

The Scarlet Letter: Points to Ponder

In Hawthorne's tale we see Hester after she has been imprisoned, had her child and been questioned by the town's authority as to the identity of the child's father. Hester, like Ruth, refuses to reveal that identity.

1. These novels open in very different ways, Ruth is a young woman who is employed as a dressmaker whereas Hester Prynne is shown initially as a woman with an illegitimate child. How do these very different histories affect our perception of the main female character in these novels?
2. Think about the style in which these stories are written. What is the difference between Hawthorne's style of narrative and Gaskell's and how does that affect our reading of Ruth and Hester?

Think about the ideas encapsulated in this passage below and how Gaskell presents these ideas in her work.

The SL

Throughout them all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast,—at her, the child of honorable parents,—at her, the mother of a babe, that would hereafter be a woman,—at her, who had once been innocent,—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument.

Ruth

"Leonard," said she, "Leonard, look up at me! Leonard, look up!" But he only clung the closer, and hid his face the more.

"My boy!" said she, "what can I do or say? If I tell you never to mind it—that it is nothing—I tell you false. It is a bitter shame and a sorrow that I have drawn down upon you. A shame, Leonard, because of me, your mother; but, Leonard, it is no disgrace or lowering of you in the eyes of God." She spoke now as if she had found the clue which might lead him to rest and strength at last. "Remember that, always. Remember that, when the time of trial comes—and it seems a hard and cruel thing that you should be called reproachful names by men, and all for what was no fault of yours—remember God's pity and God's justice; and though my sin shall have made you an outcast in the world—oh, my child, my child!"—(she felt him kiss her, as if mutely trying to comfort her—it gave her strength to go on)—"remember, darling of my heart, it is only your own sin that can make you an outcast from God."

3. Symbolism is important in this novel. What do you see as the meaning of the scarlet letter. Why does Hawthorne describe it in such detail?

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 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.

4. In what ways does the setting play an important role in the narrative of these two books?
5. Hawthorne's minister is the child's father whereas Gaskell uses Benson in a very different way. How does the role of religion and its representatives differ in these two novels. Perhaps think about the irony in Gov. Bellingham's remarks to Rev. Dimmesdale

“Good Master Dimmesdale,” said he, “the responsibility of this woman’s soul lies greatly with you. It behooves you, therefore, to exhort her to repentance, and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof.”

6. What have these two women, Hester and Ruth got in common and how are they different?