Scarlet Letter Vs. Crucible Essay, Research Paper

Comparing The Scarlet Letter to The Crucible

Adultery, betrayal, promiscuity, subterfuge, and intrigue, all of which would make an excellent coming attraction on the Hollywood scene and probably a pretty good book. Add narration, mass-hysteria and witch trials and the end result would be The Crucible, but if you added Puritan ideals and writing styles, making it long, drawn out, tedious, wearisome, sleep inducing, insipidly asinine, and the end result is The Scarlet Letter. They are both considered to be classics.

The most obvious theme contained in both works is sin. In The Scarlet Letter, the sin that has been committed is adultery and has produced an illegitimate child. Hester Prynne, and the outspoken and praised minister of the Puritan community Arthur Dimmsdale were the adulters who committed the sin and produced the child Pearl. Throughout the story Hester is dehumanized for her sin, while Dimmsdale is still thought to be the “almighty” minister. In similarity from The Crucible, sin is put on trial. The Crucible directly addresses the themes and ideas from Salem Witch Trials. The young girls and their “leader” Abigail are the core of sin and evil in the girls and the community. Throughout the story accusations are “thrown” at others from the community who are believed righteous. Ultimately in this story the sin is “coming” directly from the black-man or the devil. The girls are believed to have formed a pact with the devil and are now attempting to lure others to come with them. In both books, mental capacity causes illness. Hester’s sin of adultery has been confessed, and as its symbol, she wears the Scarlet Letter A. As a result, the sin does not destroy her inward spirit; instead, she gathers her strength and courage, and flourishes in spite of the Letter A. The author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote it best: Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred. (Scarlet p.242) If all the people know your worst, only then can they begin to work through that and begin to see your best. If all they see is the good side of you, then you are holding back from them, lying to them. Only when you show both sides do you begin to gain penance, and that is exactly what Hester Prynne did. In total contrast to Hester, Dimmesdale does not confess his sin until after it totally destroys him. He hides his adultery and fails to claim Pearl as his daughter; his punishment is guilt and self-condemnation, intensified by the torture of Chillingworth. As the shame over his cowardice increases, he suffers total deterioration, both mental and physical. Only when he publicly confesses his adultery and stands openly with Hester and Pearl in the final scaffold scene is there any sense of relief for him; by admitting his sin, he finally frees himself from his guilt and from Chillingworth’s hold over him, which allows him to die peacefully. In The Crucible, when the girls are found dancing in the forest, Betty becomes sick and won’t talk or open her eyes. Other people’s daughters become sick too. Rumors spread that witchcraft is involved in Betty’s illness and the development of the plot begins. The girls were so scared of the consequences for dancing in the forest that their brains manifested it into something that isn’t true to over compensate for it. They became ill, but they were physically ill only because they made themselves believe they were. The nerves and immune system react to what the brain is feeling/thinking therefore sending signals that they are sick. The forest outside of Salem was unknown country where the dreaded “Black Man” was fabled to meet with witches and sinners. The forest was also away from Salem, its prying eyes and harsh judgments. Here events could be open and free. Here was the only place where Hester and Dimmesdale can meet and talk freely of the sin they shared seven years previously. In this respect the Puritans were accurate in their superstition of the Black Man living in the forest. There was indeed in the forest a place where freethinking could go unfettered by Puritan code. This “Black Man” was no more than the freedom to form ideas outside of the Puritan way of life. It was dangerous to Hester and Arthur as they conspired to flee the colony instead of facing their problem. Mistress Hibbins recognized the change in Dimmesdale and acknowledged that he has had un-Puritan ideas. So he had, in a sense, met with the Black Man. The forest, at its most basic level was simply that place in the Puritan mind that non-conforming Puritan thoughts could enter. Pearl said to Hester, “Come away, mother! Come away, or yonder old Black Man will catch you! (Scarlet p. 123) The forest is not only an important location for meeting of “sinners” but also conjuring of spirits and greeting the devil. As seen in The Crucible, the girls “met” with and conjured the spirits of the devil and the underworld. This was a meeting place of the mortal world and that of the dead. In both works the forest, or other darkened place, symbolizes an evil realm that only few enter, and never return from.

Love versus lust is a characteristic that is expressed through the relationships between several leading characters in both works. From The Scarlet Letter, the illegitimate and inappropriate relationship between Hester and Dimmsdale was the most noticeable. Their love for each other extends far beyond a mere “crush” or aching to be with the person, for they have consummated a relationship together which ended with the birth of the daughter Pearl. Throughout the book, Dimmsdale had outward expressions of love for his daughter Pearl and her mother Hester, “Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which . . . ” (Scarlet p. 233) expresses the fondness of Dimmsdale for his daughter Pearl. However, in The Crucible, such types of relationships are not evident. The only relationship in the story occurred between John Proctor and Abigail. This “relationship” was more of a crush and lusting by Abigail than a true relationship of love as that of Hester and Dimmsdale. Proctor and Abigail have simply been in a “relationship” without the knowing of Goody Proctor, John’s wife, nor the knowledge of the other townspeople. Proctor becomes determined that his affair with Abigail will not continue, ” . . . I will no longer come for you.” (Crucible p. 77) Relationships in both works were not the main focus of the stories, although they were evident, and both were not appropriate in the Puritan society of the time. Both were often punished by death or public humiliation such as that of Hester Prynne. Utilizing the theme of punishment, the central character, Hester Prynne, was forced to wear an embroidered scarlet letter on “her bosom” for the rest of her life as a sign of her sin of adultery. This object; however, has the opposite affect as a punishment and has people of the community begin to forget the original significance of the letter it comes to bear a new meaning, able. In the thirteenth chapter of this book, Hawthorne comes out and in the third person states “the scarlet letter had not done its office.” Hester has gone beyond the letter of the law and done everything asked of her. She becomes quite a popular seamstress, heralded all over the town of Boston for her work. She herself wears only drab clothing of ordinary clothing, punishing herself with humility. There is only one piece of clothing that she is forbidden to make, the wedding vail, it is assumed that she cannot possibly represent the values of a marriage. It would be most improper to have one who has committed as sin as she had to be involved in the marital bonds of another couple. Nevertheless, she does her work dutifully and completely. Although Hester suffered ignominy, her suffering was nothing compared to what people had to undergo if they were charged with witchcraft in The Crucible. The girls involved with Abigail, like Mercy Lewis and Mary Warren named many people of the town as witches. These people were put and jail and would be hanged if they did not confess to the crime of devil worship or witchcraft. Many innocent people, such as the amiable Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey were hanged as a punishment. Being hanged for something that you did not do is much worse a punishment that having to wear the letter A for committing adultery.

After a complete analysis of such themes of The Scarlet Letter and The Crucible, one would be able to better understand the viewpoints of both authors, Hawthorne and Miller. One can also see that the ignorance and superstition of the people of Salem were responsible for the witch hysteria. This kind of hysteria could never exist in a society like the one we currently live in because today’s courts are much better than the theocratic church/courts of the late 1600’s. Another thing to consider is that our Declaration of Independence and our freedom states that we have freedom of religion. Partly because today the church and state are not combined, sins, such as adultery, are taken much lightly today than in the time of The Scarlet Letter. One thing that can be learned from these two books is that pride is sometimes the most essential thing in life.

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