The Signigicance Of The Scaffold Scenes In The Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

The three scaffold scenes bring great significance to the plot of the Scarlet Letter. The novel is based on repenting the sins of adultery. The scaffold represents a place of shame and pity but also of final triumphs. Each scene illustrates the importance of the scaffold behind them with many potent similarities and differences.

In the first scaffold scene Hester Prynne is depicted standing alone while clutching her baby. She has been sentenced to the scaffold for three hours to face public condemnation. In the Puritan society, where this novel is set, public shame is a source of entertainment. On this occasion the townspeople are present to watch the judgment of Hester. As the townspeople are ridiculing her, the narrator is praising Hester for her untamed but lady like beauty (60-61). The narrator goes so far as to compare her to “Divine Maternity” or Mother Mary, the ideal woman, the woman that is looked highly upon by the whole Puritan society (63). However, the conditions are set up to show the change in Hester due to isolation and discredit of the Puritan society. Throughout this scene the Puritans are condemning Hester for her sin as the narrator is condemning the Puritans for their severity.

Many years later, in desperation for a remedy to cure his tortured soul, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale takes to the scaffold where Hester had once suffered her shame. He is envious of the public nature of her shame and therefore he ascends the scaffold to confess his sin, that he too, is guilty of the same sinful passion Hester was caught up in. Dimmesdale screams in pain and is fearful that the people of the town will wake up and come see him upon the platform. The narrator tells us that the townspeople took the cries instead for that of a witch (144). This second scaffold scene is slightly different than the first. Most importantly, Dimmesdale chooses to expose his sin at night when no one can see. Also, the fact that he tells Pearl he will not hold her and her mother’s hand on the scaffold in daylight when everyone can see signifies that the minister still does not have the courage to take responsibility for his sins. He has only acknowledged his sin to God and that they will all stand together on judgment day (148-149). On the platform his role is reversed. He is no longer the sullen and heartsick minister, but a wry man who laughs at everything that occurs on ground level. He is no longer the Christian minister, but the pagan whose screams were assumed to have come from a witch and finally, no one would believe that this church symbol, high with esteem and virtue, would be in the same place as Hester Prynne, the lowest woman in town (147).

If anyone were to pass by the scaffold when the meteor shower lit up the night sky they would have seen the minister with his hand over his heart, Hester Prynne with the letter blazing on her breast, and Pearl, the link between the two. Instead the only observer happened to be Chillingworth who at this point already knows the truth (151). The fact that none of the townsfolk saw the minister at his moment of confession symbolizes that they don’t suspect anything of their minister. Also, the fact that Wilson walks by Dimmesdale without seeing him is another sign that the people can’t imagine their beloved clergyman being anywhere near sinful as Hester. The night on the scaffold differs from person to person. Dimmesdale sees it as self-acknowledgment and purification. Pearl sees it as a demerit on Dimmesdale’s part since it is nighttime, and the sexton, who found Dimmesdale’s gloves on the scaffold saw it as a trick by Satan to dispirit their minister (152-153).

Near the end of the story Dimmesdale is giving his Election Day sermon. After the speech he is in the procession to the evening feast when he sees Hester and hesitates. As he turns to the scaffold he asks Hester and Pearl to join him. Chillingworth tries to stop him but Dimmesdale mounts the platform and begins his confession, naming himself “the one sinner of the world” (237). Near the end he tears away his ministerial band to reveal his own red mark of shame (239) and with his confession completed Dimmesdale dies. People who witnessed the third scaffold scene do not agree upon what they saw later on. Some say the mark came from his own self-torture, and some believe it was from Chillingworth’s poisonous magic, or that Dimmesdale’s inner remorse caused it, while others claim they saw nothing at all (240). The revelation bestowed in this third scaffold scene is that every man, no matter his status, can be guilty of the same sin as Hester. The last scaffold scene is the climax of the novel. All the characters that have been affected by the scarlet letter, Hester Prynn, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Pearl, are standing together on the platform before the public (236). This is where the narrator gives Dimmesdale his own voice, rather than giving a description of his speeches. When Dimmesdale confesses he is finally allowed to end his own suffering, to foil Chillingworth’s plan for revenge and settle matters with God and his parishioners. By taking powers within his own hands he manages to save himself and captivate the hearts of the townfolk, which allow him to die in the moment of his greatest glory.

Henceforth, it is seen that the scaffold is a place of shame and pity but ironically it ends up being the place where a great triumph has occurred.