

# Hester Prynne: Sinner, Victim, Object, Winner

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JACKI LYDEN, host:

And now the story of a woman; a woman whose story is repeated so often - it ingrained on our collective imagination. She's an archetype. She is Eve. She's Juno. She the good woman gone bad. She is Hester Prynne.

As part of NPR's series, In Character, my colleague Andrea Seabrook shows how this Puritan woman is still very much alive today.

ANDREA SEABROOK: Hester Prynne is the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's magnum opus "The Scarlet Letter." Any serious literary scholar will tell you that she is one of the first strong women in American literature and is still among the most important. She's veiled and complex and deep. So much so, says Professor Jamie Barlowe of the University of Toledo, that her character is much bigger than the novel itself.

Professor JAMIE BARLOWE (University of Toledo): Hester Prynne lived before she was a character in Hawthorne's novel, and she has continued to be a part of our thinking as a culture because that notion of the bad-woman-good-woman dichotomy has existed for thousands of years.

SEABROOK: In "The Scarlet Letter," one of the first things you learn about Hester Prynne is that she is drop-dead gorgeous.

Unidentified Woman: (Reading) The young woman was tall with the 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 never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, than as she issued from the prison.

SEABROOK: In this opening scene, Hester Prynne is led out of a dark jail onto a platform where all the Puritan citizens of Boston can stare at her. She holds her infant daughter born in prison to her chest, and a bright, red letter A burns on Hester's breast. She has committed adultery a sin so terrible in Puritan, Boston of the 1600s that she could have been hanged. Having to wear the scarlet letter is considered by some an easy sentence.

Now, here's the second thing you find out about Hester Prynne. She is silent. She refuses to speak the name of the man with whom she committed adultery. Listen to this scene, enacted in a 1979 public television version of "The Scarlet Letter."

(Soundbite of "The Scarlet Letter")

Unidentified Man: Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of heaven's mercy, speak out the name. That, and thy repentance may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast.

Unidentified Woman #2: (As Hester Prynne) Never - it's too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony as well as mine.

Unidentified Man: Speak, woman. Speak and give your child a father.

Unidentified Woman #2: I will not speak.

SEABROOK: This is our first glimpse at the inherent contradictions of Hester's character. God has made her beautiful, but she is a terrible sinner. She wears the shameful letter A on her breast, but she (unintelligible) embroidered it too. She accepts her punishment, but she refuses to name the father of her child.

Evan Carton is a professor of literature at the University of Texas at Austin. He says this duality, this complexity has inspired writers ever since.

Professor EVAN CARTON (Literature, University of Texas, Austin): The multiple wacky interpretations of Hester begin in the book. They worked the book's about. One of the chapters of the book is called "Another View of Hester." And throughout the book, what we get are multiple views of Hester authored by multiple different viewers of Hester.

SEABROOK: The two main viewers of Hester are her husband and her lover. The man who Hester refuses to name publicly, the father of her child, is the talented young Puritan minister Arthur Dimmesdale. When Hester and Dimmesdale had their tryst, we learn, Hester's husband was thought lost at sea. Later he returns, calling himself Roger Chillingworth. What follows is a cruel and shadowy love triangle between Hester, the Reverend Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.

Prof. CARTON: The drama is really the drama of the patriarchal society's need to control female sexuality in the most basic way, you know, this classic, sort of, male anxiety: How do you know for sure whether your baby is yours? If you don't know that your woman and your child is actually yours, then you have no control over property, no control over social order, no control over anything -and that's the deep radical challenge that Hester presents to this society. And that's - and it's the working out of that challenge that takes by throughout the rest of the novel.

SEABROOK: In some ways, Hester Prynne is less a character herself than she is an object; that the men in the book define themselves by. Dimmesdale is in love with her, but she is his sin. Chillingworth is obsessed with her, but will not claim her publicly. And the elders in the Puritan community seemed care very little about Hester except when her continuing existence seems to challenge their moral authority.

Carton says Hester is a vessel that everyone in society projects their desires and fears and fantasies onto, calling into question the role of women in society. These are ideas people of Hawthorne's time were grappling with, says Professor Barlowe.

Prof. BARLOWE: Hawthorne - living in Salem, in Boston and then later in Concord - was very, very aware of this growing feminist insurgence. Women's rights were a part of the cultural conversation.

SEABROOK: The first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York was held while Hawthorne was writing the "The Scarlet Letter." For the first time in America, strong women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were challenging the firmly-established male patriarchy. Hester Prynne is Hawthorne's contemplation about women's role in society. And what happens when they brake cultural bounds and gain personal power.

Hester is a sinner, yes, but she also survives. She builds a small business, doing embroidery work. She raises her daughter Pearl by herself, fighting to keep her when the town governors try to take Pearl away. And over the years, she gains the respect of other women in Boston, then become something of a quiet confidante for them.

In a pivotal moment in the novel, Hester finally asserts her own will in her life. She meets her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale in the forest and begs him to run away with her.

(Reading) Let's us not look back on Hester Prynne. The past is gone. We this symbol, I undo it all and make it as if it had never been. So speaking, she undid the clasp, but fastened the Scarlet Letter, and taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among the withered leaves. The stigma gone, Hester heaved the long, deep sigh in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. Oh, exquisite relief. She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom...

Mr. JOHN UPDIKE (Novelist): Oh, the scene in the forest and her trying to breathe some spirit into this man, and the moment when she lets down her hair, surely one of the great moments in American fiction.

SEABROOK: This is Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John Updike. He says the scene in the woods still makes him cry.

Mr. UPDIKE: First, she throws away the scarlet letter. And then, quote, by another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance and imparting the charm of softness to her features. How wonderful, the power of the hair. The mystery of the long hair let down.

SEABROOK: Updike finds the story so powerful, he wrote a trilogy of novels based on the characters of "The Scarlet Letter." The last of those is titled simply "S." In it, Updike's 20th-century Hester is named Sarah.

Mr. UPDIKE: I found my modern equivalent of the kind of the talky(ph), flipped, sexy, free spirit. She was fun to write about, because she was so irrepressible.

SEABROOK: As somebody who has explored all of these angles of "The Scarlet Letter" and specifically explored Hester Prynne, why keep reinterpreting Hester Prynne?

Mr. UPDIKE: Well, because she's such an arresting and slightly ambiguous figure. She's a funny mix of a truly liberated, defiantly sexual and independent woman, but in the end a woman who accepts the penance that society imposed on her. And I don't know, I suppose she's an epitome of female predicaments.

SEABROOK: "The Scarlet Letter" has been told and re-told many times with different parts of Hester's personality accentuated. A 1934 film casts her as almost a saint who takes her punishment willingly. The 1995 version with Demi Moore as Hester Prynne makes her overtly sexual and defiant. You can compare these Hesters at [npr.org](http://npr.org).

A clue in to Hawthorne's feelings is how Hester fares at the end of the book. Her lover Dimmesdale dies a broken man. Hester raises Pearl, who goes on to live well. But Hester herself chooses to return to Boston, living out her years on the edge of the community that for so long treated her as a pariah. She chooses to wear the red letter A long after her punishment is fulfilled.

(Reading) Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma, which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too.

Hester's scarlet letter ends up being revered by the town folk, perhaps as a symbol that that throughout her life she bravely wore her sin, out in the open, on her chest.

Dr. NANCY TAYLOR (Pastor, Old South Church): We have Hester Prynne because we sin, we all sin.

SEABROOK: This is Dr. Nancy Taylor. She's the pastor of the Old South Church in Boston and a direct descendant of the Puritans. Taylor says Hester's story is still very much relevant today.

Dr. TAYLOR: The book explores the possibility of redemption, and one other thing it suggests is that to face our sins and to repent is a lifetime project, but it's also one that requires a certain self-honesty. But I think in the book, Hester is the only one who really has self-knowledge, self-honesty, who acknowledges her sin. She is the one who develops as a human being.

SEABROOK: All of the contradictions of Hester Prynne guilt and honesty, sin and holiness, sex and chastity make her one of the most important female protagonists in American literature. She is flawed. Her character is complex, and above all fertile.

The idea of Hester, the good woman gone bad, recurs again and again. We, as a culture, are still trying to figure out who Hester really is and how we feel about her. And in John Updike's words, that's because she's a mythic version of every woman's attempt to integrate her sexuality with societal demands.

Andrea Seabrook, NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

LYDEN: You can hear extended versions of those readings from "The Scarlet Letter" and see how Hester has been portrayed in two very different film versions on our Web site, just got to [npr.org/incharacter](http://npr.org/incharacter) - all one-word. And while you're there, you can tell us about your own favorite fictional characters, your essay, put it up on the air.

(Soundbite of music)

LYDEN: And that's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Jacki Lyden. Have a great week.