Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

Scarlet Letter: Reality vs. Perception

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, a dark tale of sin and redemption, centers around the small Puritan community of Boston during the seventeenth century. In the middle of the town market place is a ” . . .weather darkened scaffold. . . (234)” where sinners are made to face the condemning public. The people standing on the scaffold experience strange phenomena while on the scaffold. Some become braver, some meeker. And whether the people are looking at them or not, they becomes their true selves on the scaffold. In essence, everything that is real and true occurs on the scaffold, and everything that is illusion or hypocrisy occurs everywhere else. In and article entitled When Public Perception is Reality by Russ Banham it shows how people make real their thoughts.

The forest is also a setting where characters find the truth about themselves. Most settlers to the forest are people who are outsiders from society. They are untainted by the views of the townspeople and can see beyond the lies and hypocrisy of the townspeople. The experiences of the people on the scaffold and in the forest lend themselves to a higher issue, reality vs. perception. In the Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne shows how people create their own reality with what they see. The article cites a specific example where people thought that Dow Chemical Company’s products caused cancer and the company was bad. So when people stopped buying its products the company was bad. “Frequently, the public’s perception of a possible risk can bring financial ruin even is the facts don’t support…[the] suspicions. (Lines 9-10)”

The Scaffold is a high viewpoint in the market place but also a site where one can see beyond the restraints of town and even time. For one person, ” . . . the scaffold of the pillory was the point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track which she had been treading since her happy infancy (p65)”. The experience of the scaffold has a profound effect on Hester. Living on the border between the town and the forest, she learns new freedom while seeing the conformist repression of the town. Hester sees what the townspeople ignore. She soon believes that because of her punishment on the scaffold and her perpetual reminder of it, the scarlet letter, she sees the sins of the entire townspeople and the hypocrisy of keeping them secret. Thus, her time on the scaffold has made her see the truth of the town and its lies. It is on the scaffold that Hester realizes no matter what she does the reality will not change until the minds and perceptions of the town’s people change.

Reverend Dimmesdale has a similar experience on the scaffold. Troubled by his sins and his failure to confess them, the reverend ascends the pillory in the dead of night to “confess” his sins to the world. Even though on one sees him, Dimmesdale feels ” . . . all the dread of public exposure [that] had so long been the anguish of his life… nevertheless- he found himself (148)”. The scaffold is where Dimmesdale first accepts his sin of adultery. His co-sinner, Hester and their daughter, Pearl, walk by, and the three of them stand on the scaffold together. This is the only safe place, save the outside forest, where the truth is told and accepted. All other times, the illusion is kept up and the secret hid. Pearl remarks to her mother that “In the dark nighttime, he calls us to him . . . on the scaffold yonder . . . But here in the sunny day, among all the people, he knows us not, nor must we know him! (215)”. Thus, Reverend Dimmesdale is still committed to the town’s values of ignoring truth and going along with the public perception.

The forest is also a location where the truth is not forbidden, but accepted. After Hester’s judgment on the scaffold, she and her daughter Pearl escape there. The trees of the forest, unlike the people in town, listen to Hester and Pearl and welcome them, sins and all. On the edge of the forest, Hester and Pearl see the town and know that they do not belong. Their knowledge of the truth is dangerous to the townspeople. Therefore, they choose to live in their own world, free from the perception of the town. Hester is weary of the town; warning Pearl “We must not always talk in the market place of what happens to us in the forest (225)”.

Throughout the novel, the scaffold and forest show up in the book and represent many different things. Their primary function, however, is to provide a driving wedge between those who recognize reality, like Hester and Pearl, and those who only see what they want to see. The article also illustrates this fact. These people, blindly guided by public perception hide themselves in lies and never confront the truth when it is presented. Even while the dying reverend confesses his sin on the scaffold, the townspeople deny ” . . . his dying words acknowledged, nor even remotely implied . . . the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne [had committed] . . . (241)”. Hawthorne’s point is clear: there are those who embrace the truth, and those who avoid it at all costs.