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The liberation of Hester Prynne

How wearing the symbol of *The Scarlet Letter* releases Hester into a new kind of womanhood

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# Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Feminism and Christianity 7

Puritanism and expectations of a woman in Puritan Times 8

Analysis of Hester Prynne 10

Conclusion 20

Works Cited 24
Introduction

The novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a piece of literature that is still read and loved today even though it was written almost two hundred years ago. The story of a woman banished from society because of adultery still intrigues us and makes us think about women’s role in society, both now and then. The strong female protagonist Hester Prynne has the ability to create reactions and emotions even in the present day. As David Leverenz argues in his article “Mrs Hawthorne’s Headache: Reading The Scarlet Letter.”, which is written in 1983; “Hester’s private question about the “race” of women can still leap off the page for modern readers: ‘Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?’” (558).

The character Hester Prynne lives in New England in America during the Puritan times, a time period that lasted during the seventeenth century and the first part of the eighteenth century (Baym 13,157). The time and place that this character lives in of course affects the choices she has in life, but at the same time she is a woman in advance of her own time. Her way of acting and thinking is in some ways different from the Puritan ideal of womanhood, which is that of a sexually pure (Olofson Thickstun 31), submissive, and weak (Kerber 168) woman. The difference between the ideal Puritan woman and Hester herself can be connected to the fact that she has to wear the scarlet letter “A” on her chest, since being shunned by society can be seen as liberating her in many ways; “The Scarlet Letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread” (Hawthorne 128). The way Hester is portrayed is also very likely influenced by the time that the author Hawthorne was living in. Even though the novel takes place during the
seventeenth century it was written in the nineteenth century. This places the writing of the novel in the social context of the women’s right movement that existed on different levels in America in the 1800s. In his article “Woman’s Heart, Woman’s Choice: The “History” of The Scarlet Letter”, Michael J. Colacurcio argues that it is a fair assumption that this movement and its effects affected the authors concerns when writing the novel; he states, “Hawthorne would have had to be dreaming not to notice” (105).

Considering the impact The Scarlet Letter and its protagonist Hester Prynne can be argued to have had, and to have still, on its readers in terms of challenging the view of women’s place in society, it is of interest to explore how the fact that Hester was being banished from normal life as a woman in her time affected her. However, before beginning this task it is important to contextualize this thesis in relation to pre-existing research that has been carried out on the topic. It is clear that, in previous research carried out on The Scarlet Letter, Hester’s liberation from the Puritan ideal of womanhood through the scarlet letter is interpreted in different ways.

In the article “Hawthorne’s Hester and Feminism”, Neal Frank Doubleday claims that by being estranged from the normal existence of a woman, Hester assumes a freedom of speculation and her speculation frequently concerns women’s place in society. His claim is supported by this quote from The Scarlet Letter in which Hester reflects on society; “the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman
can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position” (Hawthorne 108). However, according to Doubleday´s interpretation, Hester´s thoughts in this area are not to be taken seriously since “a woman estranged from normal experience in whatever way cannot see her own problems in perspective” (828). He then suggests that if a woman’s outer conditions change substantially it can imply that a woman has to change her own essential nature and this can lead to a negative sense of being lost. This interpretation suggests a “pathetic Hester, in whom, . . . , passion and feeling have given away to thought . . . and to whom is lost the sense of human reality” (827). For Doubleday, Hester´s liberation from the Puritan ideal of womanhood has a negative effect on her life, as she thinks about aspects of life that she is not able to handle and ends up feeling lost.

The previously mentioned Colacurcio, on the other hand, states that Hester is a strong woman “potent in her power to recognize as convention what others take to be nature, and to refuse it as such”. He sees Hester as a woman capable of changing society, a woman who does not see the law of the world as the law of her mind (110). Equally, T Walter Herbert Jr recognizes Hester´s ability and interest in social change in his article “Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender”; “Hester is a vigorous and independent-minded woman who bitterly resents the oppression she has suffered and sees it as bearing on “the whole race of womanhood” “ (288). Both Colacurcio and Herbert Jr view the fact that Hester is outcast from society as something that makes her able to see how society normally oppresses women and able to see the changes that need to be done in order to change the situation for women in general terms. However, they do not agree with
Doubleday that these insights prove too difficult for Hester to deal with, as they view her as strong and capable. According to them, Hester’s liberation does not only exist on an individual level. Rather, wearing the scarlet letter particularly affects Hester in a way that makes her want to make a social impact.

In her article “The A-Politics of Ambiguity in The Scarlet Letter”, Sacvan Bercovitch argues that Hester’s wearing of the scarlet letter is linked to socialization. Here, Hester’s punishment is about accepting one’s place in society (630). Hester shows this when she returns to New England to live with the scarlet letter “A” on her chest. “Having abandoned the hope of erasing the past, Hester inscribes it upon herself, internalizes the past in all its shame and sorrow, and so re-forms herself, voluntarily, an exemplar of continuity through integration” (636). In this interpretation, Hester’s experiences do not lead to individual or social revolution. Instead, Hester finally accepts the punishment she has been given and allows it to affect her as it was supposed to do. She conforms and accepts her punishment rather than rebelling against it.

Leverenz’s view of Hester is similar to the perspective of Berkovitch when it comes to the issue of Hester conforming and accepting her punishment. Leverenz describes Hester as someone who has radical potential but chooses not to use it (567). At first she challenges her patriarchal punishment, but eventually she comes to terms with it and accepts it (566). Leverenz states that Hester is not liberated, neither inwardly or outwardly. Despite having a special perceptiveness about social injustice, she does not use her gift but instead avoids any struggle for public recognition. The only thing she fights for is to keep her conventional role as a
mother (560). It is the love for her child that allows Hester to be more a victim than a rebel (559). Leverenz claims that “Hester’s life has been a motherly survival among imprisoned possibilities” (566) and that Hester remains bonded to “her child, her duties, her isolation, [and] her marginal status” (571). In Leverenz’s analysis of Hester, wearing the scarlet letter does not liberate her at all. She is not able to be liberated, even though she has the potential, because she is trapped in, amongst other things, motherhood, and this makes her submissive to her fate as a woman at that time.

There is a perspective of Hester’s liberation from the Puritan ideal of womanhood through wearing the scarlet letter that has not yet been examined in previous research. Colacurcio and Herbert Jr argue that wearing the scarlet letter frees Hester’s mind so that she sees the injustice women are submitted to in society and because of this she wants to change society. According to this view, Hester’s focus is on society rather than individual development. Bercovitch and Leverenz argue that Hester does not get liberated at all but instead she conforms to what is expected of her. Doubleday argues that Hester is being liberated through her wearing the scarlet letter but he claims that this liberation has negative implications for her, it makes her feel lost and overwhelmed. However, the perspective of Hester’s liberation as a positive development that helps to free her on an individual level is missing.

The current thesis aims to use both a feminist theoretical analysis and an awareness of Puritan theological concepts in order to argue that the punishment of wearing the scarlet letter has a positive, liberating effect on the protagonist Hester
Prynne. The argument is that since being banished from society frees her of expectations as a woman in the Puritan times, it gives her the opportunity to create her own role as a woman and an individual. A feminist analysis of Christianity and the role of women within this religious content will highlight their perspectives on the patriarchal nature of Puritan theology.

Hester Prynne’s life and choices will be analyzed using the following Puritan Christian concepts that are critiqued by feminist theory as ways of oppressing women; the tradition of characterizing certain human qualities as female which implies that other human qualities are believed to be male and therefore improper for a woman to have; the tradition of viewing women as defined by their body and nature while men are mind and spirit which implies that women are not spiritual and intellectual; the concept of motherhood as a calling for all women which encourages women to focus on this area of life instead of other areas thus keeping them away from being active members in public life; the tradition of women being subordinated to men; and finally the view of women as sinful and impure. In the analysis, these concepts will be dealt with in the order in which they are reproduced here.

The following two chapters will provide information essential for an analysis of Hester’s character and situation, firstly about feminism and its views on Christianity and secondly about Puritanism and its view of women. The Puritan Christian concepts that will be used to analyze Hester will be further developed in these chapters.
**Feminism and Christianity**

In her book *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*, Pamela Dickey Young states that feminist theory acknowledges the systematic oppression of women and identifies this oppression and its sources (12). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza expands this thought in her article “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation” by claiming that feminism criticizes the myths and structures of society which oppress women (607). In this context, feminism calls attention to the fact that the traditional Christian theology is patriarchal since it has been written by and for almost only men, it is for the most part about men and it presents men as the norm (Dickey Young 15).

Christianity condones societies patriarchal structure and supports women’s internalization of so called “feminine, passive attitudes, e.g., meekness, humility, submission, self-sacrifice, self-denying love, which impede the development of self-assertion and autonomy by women” (Schüssler Fiorenza 608). In the Christian tradition qualities like love, compassion and patience are also considered to be feminine qualities and therefore suitable for a woman (623). Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito are editors of the book *Daughters of Abraham. Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, and in this book it is stated that the Christian tradition views women as “irrational and morally inferior expressions of the human species” (66). Furthermore, the body-soul dualism of Christianity is a tradition that oppresses women. Schüssler Fiorenza states that in this Christian tradition:
Man . . . is defined by his mind and reason, woman is defined by her “nature”, i.e., by her physical ability to bear children. Motherhood, therefore, is the vocation of every woman regardless of whether or not she is a natural mother. However, since in the ascetic Christian tradition nature and body have to be subordinated to the mind and the spirit, woman because of her nature has to be subordinated to man. (622)

Another aspect of the Christian tradition that feminism criticizes is the representation of women within the structure of the church. Women in general are portrayed as evil and dangerous (Dickey Young 12). Furthermore, the human traits of impurity, sin and weakness are claimed to be found particularly in women. “Women were assumed to be those most prone to sin and temptation, and here Eve was usually cited as the prime example” (16). In Christian tradition, it is the sexually active woman in particular, who is viewed as provocative. The sin of Eve is “represented by all women but particularly by sexually active women” (Yazbeck Haddad and Esposito 68).

**Puritanism and expectations of a woman in Puritan times**

The views and perspectives mentioned above were all embodied within the Puritan movement, thus being views and perspectives of both general, traditional Christianity but also of Puritan Christianity. In the article “Puritanism in The Scarlet Letter”, Shinichiro Noriguchi claims that Puritan society was built on Christian values and strived for a government where the church and state were united (54). Puritans believe that it is faith in God that saves man, not good deeds. This means that acts of charity do not help to redeem a person (57). In her book,
Fictions of the Feminine: Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women, Margaret Olofson Thickstun claims that Puritans place the responsibility of salvation on the individual believer and salvation can only be achieved through self-examination and searching for grace (3). Emphasis is put on enduring times of hardship without wavering in faith. The Puritan definition of heroism is a persistence in lovingly obeying God even in times of need and sorrow (28). Likewise, “female heroism is a condition for which there ought never to be an occasion; the heroine suffers her fate with the patient endurance of a victim who is responsible for what she gets” (32).

There is no model for female celibacy within Puritanism. Instead, the recommended path to spiritual and moral supervision for a woman is to get married so that the husband can guide her. This should be combined with having children (Olofson Thickstun 31). The Puritan ideal of marriage is that of a companionable marriage, with the man being the “head of the household and the wife his loving helpmate” (x). The Puritan society believe that the act of adultery “endangers the very basis and strength of Puritan life” (Noriguchi 56).

The Puritan society had “a conservative view of the moral nature and social place of women” (Colacurcio 104). In the article “Can a Woman Be an Individual? The Limits of Puritan Tradition in the Early Republic.”, Linda K. Kerber claims that, because of Eve taking the initiative to eat the forbidden fruit, women were perceived as “weak, vulnerable, in need of guidance for their own good” (168). Hence, female self-sufficiency was a quality that Puritans were hesitant to assign
to women. “As the subordinate half of the couple, …, a woman actually required male dominion.” (Olofson Thickstun 30).

As already established, a Puritan woman was supposed to be submissive particularly to her husband, but she was also supposed to be submissive in general. “The Christian virtues of patience and faith were invariably linked with the general female virtues of submissiveness and docility” (Kerber 168). Puritans supported their claim of female inferiority with the parallel that “the man is the head, the woman the body” (Olofson Thickstun 15). This means that a man can “resist and deny the impulses of the flesh imibodied in the sexuality of “fallen women.” Women, spiritually defined by their biological capability - as wife, mother, adulteress, whore - remain trapped in their physical bodies” (133). The connection is made between women and the biblical figure of Eve who is viewed as the original sinner and a disobedient wife. Eve’s recognition of her own guilt, her repentance and her submission to her husband come to be the model for female virtue (31). The Puritans had an additional explanation for women being inferior; “not only are women inferior by nature, but their subjection is also a punishment for Eve’s role in the Fall” (19). These ideals of a Puritanism and Puritan womanhood form the background to Hester Prynne’s life in the New England area in which she lived.

**Analysis of Hester Prynne**

Schüssler Fiorenza points out several different character traits that are viewed as typically female within Christianity; “humility, submission, self-sacrifice” (608). Kerber claims that the Puritans also recognizes submissiveness and docility as
female features (168). The belief that these character traits are ‘female’ is internalized by women and thus contribute to the oppression of women since it keeps them from developing their full personality (Schüssler Fiorenza 608). Hester displays some of these character traits, as for example she is submissive and humble which are considered typically female traits. It is being a humble servant to the community that leads her to being accepted by society again after her punishment. She helps out in different ways and sews for people in the community, especially the poor, even when they show no gratitude; “None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty; even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have embroidered a monarch’s robe” (Hawthorne 105). Hester also looks after the sick and dying, and was welcome in the homes of people in need; “There glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick-chamber” (Hawthorne 105). Consequently, Hester’s sympathy and tenderness win her the admiration of many people in the community; “The blameless purity of her life during all these years in which she had been set apart to infamy, was reckoned largely in her favor” (Hawthorne 105). It could be argued therefore that, in some ways Hester lives up to the ideal representation of a Puritan woman. However, in other respects she challenges these views of a woman and this will now be explored in further detail.

According to Kerber, Puritans viewed women as weak and vulnerable (168). Hester is not weak however, in the manner expected of her as a woman, she is on the contrary strong, a quality which is revealed on several occasions. When she is
Hester decides that she is not going to let the punishment control her life but instead she is going to take charge of her life even though her situation creates certain limits. She frees herself from what is expected and her independence prevails as she sews on the letter A upon her dress:
Standing alone in the world, - alone, as to any dependence on society,…she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world’s law was no law for her mind….She assumed a freedom of speculation…In her lonesome cottage….thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling. (Hawthorne 107)

An example of her independence is when she chooses to continue to live in the town even though she could have moved somewhere else where no one would know about her and her situation; “-it may seem marvelous, that this woman should still call that place her home, where, and where only, she must needs be the type of shame” (Hawthorne 56). No one requires for her to stay but she chooses to do so. It can be argued that she chooses to stay because it is important for her to show the world that she has done nothing wrong. She feels that she should not have to move since she has nothing to be ashamed of. She stays and she refuses to live up to the oppressive ideals of woman’s character and she refuses to allow herself to be totally marginalized by society.

The argument that Hester is a strong woman is shared by Colacurcio, who sees Hester as a capable woman (110). Herbert Jr also views Hester as strong; “Hester is a vigorous and independent-minded woman” (288). According to the views of Colacurcio and Herbert Jr, it is clear that Hester Prynne does not live up to the representation of a typical Puritan woman when it comes to certain aspects of her personality. Doubleday on the other hand, seems to be of the opinion that Hester is weak and passive since he believes that she cannot handle her punishment and the thoughts it leads to; “a woman estranged from normal experience in whatever way
cannot see her own problems in perspective” (828). For Doubleday, Hester displays character traits typical for a Puritan woman and because of this, her punishment makes her feel lost.

Schüssler Fiorenza states that there is a Christian tradition saying that man is defined by his mind and reason and woman is defined for her physical ability to bear children (622). According to Olofson Thickstun, this body-soul dualism of Christianity also exists among the Puritans; “While men have the flexibility to be both spiritual and physical, authoritative and subordinate - the “head,” or representative of God, within the couple and the body, or “member of Christ,” within the church – women become ontologically and essentially identified with “body” “(7). Obviously, this way of perceiving women is a type of oppression. Claiming that women are shut out of mind and reason belittles women and keeps them out of important parts of the society, making sure that women have little impact on something other than the domestic sphere.

Hester is portrayed as having both mind and reason as well as “body”, and her mind is depicted as being free; “Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods” (Hawthorne 128). This is not the usual way to view a Puritan woman and this can derive from the argument that when Hester wears the scarlet letter, she becomes something other than an ordinary woman. Even her beauty as a woman is hidden; “She who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration” (Hawthorne 107). Consequently, when Hester is forced to wear
the scarlet letter and becomes shunned from society she ceases to be a woman in a sense. It can be argued that Hester becomes liberated from her gender and that she is left alone to discover who she is and who she wants to be. She gets the opportunity to discover other, and perhaps new, sides of herself, such as her intellect, her mind and her reason. These are human qualities that were not seen as natural in a woman but since Hester is prohibited from being a full part of her society she is also liberated into making her own rules of how she as a woman wants to be. She has many thoughts in this area that are quite revolutionary for the time. For example, she believes that society has to change in order for women to be able to assume a fair position in it. She also believes that a “woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated” (Hawthorne 108). Through these thoughts, Hester displays an ability to use her mind in an intelligent way, thus showing an ability to reason which is usually viewed as a male trait. She also displays a willingness to change and explore herself as a woman. It is clear that Hester takes the opportunity that her punishment gives her and uses it to develop as a woman and in this process she challenges the body-soul dualism of Puritan Christianity.

Both Colacurcio and Herbert Jr view Hester as a woman capable of using her mind. Colacurcio points at Hester´s “turn from feeling to the supposedly masculine province of thought” (110). Meanwhile, Herbert Jr views Hester as a “manly woman” who has an independent mind (288). It is a fair conclusion that both Colacurcio and Herbert Jr agree with the argument that Hester has mind and
reason and therefore challenges the Puritan view of a woman as only “nature and body” (Schüessler Fiorenza 622).

In Puritanism, women are encouraged to get married and have children in order to be good Christians (Olofson Thickstun 31). This is partly because of the previously mentioned body-soul dualism of Christianity, where a woman is defined for her physical ability to bear children and this concept stresses the fact that motherhood is a calling for every woman (Schüessler Fiorenza 622). This emphasis on motherhood is a way of oppressing women, keeping women focused on this matter instead of becoming involved in other areas in society or in their own individual development. This prevents women from having an impact on society in any real sense.

Hester has entered the world of motherhood, since she is the mother of her daughter Pearl who is “Hester’s Pearl “of great price, - purchased with all she had, - her mother’s only treasure!” ” (Olofson Thickstun 139). For Leverenz, Hester’s bond to her daughter is not liberating but suffocating. He claims that “Hester’s life has been a motherly survival among imprisoned possibilities” (566) and he believes that Hester is trapped in motherhood. To Leverenz, motherhood affects Hester just as it would any other woman at that time, even though her circumstances of being a mother is quite different because of her punishment.

However, it can also be argued that motherhood has a liberating effect on Hester. If she had been living amongst the other women and men of society, motherhood would most likely affect her in a different way than it does now that she wears the
scarlet letter. Because of Hester´s punishment and its consequences, motherhood does not trap her into a domestic sphere, making Hester less than she can be. Instead motherhood frees her. Living on her own, Hester´s only companion is her daughter and this creates a special closeness between them and an opportunity for Hester to define motherhood for herself. Olofson Thickstun claims that Pearl keeps Hester in line spiritually (137). This would be considered normal in the Puritan society since that is the main purpose for having children. However, Pearl also liberates Hester and makes her think differently, as it is Pearl that makes her challenge the Puritan times she is living in. “While the responsibility for a child prevents Hester from becoming politicized, . . . ,it is, in fact, Pearl who forces Hester’s radical critique of Puritan society” (Olofson Thickstun 138). This critique of society can also be claimed to include a critique of motherhood and her own role as a mother and a woman, which means that Hester is free in her desire to create her own style of motherhood. Furthermore, Hester’s love for Pearl, and therefore motherhood, saves her from submitting to her punishment. “Because of Pearl, the scarlet letter does not do its “office.” Hester remains unrepentant because to repent her “sin” would be to repent Pearl” (Olofson Thickstun 139).

According to Kerber, Puritans viewed women as in need of guidance from a man (167). Hester does not live up to this view of a woman at all. Since she is banished from society, she has no guidance from a husband but she is managing fine without one. She supports herself financially by working, she “earn[s] daily bread for little Pearl and herself by the faithful labor of her hands,” (Hawthorne 105). Furthermore, she raises her daughter without any help; “Mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society” (Hawthorne
It is a fair assumption that Hester finds a way to cope with her situation in life without the help of a man. Yazbeck Haddad and Esposito state that within the Christian tradition women are perceived as irrational and morally inferior to men (66) and this is also how Puritans view women (Olofson Thickstun 133). Hester does not appear to be morally lost even without the guidance from a man. On the contrary, she comes across as having a strong moral compass that guides her in her decisions. Even though she has committed adultery and “she knew that her deed had been evil;” (Hawthorne 61), she does not let that one action color the rest of her life. She lives a righteous life which is shown by the fact that she chooses to focus on helping the community after she receives her punishment; “Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained as Sister of Mercy” (Hawthorne 105). Hester without a doubt challenges the view that a Puritan woman is in need of guidance from a man, and it is because of her punishment that she is put in a position to be able to challenge such a view.

It can be argued that Hester becomes liberated from the notion of being subordinate to men to some extent by the fact that she is wearing the scarlet letter and being shunned from society. When she deals with members of society she is no doubt regarded as inferior, just like any other woman during the Puritan times. An example of this is when she goes to the Governor’s mansion to leave a pair of gloves that she has made but during the visit the men present start to question if Hester is to keep her own child; “My poor woman,” said the not unkind old minister, “the child shall be well cared for! – far better than thou canst do it” (Hawthorne 76). This situation is certainly related to the fact that she has
committed a sin and has been punished for it but it can also be argued that this situation displays Hester’s vulnerability as a woman in the Puritan society. However, Hester does not live with a husband and she does not mix with the community much but spends most of her time in her “solitary cottage” (Hawthorne 68) by the woods. She is “standing alone in the world, - alone, as to any dependence on society” (Hawthorne 107). Consequently, she lives an independent life where she is free to make up her own mind and she is the one making all the decisions in her life. This saves her in part from subordination and male dominion.

It can be argued that, according to Puritan society, Hester is a good representative of the sin of Eve since she has clearly been sexually active outside of her marriage. Her adultery becomes public since there are visible consequences. Nevertheless, Hester does not seem to feel ashamed of her actions. Rather, she seems to stand up for her choice, not by being proud of it but recognizing the importance of her decisions for her, “she cannot walk away from her adultery as if it meant nothing” (Olofson Thickstun 136). Hester examines her adultery without shame. This ability to separate herself from the sinful image she represents in the eyes of the world, is related to her punishment. “Wearing the scarlet letter gives her an identity outside of herself, a vantage point from which to objectify herself “ (Olofson Thickstun 136). This means that wearing the scarlet letter frees Hester’s mind so that it is possible for her to look at her situation from a distance, from a more objective place. Furthermore, when she analyses her adultery she does so from the perspective of being a woman who is free to think outside the usual social moral since being an outcast has in some way released her from the opinions of society and led to the formulation of her own true thoughts and feelings. Wearing
the scarlet letter has liberated Hester from judging herself as being a representative of the sinful Eve.

**Conclusion**

The topic of this study was the protagonist Hester Prynne’s liberation through the punishment of wearing the scarlet letter. Previous research has shown that Hester can be considered as receiving no personal liberation at all through her punishment or that the liberation she achieves causes her distress. The aim of the current thesis was to apply a feminist analysis of Puritan Christianity to investigate how the punishment of wearing the scarlet letter has a liberating effect on Hester Prynne. The thesis has also examined the expectations placed on women during the Puritan times, and argued that Hester challenges these expectations and how this liberation from social expectations has a positive effect on her as a woman and an individual.

Feminist theory acknowledges the systematic oppression of women and criticizes the myths and structures of society which oppress women. Furthermore, feminism criticize all institutions that keep women in inferior positions, and this includes the Christian tradition as well as Puritan Christianity. Feminist critique recognizes that Christian symbols, myths and thoughts are deeply influenced by patriarchal traditions and sexist structures. In the Puritan society, the Christian Puritan religion was extremely important on all levels. In Puritanism, a woman was expected to get married in order to receive spiritual and moral supervision from her husband. It was also essential to have children. In other words, the Puritan society had a conservative view of the place of women.
In this thesis, Hester’s life and choices have been analyzed by examining the following Christian concepts; the tradition of characterizing certain human qualities as female; the tradition of viewing woman as body and nature while man is mind and spirit; the concept of motherhood as a calling for all women; the tradition of women being subordinated to men; and the view of women as sinful and impure. These concepts are critiqued by feminist theory as different ways of oppressing women and they are all present in the Puritan Christian faith.

This thesis shows that Hester displays some of the character traits that are typically viewed as ‘female’ within the Puritan Christian tradition, such as being submissive and humble. This is displayed through the humble way she serves her community even though she is banished from society. She sews clothes for people and she looks after the sick and dying. For the most part however, Hester does not show typical female character traits. For example, she is a strong person and this strength grows from her having to wear the scarlet letter. The punishment forces her to either grow stronger or grow weaker, as it is impossible for her to remain unchanged. As the punishment frees her from social expectation, her strength increases and her independence prevails and grows.

Further analysis demonstrates that in The Scarlet Letter, Hester is depicted as having both a mind and a body instead of just being viewed as a body defined by its physical ability to bear children. This is not a typical image of a Puritan woman, and even more noteworthy is that Hester’s mind is free, making her able to define herself according to her own values. By wearing the scarlet letter Hester becomes something more than an ordinary woman, and even ceases to be ‘a woman’ in a
sense. Consequently, Hester becomes liberated from her gender and is free to
discover for herself what being a woman means to her. This gives her the
opportunity to discover new aspects of herself, aspects that were not considered
suitable for a woman, and to include these in her own sense of womanhood. Due to
Hester’s punishment, motherhood does not affect her the way it would have if she
had lived in the community as an ordinary Puritan woman. Since Hester is
banished from society, motherhood does not trap her in the domestic sphere,
instead this new role frees her mind and makes her think in new ways. She is free
to define motherhood in her own way and to think about her own role as a woman
and an individual.

Furthermore, it is argued that to some extent, Hester becomes liberated from the
idea of being subordinated to men by the fact that she is wearing the scarlet letter
and therefore is shunned from society. Hester does not live with a husband and she
lives on the outskirts of society. This implies that she lives an independent life
where she is free to make up her own mind and she is the one making the decisions
relating to her. Even though she cannot completely escape the community’s view
of her as subordinate, her punishment gives her the opportunity to be less
influenced by this notion.

Finally, this thesis demonstrates how wearing the scarlet letter liberates Hester
from judging herself as being a representative of the sinful Eve. Because of her
punishment, it is possible for her to objectify herself and look at herself from a
distance. This helps her to separate herself from the sinful image she represents in
the eyes of the world. Furthermore, when Hester thinks about her adultery she does
so from the perspective of a woman being outcast from society and this has in some way released her from the opinions of others and made her connect with her own opinions instead.

To conclude, by being shunned by society, Hester becomes free to create her own version of womanhood on many levels and this is liberating for her as a woman and an individual. This liberation is positive for her since Hester’s punishment becomes her passport to true freedom, a freedom unavailable to those not living on the outskirts of Puritan society. Without her punishment, Hester’s life would be shaped very differently, it would be more like that of an ordinary Puritan woman living in that time. In this sense, wearing the scarlet letter is a blessing in disguise, as even though the punishment is painful it gives Hester a freedom of thought that she had no possibility to gain otherwise and this is liberating for her. It truly can be claimed that “the tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free” (Hawthorne 128).
Works cited


