A Feminist Reading Of The Life Of Hester Prynne

In the sixteenth century, the Puritans followed John Withrop to Mass Bay Colony for religious freedom away from the Church of England. This religious freedom quickly turned into religious tyranny as Puritan punishments were made to humiliate “sinners”. The main protagonist in The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne, is the ultimate example of sin in her Puritan society. Hester Prynne is an elegant, creative, and beautiful young woman who traveled to America to wait for her husband, Roger Chillingsworth, to join her. Chillingsworth never arrived in the Puritan colony so she assumed that he was dead, and she had an affair with Arthur Dimmesdale a young minister and conceives a child, Pearl. Society’s religious leaders spare Hester the death sentence for adultery, but she is imprisoned for three months, shamed in public, and forced to wear the scandalous letter “A” for “adultery” on her chest (the scarlet letter) for the rest of her life. In the novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne points to the gender inequalities Hester faces in Puritan society while she is persecuted by the male authority and laws established by the male-dominated population society. Hester Prynne embodies a proto-feminist as she refuses to accept the subordinate role of women politically, socially, and economically.

Feminism is the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, and Hester Prynne takes the first step of being a feminist through her belief of gender equality. Hester comes to a gender inequality realization after seven years with the scarlet letter. This realization was sparked by society’s new view of Hester because of her aid to the needy and unselfish nursing of the sick. Furthermore, in the beginning of The Scarlet Letter Hester has to wear the scarlet letter as a sign of shame and sin, but by the end of the novel the scarlet letter symbolizes respect and capability. The more Hester is accepted, the more she loses herself in Puritan society as “all the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand” (Hawthorne 245). As she becomes more Puritan, she sees: “The very nature of the opposite sex…is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position”(Hawtorne 249). Hester sees that the laws that govern society have no purpose other than to create social control. She pushes for gender equality believing the only way women can reach a fair position is to destroy this system of society and the nature of the sexes. In particular, Hester realizes that women are treated unfairly and often live unhappy lives as a result of “a tendency of speculation . . . [on] such a hopeless task” (Hawthorne 249). She recognizes that striving for gender equality in this time period is hopeless and almost accepts women’s subordinate role to men. Hester believes that women, in the future, will be more independent and equal than women during her time. In Hester’s final years, she returns to the Puritan colony after years abroad and consoles women in her community “assur[ing] them . . . a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness'(Hawthorne 393). In other words, Hester believes that, when the world is ready, women will be as independent as men and that marriage between men and women will be based on their mutual happiness rather than position of power. She had once hoped that she would have a marriage based on mutual happiness with Chillingswoth or Dimmesdale, but she knows that her world would never have listened to a woman, especially a sinful woman. In the case of her marriage to Chillingsworth, it was arranged. Since Dimmesdale is in a religious position in society Hester could only dream of marrying him.

Hester Prynne politically changes society's views of women by taking stands against traditional Puritan values. Most importantly, Hester goes directly against Puritan values by having an affair. Hester's passionate nature inclines her to view her and Dimmesdale's act as love and not a crime like society views it. She even plans to runaway instead of working for forgiveness in the colony when she tells Dimmesdale " 'Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another' " (Hawthorne 298). The very beginning of the book sets up Hester's political rebellion as the first chapter started with a description of a rose bush that was believed to have "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson as [Hester] entered the prison" (Hawthorne 73). Hawthorne establishes a connection between Hester Prynne and the real-life woman, Ann Hutchinson, who was also punished for political rebellion against Puritan society.Hutchinson ruffled the male religious authorities because she claimed to speak to God, which challenged the social norm that only men could be priests. Additionally, Hawthorne mentions that Hester "might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect," which links Hester's courage with Hutchingson's. (Hawthorne 248).Dissimilarly, Hester's rebellion is private because her actions avoid the publicas she inwardly follows her heart while Hutchinson's rebellion is a public because manifested by preaching during her sermons and defending herself at her Puritan trial. When Hester decides to not reveal Pearl's father she stands up for the right to not speak saying "it is too deeply branded . . . ye cannot take it off" when offered a chance to take off the scarlet letter in exchange for revealing Pearl's father (Hawthorne 103). In this way, Hester politically creates a voice for herself since the male authorities can control her punishment, but they can not force her to reveal the truth. She claims the power to keep a secret which emphasizes private acts of rebellion are not publicized, but they still can politically transform Puritan society.

Socially, Hester Prynne rises above society's stigma of adultery and lives her life with strength. This is shown through the Puritan community view on Hester Prynne's scarlet letter throughout the novel. Essentially, Hester first wears the scarlet letter as a symbol of public shame and sin. There is a massive difference between thee scarlet letter at the beginning and end of the novel: "the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be . . . looked upon with awe" (Hawthrone 392). The change in how the scarlet letter was perceived is linked to Hester's good works in the community that socially renews society to the point many people interpreted the scarlet "A" as "Able". It is true Hester shows social strength when she asks Dimmesdale to runaway and start a new life with her and Pearl, but the ultimate defiance is Hester's return to the Puritan colony in her late days which expresses her personal liberation. Before Hester returns to the colony, she rejects society's attempt to control her. While disscussing running away with Dimmesdale, Hester tears off the scarlet letter and takes off her cap which lets her hair down which allows "her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty [to come] back." (Hawthrone 304). While the scarlet letter is a specific punishment for Hester, all Puritan women are obligated to wear caps and Hester cast off the patriarchal control. Despite this significant social, rebellious behavior, the novel ends with Hester voluntarily returning to the Puritan colony with the scarlet letter on her chest. Is this the furthest away from a feminist rebellion? However, no, Hester now chooses to wear the scarlet letter instead of being forced to which creates her own life. Hester chooses to extend her personal liberation to socially change society by supporting women who were suffering under the patriarchy. These women "came to Hester's cottage demanding why they were so wretched, and what [was] the remedy," and Hester would provide them answers of the inequality in society(Hawthorne 393).

Economically, Hester Prynne breaks boundaries by being self-sufficient. Hester Prynne is a single mother who successfully raises her daughter despite living in an economy driven to ostracize her. Hester supports herself and her daughter by selling elegant embroidery. Even though the Puritan citizens scorn and shun her, they eagerly buy and wear Hester's gorgeous handiwork which allows her to live without a man's financial support. In spite of Hester's previous dependence on her husband, Chillingworth for money, she now realizes that she can be an independent woman. Hester's embroidery alone brings in "subsistence of the plainest and most ascetic description, for herself, and a simple abundance for her child" (Hawthorne 124). Furthermore, Hester's economic independence emerges again when she fights to raise her daughter Pearl alone, pleading that, "God gave her into [her] keeping . . . [and she] will not give her up!" (Hawthorne 168). Hester knows that she can provide for her child and goes directly against the wishes of her religious leaders to accept the more challenging role of a single mother. This demonstrates that women are strong enough to survive on their own and are not helpless without man's money . Hester's hard work pays off and her embroidery "became what would now be termed the fashion"(Hawthorne 123).

Although gender inequality was a big issue in the sixteenth century and still exists today, society is improving this concept through empowering women by breaking gender barriers like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the youngest congresswomen in history. In The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne implies these gender inequalities in Puritan society through the main protagonist, Hester Prynne. She is a proto-feminist who refuses to accept the subordinate role of women politically, socially, and economically while she is persecuted by the male authority and laws established by the male-dominated society. Hester Prynne takes the first step of being a feminist through her belief of gender equality. Hester Prynne politically changes society's views of women by taking stands against traditional Puritan values. Socially, she rises above society's stigma of adultery and lives her life with strength. Economically, Hester Prynne is a single mother who successfully raises her daughter despite being ostracized by society. These three aspects exemplified through Hester Prynne provide the modern-day women with the message to persevere through adversity, even if you have to stand alone.