesdale's guilt over his hidden sin eats away at him because he believes that he is unable to escape his fate. His sense of being trapped in his own predestination prevents him from acting freely, and the constant torment he experiences as a result of his unconfessed sin ultimately leads to his physical and spiritual decline. Chillingworth, too, is consumed by his belief that his role is to take revenge on Dimmesdale, as if fulfilling some divine purpose. His obsession with vengeance demonstrates how Puritan beliefs can manipulate an individual's sense of purpose, driving them into unhealthy and destructive behaviours.

The text represents the collective unconscious and Puritan consciousness in contemporary society and their judgment in the violation of their social norms. Public shaming is a part of their jurisprudence and the scaffold scenes symbolize the Puritan practice of public punishment and humiliation. Hester's punishment reflects the community's need to enforce moral conformity.



Though Puritans preach forgiveness and humility but they are quick to judge and condemn in the matter of Hester. Dimmesdale's hidden sin exposes the gap between public piety and private failings. Hester is isolated from the community, yet she remains connected through her needlework, symbolizing her complex relationship with Puritan society.

Gender and Puritan Ideology: The Role of Women:

The role of women in Puritan society is another aspect of Puritanism explored in the novel. Women, especially those like Hester who transgressed moral codes, were punished much more harshly than their male counterparts. Dimmesdale's sin is viewed with more leniencies because he is a man, while Hester's sin is treated as a greater transgression due to her gender. This double standard highlights the gendered nature of Puritan ideology, where women were expected to embody moral purity and were held to stricter standards. Hawthorne critiques this gender bias through Hester's public humiliation, portraying how the Puritans' obsession with female virtue leads to her social ostracization. Despite this, Hester demonstrates resilience, and by the end of the novel, she reclaims her symbol of shame as a mark of strength. Through Hester, Hawthorne challenges the Puritan view of women and critiques the social structures that enforce these gendered expectations.

Hester as a Feminist Figure Hester challenges Puritan gender norms by asserting her independence and raising Pearl alone. Her strength and resilience contrast with the submissive role expected of women in Puritan society. Pearl as a Symbol represents both the sin and the vitality that Puritan society seeks to suppress. Her wild, untamed nature contrasts with the strict discipline of Puritan children.

The Supernatural: God's Will or Folly?:

Puritan beliefs were deeply intertwined with the supernatural, with the belief that any unexplained events could be attributed to the will of God or the devil. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the supernatural manifests through the character of Mistress Hibbins, who is accused of witchcraft and executed by the Puritans. The Puritans' fear of the supernatural further intensifies their sense of moral superiority and judgment. The supernatural also plays a role in the symbolism of the novel, such as when the letter "A" appears in the sky after Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the forest. This supernatural sign is interpreted by the Puritans as a divine message, reinforcing their belief that every action, sin, and outcome is governed by God's will. Hawthorne uses these supernatural elements to emphasize how the Puritans' rigid beliefs extended even to the natural world, reinforcing their controlling ideology.

Nature:

The Forest is a central symbol to Puritan philosophy of life which differ two worlds of human and nature. The forest represents freedom, passion, and natural law, contrasting with the rigid rules of Puritan society. Hester and Dimmesdale's meeting in the forest symbolizes their temporary escape from Puritan constraints. The Town also acts as a symbol of order, law, and repression, reflecting the oppressive nature of Puritanism.

Redemption:

Hester's redemption is a journey of human salvation in its religious perspective. Over time, Hester transforms the meaning of the scarlet letter from "Adulterer" to "Able" or "Angel." Her charitable works and quiet strength earn her a grudging respect from the community. Dimmesdale's



redemption is much more tragic and suffering is central to his fate. Dimmesdale's public confession on the scaffold allows him to achieve a form of redemption, though it costs him his life. Chillingworth's lack of redemption makes him more human and sidelines him from the Puritan ideology. Chillingworth's obsession with revenge prevents him from finding peace or redemption. This sentence makes more sense that Hester living with her punishment of sin, "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread."

Hawthorne's Critique of Puritanism:

The novel marks and mocks the hypocrisy and rigidity in contemporary Puritan society. Hawthorne critiques the hypocrisy of Puritan leaders like Dimmesdale and the harshness of their moral code. The text also represents the conflict between individual vs. society, where society prevails and controls the system by laws of sacrifice, sin, shame, punishment, guilt and redemption. The novel explores the tension between individual freedom and societal expectations, highlighting the oppressive nature of Puritanism. Hawthorne suggests that the legacy of Puritanism continues to influence American society, particularly in its judgmental and moralistic tendencies.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* offers a critical examination of Puritanism as an ideological framework that governs both personal actions and social structures. Through the experiences of Hester Prynne, Reverend Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, we see how Puritan beliefs such as predestination, sin, public punishment, and gender roles influence and control the lives of individuals. Hawthorne critiques the oppressive nature of these beliefs, highlighting the damaging effects of such rigid ideologies. The novel serves as a reminder of the dangers inherent in any 'ism'—be it religious, social, or political—that imposes absolute conformity and control. Through the lens of *The Scarlet Letter*, we gain insight into how ideologies shape human behaviour and challenge the boundaries of individual freedom.

Puritanism in *The Scarlet Letter* serves as both a historical backdrop and a lens for exploring universal themes of sin, guilt, and redemption. Hawthorne's portrayal of Puritan society is critical yet nuanced, highlighting its flaws while acknowledging its influence on American culture. The novel remains a powerful exploration of the human condition and the consequences of rigid moral systems.

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