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SIN, SHAME, GUILT AND REDEMPTION IN HAWTHORNE'S
THE SCARLET LETTER

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ABSTRACT

The New England Puritans considered sin as a direct result of the Fall and sinners were detracted from the society. Unrepentant sinners damaged the community's soul and were sometimes ex-communicated or banished from the society as is the case with Hester the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne. Sin is an act which violates a known moral code. It is a rebellion against, or resistance to, the direction of supreme authority, and enmity toward, avoidance of, or hatred of the good. Guilt results in being responsible for committing an offense. According to Hawthorne, guilt is a stain upon the soul. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne delves deep into man's moral nature thoroughly exploring the effects of sin on the major characters Hester Prynne and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. The character of Dimmesdale is used to show the conflict and Hester's to depict how a person's actions should be taken into consideration for salvation.

Key words: Puritans, Fall, moral, sin, guilt, soul, rebellion,

The role of sin is deeply considered by both the New England Puritans and Nathaniel Hawthorne. According to the Puritans, sin was a direct result of the Fall and sinners detracted from society. Covenants made with God proposed a collective guilt that the Puritans were eager to avoid. Unrepentant sinners damaged the community's soul and were sometimes ex-communicated or banished from their society. As a way to avoid sin, ministers preached against the various sins and threatened damnation for the degenerate. Hawthorne called himself 'the most obscure man of letters in America'. *The Scarlet Letter* is his most celebrated and outstanding piece of work, both in its theme and in its style. It is one of the most amazing and disturbing novels in the American literary genre. The root conception of *The Scarlet Letter* had already been expressed in his tale of *Endicott and the Red Cross*. The setting of the novel is the Puritan society of the mid seventeenth century Boston. According

to Morgan, "Sin was a violation of order, grace and restoration of order" (*The Puritan Family* 15). Morgan simply wants to tell about sin and how to turn away from sin. God is supposed to have created order from the existing chaos. The puritans, in the hope of emulating their creator attempted to lead lives of order within a chaotic world. Therefore, sin, is an act which violates a known moral code. The term sin may also refer to the state of having committed such a violation. Commonly, the moral code of conduct is ordered by a divine entity, also known as the divine law. Fundamentally, sin is rebellion against, or resistance to, the direction of supreme authority, and enmity toward, avoidance of, or hatred of the good. Guilt results in being responsible for committing an offense. It is an emotional experience that that happens when a person realizes or believes that he or she has violated a moral standard, and bears significant responsibility for that violation. It is closely related

to the concept of repentance. Hawthorne himself defined guilt as a stain upon the soul, and raised the question whether even the thought of sin, without its being carried out, will not draw down the full weight of a condemning sentence, in the supreme court of eternity. His conclusion is that the mere thought of seduction, or murder, or legal chicanery is a positive sin. Hawthorne called himself 'the most obscure man of letters in America'. The *Scarlet Letter* is his most celebrated and outstanding piece of work, both in its theme and in its style. It is one of the most amazing and disturbing novels in the American literary genre. The root conception of *The Scarlet Letter* had already been expressed in his tale of *Endicott and the Red Cross*. The setting of the novel is the Puritan society of the mid seventeenth century Boston. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne delves deep into man's moral nature. Describing it as "a hell fired story" and "a tale of human frailty and sorrow", the novel is a searching study of sin and its effects on human personality. The novel thoroughly explores the effects of sin on the major characters Hester Prynne and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. It also portrays the conflict between predestination and individual redemption as a result of actions carried out by the person. The character of Dimmesdale is used to show the conflict and Hester to depict how a person's actions should be taken into consideration for salvation.

The adultery is over and done with before the book begins; it is "a triangle after the event" as Herbert German calls it. An old scholar by the name of Roger Chillingworth already dehumanised by the abstruseness of his studies makes the mistake of marrying a young wife. He sends her to America, to the Puritan colony of Massachusetts, with instructions to live quietly until he comes. But he does not come until the day when she is being publicly exposed as an adulteress, for she has borne a child, and she will not name its father. She, Hester Prynne, must stand on the scaffold, holding the child until her shame is thoroughly known; and even after she must wear the letter A, embroidered in scarlet on her bosom. The entire community has assembled to make a public spectacle of Hester's private sin. The iron-visaged good women of the settlement pour malice and abuse on her and feel

that she deserves a greater punishment (TSL 8). As for the governor, the magistrates, and the ministers,

Out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgement on an erring woman 'a heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned her face. She seemed conscious, indeed, that whatever sympathy she might expect lay in the larger and warmer heart of the multitude. Not one of the judges sees any virtue in her refusal to reveal the name of her lover. Even the kindly old John Wilson berates this token of her loyalty as unregenerate hardness and obstinacy: while the unrecognised lover himself, with curious moral hypocrisy, calls upon her from his elevated stand with the other dignitaries to denounce the companion of her sin and not deny to him "the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now pressed to thy lips!" (TSL 9)

The effect of the scene – of its cruelty, and the general absence of pity and understanding in it – is heightened rather than dispelled by the occasional soft words of the young mother, the one sympathetic observer in the hostile crowd, who tries ineffectually to remind her neighbours that Hester's suffering does not need this added inhumanity to make it an adequate atonement for her sin.

Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter ...God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished had given her a lovely child, whose place was on this same dishonoured bosom, to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of a blessed soul in heaven. (TSL 10)

This sacred obligation of motherhood keeps her from plunging headlong into that abyss of sin towards which society's punishment would naturally impel her. As Hester suffers public shame and contempt, she is determined to recognize only the letter and not the living embodiment of her guilt,

and her release from confinement immediately follows. Hester has thus gained only a partial insight from her plunge into the pit and her consequent ascent. Although she is free to leave the colony altogether, she does not do so, but instead takes her stand at the farthest edge of the settlement. The reason is that even though society has cast her off, she has not lost hold of the magnetic chain of humanity. "The chain that bound her was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but could never be broken". (TSL 11) the deeper reason was her own consciousness of sin. Being an outcast and with her own judgement of society's institutions, she neither seeks nor is allowed a full place in it. Uniting the perspective gained from the pillory with the word, the letter branded upon her, she puts off the old garments and finds a new self in her art of needlework which is seen an act of penance. In fact, Hester accepts her position in the Puritan community with proud humility. According to Turner, "her sin taught her to recognize sin in others and to look more warmly and sympathetically into the hearts of sinners." Her salvation lies in truth. In her conversation with Dimmesdale she says: "Oh Arthur!" cried she, forgive me! In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did hold fast through all extremity; save when thy good – thy life – thy fame -- were put in question! Then I consented to a deception. But a lie is never good, even though death threaten on the other side! Dost thou not see what I would say? That old man! -- The physician! – he whom they call Roger Chillingworth! – he was my husband!". (TSL 27) It seems that Hester "handles her guilt more successfully than Dimmesdale because her conscience is less highly developed than his" Crews 143).

The sin of sin is not so much sin as the concealment of that sin, for to pretend sinlessness is to assume superhuman goodness or holiness. To acknowledge the sin only to God may be far short of absolution, because a good reputation may be what the culprit most desires as was the case with Dimmesdale. To acknowledge the truth before men is indeed to acknowledge it before God, for the human conscience is God's presence in man. Physically Dimmesdale is delicate, morbidly

conscientious, very sensitive, and very intellectual but "in no state of society would he be called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the presence of a faith about him, supporting while it confined him within its iron framework. He was a follower of creeds, norms and law. He was not speculative like Hester. The framework of his priestly position supported him. He had never gone through crucial experiences calculated to make him question generally received laws, although in a single instance he had transgressed one of the most sacred of them. His delicate, sensitive nature shrank from confession and yet, without confession his tortured soul could find no rest. Hawthorne also wants to drive home the point that while sin which is exposed and confessed, frees the sinner's mind and often brings about a transformation in the life, sin which is concealed and cherished tends to cause ruin and death. Dimmesdale suffers during the seven years of silence. He regrets his sin and feels anguished at the same. Guilt eats away his very soul and threatens to destroy him. Frederick Crews comments on the devastating effects of guilt:

The breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired. It may be watched and guarded; so that the enemy shall not force his way into the citadel, and might even, in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded. But there is still the ruined wall, and near it, the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph. (TSL 137)

Though suffering from guilt, Dimmesdale loved the approval of his people so much that he could not voluntarily give it up, and yet he knew it must be done. In the forest he tells Hester,

Happy are you Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom: Mine burns in secret: thou little knowst what a relief it is after the torment of seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am: Had I one friend --- or were it my worst enemy" --- to whom when sickened with the praises of all other men, I

could daily betake myself, and be known as the vilest of all sinners, methinks my soul might keep itself alive thereby. Even this much of truth would save me. But, now, it is all falsehood! -- all emptiness! - all death! (TSL 30)

Dimmesdale has been wrought to a pitiable condition after seven years of hypocrisy. His life is full of lies. Dimmesdale is the most pathetic character in this tragedy of sin. According to Arlin Turner, different types of sin are represented in The Scarlet Letter. They are sins of the flesh, sins of weakness, sins of will and the intellect. The transgression of Hester and Dimmesdale stand condemned by the laws of society. (59)

Hester works towards her salvation by becoming involved in performing charitable acts and kindness to the people in the community and also by showing her concern for the sick, the poor and the dying. Sin is precisely what allows Hester to develop and change as a person. As a result of her sin, fall, eventual remorse and penance, she rises higher than she fell. Hawthorne observes that "... in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence". (TSL Chp. 24) Outwardly she has been a penitent sinner, and by her good works she has transmuted the letter into a badge of mercy. To many, the letter has the effect of a cross on a nun's bosom.

Chillingworth is isolated by his guilt which is represented by his fearsome appearance he has grown in the village. He only descends not to re-ascend. As in his injured pride and inhuman curiosity he devotes himself in prying into the minister's heart, whatever goodness had been his had always been negative, the mere absence of overt evil – disappears and pride moves into what had been a merely cold heart: prompting to revenge and displacing intellectual curiosity. He becomes a moral monster who feeds only on another's torment, divorced wholly from the sources of life and goodness. In fact Chillingworth too is guilty of an unforgivable sin of intellect, and much less

forgivably so. Chillingworth's comments reveal the importance of Dimmesdale's confession: "Hadst thou sought the whole earth over, there was no one place so secret, neither high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me,--save on this very scaffold. 'Thanks be to Him who hath led me hither!' answered the minister. Yet he trembled, and turned to Hester, with an expression of doubt and anxiety in his eyes, not the less evidently betrayed, that there was a feeble smile upon his lips. 'Is not this better,' murmured he, 'than what we dreamed of in the forest?' 'I know not! I know not!' she hurriedly replied 'Better? Yea; so we may both die, and little Pearl die with us!' 'For thee and Pearl, be it as God shall order,' said the minister; 'and God is merciful! Let me now do the will which He hath made plain before my sight. For, Hester, I am a dying man. So let me make haste to take my shame upon me!' (TSL 35) For Dimmesdale, salvation and grace come when he casts off the gown of hypocrisy and shows his real personality.

The other characters suffer isolation for their sins. Pearl was born as an outcast remains at war with her world until the expiation of the final confession scene. Hester lives at the edge of the village and years afterward, when Pearl has married, returns to finish out her life at the same spot. The scarlet letter, when she first wore it, "had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself", (TSL 38) and as time passed it became everywhere apparent that she was banished. Hester expiated her evil by means of repentance and a virtuous later life. Hester represents the repentant sinner, and Dimmesdale the half-repentant sinner and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner. Therefore, Hester individually achieved salvation even though her sin was clear and her dream of freedom impossible. What Hawthorne tries to imply is the fact that individualistic sin has direct effect on the social health of the community in which its members are living. These members find salvation only when they try to purify their souls and try to be moral toward each other.

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