

7. Read the first sentence of paragraph 3.

a. What happens?

The woman appears to the people who have come to see her and she hugs her baby.

b. What is the cause of the woman's reaction?

She uses the baby to hide something on her dress.

8. Read the following sentence.

a. Based on the context, what do 'one token of her shame' and 'another' refer to?

The woman uses the baby to hide something on her dress, so 'one token of her shame' refers to the baby, and 'another' refers to the thing on her dress she is trying to hide.

b. What conclusion does the woman reach? What does she do as a result?

She realises that both the baby and the thing on her dress are both 'token[s] of her shame' so her gesture is useless: she cannot hide her shame. As a result, she overcomes her initial impulse and lets the thing on her dress be visible.

c. Based on the situation and on the narrator's description of the woman's behaviour here and in the previous paragraph, comment on the phrase 'as if by her own free will' (l. 18).

The reader sees the woman repel the beadle in order to preserve her dignity, then looking at the Bostonians who are looking at her displaying symbols of her disgrace. Both cases show her to be a proud woman who refuses to appear forced to obey, but she actually has no choice besides the style of her behaviour: she cannot choose not to obey, she can only choose how she obeys, as is indicated by 'as if by her own free will' (emphasis mine). This phrase points to freedom as a pretence.

9. Read the following sentence.

a. What do you learn?

The thing that the woman was trying to hide is a letter A made of red fabric.

b. Analyse the construction of the sentence. What is its effect?

The phrase begins by three adverbials, followed by the verb and finally by the subject. This construction dramatises the description: it makes the appearance of the letter in the text a spectacular event which captures the reader's attention just as much as it captures the Bostonians' when it becomes visible to them.

c. Based on all the information the text has given you, what can you infer?

The woman has been arrested and imprisoned for a crime which is related to a baby and to the letter 'A'.

10. Read the text down to line 40.

a. What happens? What is Hester Prynne forced to do?

Hester Prynne is forced to stand on the pillory for a certain duration of time so that everybody can see her wearing the letter 'A' which indicates that she is an adulteress.

b. Compare the ends of the third and fourth paragraphs: what question(s) does the text raise?

The end of the third paragraph states that the letter A that Hester Prynne is forced to wear because she has broken the law itself breaks the law.

At the end of the fourth paragraph, the beadle speaks a legal phrase according to which the punishment he is administering is made legal by the king's authority; yet the Puritans are enforcing other laws than those of the kingdom of England.

The text thus questions the Puritans' relationship to the law: they are presented as rigoristic people, but they enforce laws whose legality is questionable, and the punishment itself is illegal.

The text also questions the meaning of the letter 'A': Hester Prynne is made to wear it by Puritan justice, so that it represents the law, or legality, or law enforcement, or a movement from law-breaking to law-abiding; yet, because it breaks sumptuary regulations, it represents illegality, law-breaking. Therefore the letter 'A' appears as an ambiguous signifier, one with several conflicting signifieds, raising questions about language: linguistic signs are explicit but polysemy prevents their explicitness from dispelling ambiguity.

c. Pay attention to what the beadle says about Massachusetts. Compare it to other sentences that may have been expected in this place: what are the differences? How does this connect with the Puritans' beliefs?

The beadle may have been expected to praise Massachusetts for not allowing crime to go unpunished. Instead, he praises Massachusetts for not allowing crime to remain hidden and does not literally mention punishment.

Puritan justice appears to rely on Puritan theology: Calvinists believe that sinners can only be saved from hell by God's undeserved grace, so that no human being or human institution can have any effect on anyone's salvation. Because of their belief in predestination and in the impossibility to influence salvation, which means that they cannot do anything, Puritans sometimes try to know and look for signs of salvation. Here, the narrator presents their justice as concerned with making criminals visible instead of punishing them.

Furthermore, the nature of the punishment is also underpinned by Puritan theology: by sticking a letter onto the criminal, Puritan justice manifests its preference for abstract linguistic signs over images, based on the Protestant emphasis on a written book, the Bible, as their unique source of authority, and on their emphasis on the commandments, which prohibit idolatry. They make the woman a page on which they write what she is.