Feminism In The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter was written by Nathaniel Hawthorn in 1850 and set in 1650, both time periods were completely dominated by men. Gender equality was an unfathomable concept, yet the Scarlet Letter features a resiliant feminist woman, Hester Prynne. Throughout the novel, Hester looks out for two separate men, she keeps their secrets and reputations safe whether they deserve her grace or not. These two men, Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, are blessed to have her in their lives, seeing as they are utterly incapable of holding their lives together. In The Scarlet Letter there are two other specific types of women explored in the story; the evil in Mistress Hibbins and the witches or of piousness like the wives of the town. That said, what makes Hester Prynne so compelling to the reader yet so confusing to the society she lives in, is that she does not fit in either binary. She built her own genre of femininity. Hester Prynne is an underrated example of feminism during an extremely patriarchal time, this is rooted in her moral strength and defiance of cultural standards.

Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingsworth are driven by their feelings into eventual turmoil, while Hester Prynne's presence brings reason and logic. This is a massive feminist theme of the Scarlet Letter. Nathanial Hawthorn depicts his male characters as mentally fragile, with Dimmesdale's entire characterization is his pathetitism. His refusal to accept his half of the blame causes a destructive spiral of self pity that culminates in a meeting with Hester in the woods. "Happy you, Hester Prynne, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is," (Hawthorn, 178). This passage makes Dimmesdale even more unlikable as he implies his pain of guilt is greater than Hester's while still refusing to accept the consequences of admission. He continues to procrastinate, saying, "'...not so, my little Pearl!' answered the minister; for, with the new energy of the moment, all the dread of exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, [...] I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother thee one other day, but not to-morrow!'' (Hawthorn, 138) Dimmesdale's dread of any real action traps him in a miserable pity-party. This greatly contrasts how Hester Prynne handles the situation. She accepts her punishment with courage and therefore gains authority over her life. Through this act, she learns that though she cannot control the feelings of others she can control her own, which is very powerful. Because of this power, Dimmesdale asks for her wisdom saying, "advise me what to do Hester" (Hawthorn, 182). In asking her for help, Dimmesdale reveals the couple's power dynamic. A relationship where the woman holds the emotional stability was virtually unheard of. Dimmesdales' preoccupation with his own suffering overtakes him regularly and it is always up to Hester Prynne to rationalize him, "Heaven would show through mercy, if thou had the strength to take advantage of it," (Hawthorn, 182). This scene is relevant to the development of Hester Prynne's femininity, she confronts the stereotype of an emotionally reckless woman who needs a man to calm her down by embodying the opposite.

Throughout the novel, there are only two categories of women mentioned and Hester Prynne refuses to submit to either. There are the town wives, the sanctimonious bystanders. Some are sympathetic, some are definitely not, but they never act on their opinions. They are more of an accurate representation of a Puritan woman, they are described as, 'The witnesses of Hester Prynne Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity,' (Hawthorn, 55). The women of the town are feebleminded and innocuous just as the patriarchal Puritan society

deems acceptable. On the contrary, Mistress Hibbens is the embodiment of all things anti-Puritan. She represents feminine promiscuity, she is described as “bitter tempered” (Hawthorn, 106) which is reflected in her “ill-omened physiognomy” (Hawthorn, 106) or in other words, ugly appearance. The people of Boston want to force Hester Prynne into this role because they consider her sin irredeemably evil, but Hester Prynne is a good person as evident in her kind works for her town. Though Hester Prynne does not dance with the Black Man in the forest, she is far from fitting in with the modest town wives. She does not conform to the predetermined categories of women. This confuses her society, so as most humans do with things they do not understand, they ignore her. The town isolated her in the forest because she chose not to submit to cultural standards, yet Hester Prynne reacted with the self-respect of a true feminist.

The Scarlet Letter works to expose the hypocrisy of the Puritans’ sexism. The entire plot surrounds the punishment of a woman’s sexuality and the resulting ‘slut-shaming,’ while starring a woman stronger than any man mentioned. It sheds light on the double standards of sexuality that exist even now, where males are celebrated and females are shamed. Despite this, Hester Prynne protects undeserving men, lifts her chin to public ridicule, and carries her dignity everywhere she goes. At the end of the story both Dimmesdale and Chillingsworth end up six feet under and Hester is left with free will and the independence to determine her own fate.