

Excerpt I from *The Scarlet Letter*

In this scene, Hester Prynne is released from jail before she faces her punishment: the humiliation of being publicly denounced and interrogated while she stands on a platform in the town marketplace. At the beginning of this scene, several of the women of the town are exchanging their opinions about this punishment.

“Goodwives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty, “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such **malefactresses** as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips¹? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry², I trow not!”

“People say,” said another, “that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very **grievously** to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation.”

“The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch—that is a truth,” added a third autumnal matron. “At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead. Madam Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she—the naughty baggage³—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or such like **heathenish** adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!”

“Ah, but,” **interposed**, more softly, a young wife, holding a child by the hand, “Let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart.”

“What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?” cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!”

“Mercy on us, goodwife,” exclaimed a man in the crowd, “is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows? That is the hardest word yet! Hush, now, gossips! for the lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself.”

The door of the jail being flung open from within, there appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and grisly presence of the town-beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand. This personage **prefigured** and represented in his aspect the whole **dismal** severity of the Puritanic code of

law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender.

Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward; until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will. She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old, who winked and turned aside its little face from the too vivid light of day; because its existence, heretofore⁴, had brought it acquainted only with the grey twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome apartment of the prison.

When the young woman—the mother of this child—stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a **haughty** smile, and a glance that would not be **abashed**, looked around at her townspeople and neighbors. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary⁵ regulations of the colony.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine **gentility** of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, **evanescent**, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more ladylike, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected

¹ a term of familiarity used by women

² a light oath expressing surprise or indignation

³ a woman worthy of contempt, esp. a prostitute

⁴ up to now; up to this time (“hitherto”)

⁵ related to personal expenditures and intended to keep people from being extravagant

to behold her dimmed and **obscured** by a disastrous
cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to per-
105 ceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of
the misfortune and **ignominy** in which she was
enveloped. It may be true, that, to a sensitive
observer, there was something **exquisitely** painful in
it. Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for
110 the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much
after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude
of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her
mood, by its wild and **picturesque** peculiarity. But
the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were,
115 **transfigured** the wearer—so that both men and
women, who had been familiarly acquainted with
Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld
her for the first time—was that SCARLET LETTER, so
fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her
120 bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of
the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing
her in a sphere by herself.

“She hath good skill at her needle, that’s
certain,” remarked one of her female spectators;
125 “but did ever a woman, before this **brazen** hussy,
contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips,
what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly
magistrates, and make a pride out of what they,
worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?”

130 “It were well,” muttered the most iron-**visaged**
of the old dames, “if we stripped Madam Hester’s
rich gown off her dainty shoulders; and as for the
red letter, which she hath stitched so curiously, I’ll
bestow a rag of mine own **rheumatic** flannel, to
135 make a fitter one!”

“Oh, peace, neighbors, peace!” whispered their
youngest companion; “do not let her hear you! Not
a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt
it in her heart.”

Comprehension Questions

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following words mean?

behoof (line 3)
sentence (line 9)
trow (line 10)
autumnal (line 17)
warrant (line 20)
will (first occurrence on line 27)
constituted (line 32)
save (line 40)
springs (line 41)
wholesome (line 41)
aspect (line 50)
thus (line 56)
token (line 71)
fantastic (line 80)
fancy (line 82)
after (line 95)
state (line 96)
antique (line 100)
issued (line 101)
sensitive (line 107)
impressed (line 117)
curiously (line 133)
fitter (line 135)

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following pronouns refer to?

it (line 36)
its (line 99)
it (line 126)
it (line 127)

What rhetorical device is used on lines 6-10, and what is its purpose?

What is the implication of the woman's choice of the word "awarded" (line 10)?

Why does the third woman argue that Hester should have been branded as part of the punishment for her crime (lines 15-24)?

What is the meaning of the fourth woman's argument (lines 25-28)?

What implication is the narrator making about the psychological source of the fifth woman's harshness (lines 29-38)?

Why, according to the fifth woman, should the magistrates "thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray" (lines 35-37)? What rhetorical device is the use of the word "thank" an example of?

What do you think is the narrator's purpose in including this argument among the women?

Why is the word "woman" singular on line 40?

What is the meaning of the man's comment about women on lines 40-41? What tone is he expressing—what is his attitude toward women? Think carefully.

What is the symbolic significance of the town-beadle?

What is the implication of the phrase "as if by her own free will" (lines 59-60)?

What is the metaphorical significance of the baby's turning its head away from the light (lines 61-65)?

Why does Hester move the baby away from her bosom (lines 74-75)?

What is the significance of the narrator's use of the word "fertility" (line 82)?

What rhetorical device is used on lines 90-91, and what is its effect?

What rhetorical device appears on lines 103-104 and lines 105-106, and what is its effect?

What examples of irony can be found on lines 105-111?

Who would qualify as a "sensitive observer" (lines 107-108)—why could most of the people in the crowd not be considered sensitive observers?

In what way does Hester "make a pride" (line 128) out of her punishment?

What does the expression "it were well" mean (line 130)?

What is ironic about the fifth woman's use of the word "bestow" on line 134? What does she mean by "rheumatic flannel"? (*Rheumatism* is arthritis.)

Based on her comments (lines 25-28 and 136-139), what do you think the fourth woman's definition of true punishment is?

What is the implied metaphor contained in lines 137-139?

Questions for Discussion and Writing

What is the effect of the narrator's description of Hester? Describe her reaction to her situation. How does she feel, and why does she present herself differently? What do we learn about her character from this scene?

Discuss what the passage conveys about Puritan society, especially the values and moral attitudes of the Puritans.