

SIN FROM THE PURITAN AND HAWTHORNE' E POINT OF VIEW IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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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. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* thoroughly explores the effects of sin on Hester Prynne and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. While Hawthorne agreed with his Puritan ancestors on what constitutes sin, Hawthorne attributed a beneficial use to sin if the sinner fully repented. He emphasizes a heightened self-awareness in both of his characters, a better understanding of sin when observed in others, and a shift in society's perception of sin. In this way, Hawthorne deviates from the Puritan views to emphasize the Romantic philosophies surrounding sin.

What constituted sin to the Puritans? According to Morgan, "Sin was a violation of order, grace a restoration of order" (*The Puritan Family* 15). In this quote, Morgan tells us about sin and how to turn away from sin. God formed order from existing chaos. The Puritans, hoping to emulate their creator, attempted to lead lives of order within a chaotic world. They struggled to rise above the surrounding wickedness by entering into a set of covenants made with God. Many of these covenants specified how they would interact with each other and with non-Puritans. The

covenants framed their daily lives, acting as a civil contract or agreement as well as spiritual. The covenants gave them the perception of being anchored to something solid in a changing world. However, even Puritans were human and sinned. For them, sin was the act of moving away from the order attributed to God. Under this definition, sin entailed anything that disrupted the relationship each Puritan strove to have with God.

Puritans viewed sin as wrong in all instances. For them, there was never an acceptable reason for sinning. There was no situation that the Puritans felt warranted secrecy. If a mistake was made, then the proper action to pursue was confession. A voluntary declaration of the sins or wrongs committed was preferred. However, there were times when voluntary confession was not amply elicited from the sinner's own conscience. The Puritans believed that confession wrung from a stubborn sinner's heart due to accusation was not as valid as voluntary admittance. Still, they felt that confessing by any method was favored over hiding the sin. When sin was discovered, the Puritans looked to their ministers to help the sinner once again take steps to return to the fold of God.

Hawthorne did not choose a secret sin but rather one that could not be hidden, because of the child, as one focal point of discussion in his romance. Yet, on the part of Dimmesdale, the sin of adultery *does* remain hidden until the minister's revelation near the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. The focus on Dimmesdale and his secret sin points to Hawthorne's understanding of the paradoxical nature of Puritan society. The Puritans strove to live in accordance with God's will, yet in order to accomplish His will they believed it was necessary to impose their lifestyle upon everyone else. The unregenerate person was not welcome among them because of the covenants

that tied the entire community to God. Hawthorne takes a seemingly godly man and reveals him as the vilest of sinners, worthy of the death penalty among New England Puritan culture.

Conveniently for Reverend Dimmesdale, no action can be taken against him because he dies.

His death is not surprising, considering how sickly he has been portrayed throughout the romance, nor can Hawthorne be expected to close with Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl happily embarking on a new life. Skeletons in the cupboard, secrets, and hidden passions cannot stand against the full light of day.

Hester's adultery is discovered because she becomes pregnant. Her hidden sin is aired in the public sphere and condemned. Yet, she manages to keep one secret; the identity of her lover is never revealed through her. She declares that the scarlet letter is "too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!" (Hawthorne 68). No matter the amount of entreaty or chastisement, Hester refuses to name her fellow sinner. She does not believe that the stern-faced magistrates have the right to know because they cannot understand what prompted her to commit adultery in the first place. Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, the townspeople try to discover the identity of Pearl's father, indicating that Hester has not told them. Nor has she told Pearl. At the market-place, waiting for the New England holiday to begin, Pearl asks, "Will the minister be there? [...] And will he hold out both his hands to me, as when thou ledst me to him from the brook-side?" and is eventually rebuked by Hester with "Be quiet, Pearl! Thou understandest not these things" (Hawthorne 229). Hester is rarely portrayed as stern, but when she is, the minister is the topic of conversation that elicits harsh words.

on the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the scarlet letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. (53)

Although Hawthorne never labeled Hester's sin as adultery, there is no doubt as to why she has been called before the magistrates at the opening of *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only has the woman conceived a child without her husband, but she refuses to name her lover, thus adding obstinacy and concealment to her growing list of sins. After Hester is permitted to leave the prison and return home, she falls into a temporary state of melancholy where she ponders how she will *become* sin to the inhabitants of Boston. She realizes that she will "become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion [...] as the figure, the body, the reality of sin" (Hawthorne 79). Indeed, such moments do occur. Nearly every time Hester and Pearl leave their house, they are either chased by children, reviled by beggars, mocked by women, exhorted by clergymen, or serve as the visual lesson against sin on the Sabbath day. As far as the Puritans of Hawthorne's creation are concerned, Hester and Pearl are sin. In daily life, there were numerous instances when a devout Puritan might accidentally engage in sin. Morgan asserts that "For a child to make too much of its parents, a wife of her husband, a subject of his king was to place the creature before the creator, to reverse the order of creation, to repeat the sin of Adam" (*The Puritan Family* 21). These acts of sin were not wrong in and of themselves. Nonetheless, the Puritans, clinging to the belief that sin was a disruption of order, asserted that putting anything above God was sinful. Morgan clarifies sin with the words "to make too much of"

(21). It was only when a child, wife, or subject exhibited love that supplanted their love for God that they were treading the path of sin. This is why Reverend Dimmesdale does not believe that he and Hester should be allowed eternity together. In their passion, they allowed the other person to rise above God. For that moment, Hester became more important to Dimmesdale than God, just as Dimmesdale became more important to Hester than God. The Puritans would not have been confused by or refuted the minister's response to Hester. Placing each other higher than God was their first sin. Adultery was the second. Attempting to hide the first two sins became their third sin.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan society of Boston initially treats Hester as an outcast. Their scorn of her, along with being made a physical representation of sin to all who saw her, was enough to cause Hester to distance herself. Immediately upon her release from the prison, she secludes herself in a "small thatched cottage" that had been "abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of [...] social activity" (Hawthorne 56). However, with no strictures upon where she must live, Hester strangely chooses to remain among a people who taunt and jeer at her. Not only do the devout Puritans set her up as an allegorical embodiment of sin, but they teach their children to despise her daughter Pearl.

The Puritan children need no enticement to harass Hester and Pearl aside from the fact that they are sinners. The bright A sewn onto the outside of her raiment names Hester as a sinner. Pearl shares in Hester's guilt for two reasons: she is the product of sin and the child of a sinner. Hawthorne's portrayal of how the Puritan children treat Pearl appears cruel and unfair to

the modern reader. The Puritans were staunch believers in crushing the evil within a person and society in order to ensure the thriving of what they termed righteousness. It was not enough to personally correct mistakes. The Puritans felt that one sinner among them condemned them all. Morgan comments that “In view of such a belief [collective guilt] the reason for restraining and punishing sin is obvious. Since the whole group had promised obedience to God, the whole group would suffer for the sins of any delinquent member, unless that member were punished” (*The Puritan Family* 10). Due to this belief in collective guilt, and in order to keep their covenants with God, the Puritans could not allow any member of their society to continue sinning once the sin had come to their attention. Immediate repentance was demanded. If the sinner refused, then the person was expelled from the society, forever shut out as the Puritans perceived humanity being shut out from God.

Describing Hester after Dimmesdale and Chillingworth’s deaths, her departure from Boston with Pearl, and her eventual return, Hawthorne endows her with more compassion, empathy, and generosity than previously seen. When the women of Boston entreat her counsel, Hester “comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and women on a surer ground of natural happiness” (Hawthorne 263). Hester’s ability to soothe the wronged and afflicted would not have been possible if she had not truly repented. Hawthorne’s belief in “an educative effect” of sin was void without sincere repentance as part of the equation. If Hester had sinned and then chosen not to repent, she would have remained as Adam after the Fall, cut off from the presence of God. While her repentance occurs over the

course of many years, in the end she does return to Boston and Hawthorne implies that when she returns, Hester brings inner peace.

In being a sinner, the sinner becomes capable of understanding other sinners.

With the entire town of Boston sinning, Mistress Hibbins meeting with the Devil, and the leaders incapable of sitting in righteous judgment, Hawthorne allowed himself infinite scope. However, it is both Hester and Dimmesdale who can see into the hearts of their fellow citizens. Hester's keen insight provoked by the scarlet letter warns her of fellow sinners. Her understanding grows not only with perceiving other sinners, but also with the task of raising Pearl. When Governor Bellingham and the other magistrates of Boston consider taking Pearl away from her, Hester pleads with Dimmesdale to defend her. His response is that "It is good for this poor, sinful woman that she hath an infant immortality, a being capable of eternal joy or sorrow, confined to her care,—to be trained up by her in righteousness,—to remind her, at every moment, of her fall,—but yet to teach her" (Hawthorne 114-15). Through focusing on Pearl's temporal and spiritual welfare, Hester's love grows and promotes assisting her fellow citizens. At the end of the romance, she goes so far as to transform into a sounding board for the people of Boston, particularly the women. Instead of the sinner bringing society down, Hester as the repentant sinner becomes an asset to the community.

Hawthorne thought that sin was necessary in order to truly understand humanity. In this way, he debated with the Puritans over their perception of collective guilt. Rather than feeling one person would drag down the entire society, Hawthorne concentrated on the "conflict between passionate, self-assertive, and self-expressive inner drives and the repressing

counterforces that exist in society and are also internalized within the self” (Baym *The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career* 124). But while the conflict between inner drives and social mores are indisputably a part of character in Hawthorne’s works, “internalized” social counterforces may receive considerably less attention from Hawthorne than Baym asserts. This is especially seen in the case of Hester. Hester internalizes aspects of the Puritan society of Boston, such as the concept of adultery as sin, but this internalization does not keep her from committing adultery, nor does it prompt her to speedy repentance. American Romanticism in the nineteenth century expounded the belief that the individual was more important than the collective. This movement, studied by Hawthorne, explored how searching the individual’s interior brought enlightenment. Hester does not languish in guilt. She accepts responsibility and moves forward. For Hawthorne, it wasn’t a matter of collective guilt, but rather the thought of self versus self. The guilt Hawthorne centered his romance around was not necessarily Hester’s, but rather Dimmesdale’s. The minister, torn between a spiritual desire and a carnal desire, battles his own conscience from beginning to end. Baym’s observation applies more clearly to Dimmesdale than it ever does to Hester.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne takes the Puritans’ perceptions of sin and deviates to strongly demonstrate how the Romantic notion of individualism benefits both Hester and Dimmesdale. While he acknowledges that the sin of adultery is wrong, Hawthorne never specifically labels the sin, nor does he infinitely punish the sinners. Although Hester is exposed and chastened, she is not expelled from the community and in fact eventually carves out a niche for herself and Pearl within society. When Dimmesdale finally declares his guilt, Hawthorne re-emphasizes the belief that sin can help a person better understand humanity.

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