

Atoning for the Past, Writing for the Future

An analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's
The Scarlet Letter

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I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them – as I have heard, and as the dreary and unprosperous conditions of the race, for many a long year back, would argue exist – may be now and henceforth removed (Hawthorne, 27).

In the aftermath of trauma, there develop potent residual effects that will influence those who were directly involved and affected for the duration of their lives, and effectively permeate the lives of future generations. Although one may not have experienced a traumatic event firsthand, the events of one's past will nevertheless have a significant impact on one's own development and course of life. Marianne Hirsch writes on the concept of "familial inheritance," defining it as one's "identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after...It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story" (Hirsch, 10). She is certain to state that she limits her inquiries to victims and bystanders, and excludes perpetrators from her analysis of generational trauma; however, can a descendant of a perpetrator not also be considered in some way a victim if the cruel actions of one's ancestors are not ones with which the descendant agrees? After all, there is still a transaction of familial

inheritance, as people inherit the burdens of shame and guilt that belonged to the generations that preceded them.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born into a Puritan family in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804, inheriting along with his family name, Hathorne, a history of persecution and a lineage that he later characterized as “stern, severe, [and] intolerant,” and left him feeling “haunted by his ancestor’s association with the punishment of the Quakers,” and the accused witches of the 1692 trials (Moore, 31). In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne expresses his disapproval for the cruel and merciless actions of select ancestors, as evidenced in the opening lines of this essay. Although his line of ancestry, he claims, provides him with a “home-feeling” and place of belonging within Salem, Massachusetts, it is clear that Hawthorne possesses a sense of responsibility to atone for his family’s past, as well as a desire to distance himself from their legacies through his expression of shame on their behalf.

Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* can certainly be read as a product of generational trauma, as he attempts to witness and work through the trauma inflicted by his predecessors, as one who was not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions, and symptoms of the previous generation(s) (Hirsch, 12). His mother, Betsey Clarke Manning Hathorne, was left to raise her three children without her husband, under the supervision of her strict and stern Puritanical in-laws. Perhaps she served as a bit of inspiration for Hawthorne as he created his heroine, Hester Prynne, for although his mother did not conceive her first child, Elizabeth, out of adultery, she did conceive her out of wedlock, which was also severely frowned upon by the Puritans, particularly her husband’s family, with whom she resided. Hawthorne

frequently expressed his displeasure with living in a Puritan household through his writing, referring to himself as a “prisoner” trapped in a “lonely chamber” (Murfin, 5). His own experiences under the “rigidities of the Puritan faith,” coupled with the shame he felt on behalf of his ancestors who were active in the persecution of the Quakers and in the testimonies and judgments against those accused of witchcraft, served as Hawthorne’s motivation to create a world in which a sympathetic, and ultimately benevolent, heroine suffers at the hands of a close-minded and judgmental Puritanical community that deems themselves worthy of assuming the power of God’s judgment (Moore, 9).

There is one ancestor in particular on behalf of whom Hawthorne found himself most compelled to repent. In “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne describes him as having “inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him” (Hawthorne, 27). The classification of a persecuting spirit as something to be inherited suggests that it was something deeply ingrained in the blood of his family, and implies that a long line of other persecuting spirits have preceded him. This ancestor can be easily identified as Hawthorne’s great-great-grandfather, Justice John Hathorne, the relentless and unapologetic judge from the Salem witch trials of 1692, from whom he so desperately sought to be dissociated that he added a “w” to his name. Hathorne, “the chief questioner of the presumed witches, always seemed to suppose them guilty,” and was “cruel in his questioning” of the accused women (Moore, 38). Although in theory Hathorne’s position as a judge required him to be impartial, he assumed more of a prosecuting role throughout the witch trials, actively seeking to condemn any woman against whom there was the slightest accusation. His accusational and relentless approach to the trials,

coupled with his refusal to repent for his actions, brought a great amount of shame to the Hathorne name. Considering that the public torture and societal alienation of Hester is reminiscent of those victimized by the witch trials, the novel can be read as Hawthorne's "belated act of repentance, an expression of regret...for the sins of an ancestor," as well as his attempt to deliver a critique of the Puritan community in which he was raised, yet from which he often himself felt alienated, in hopes of opening the eyes of others to the close-minded, accusing, and even hypocritical nature of his ancestors (Murfin, 10).

Hirsch suggests that "trauma may also be a way of seeing through another's eyes, of remembering another's memories through the experience of their effects" (Hirsch, 12). The members of the Puritan community in *The Scarlet Letter* place a great emphasis on the need for a sinner to repent before the eyes of the public, to endure the torment and judgment of their fellow citizens, and to serve as a deterrent for others inclined toward sin. They, especially the women, feel as though they have been personally wronged by the actions of just one, Hester Prynne, and long for her to suffer the most painful punishment: "This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die" (Hawthorne, 56). For Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* provided a space in which he could attempt to understand the experiences of Hester, of the women who fell victim to the persecutions of his ancestors, and even offer a different perspective on the humanity within them as he endows Hester with an individuality that separates her from the label "Adulteress". Emily Budick takes this notion a step further, considering Hester and Hawthorne to be "counterpoints," as they are both products of a culture that they choose not to escape, despite their rejection or critique of its tendency to define in absolutes. "[T]o some significant degree, the book itself is also a scarlet letter..., making the same accusation of

shame against the Puritans that they levy against Hester,” for as Hawthorne “embroiders the letter and tries to free it from the literalism of his Puritan ancestors,” Hester embroiders and decorates her letter extravagantly, bringing a sense of individuality to the sin that brands her (Budick, 171-172). Just as he does in “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne places the letter to his breast, “[experiencing] a sensation...of burning heat...as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron,” as he recounts and lives through Hester’s experiences, imagining what one must endure when placed under the scrutiny and “heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes” (Hawthorne, 43, 60). Murfin identifies Hester as a semblance of women marginalized by society, hence in offering her a space in which her story can be told, Hawthorne provides such women, particularly those who were outcast by the hands of his own ancestors, with a voice that had previously fallen on deaf ears, illuminating a spectrum of possibilities that may point to a new and different truth. By doing so, as well as attempting in earnest to understand and relate to their experiences, Hawthorne paves an avenue through which he may begin to atone for his family's past.

In his essay, “Concerning Ancestors,” Solomon Stoddard, an important Puritan religious leader in the late 17th and early 18th century, regards "the mistakes of one generation" to be "the calamity of succeeding generations," and asserts that "if the practices of our fathers in any particulars were mistakes, it is fit they should be rejected; if they be not, they will bear examination. If we be forbidden to examine their practices, that will cut off all hopes of reformation" (Stoddard, 223). In *The Scarlet Letter*, one of Hawthorne's first tasks is to elucidate the differences that exist between generations, despite the connections forged by a common name and history. In *Main Street* he wrote,

"Let us thank God...for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them" (Moore, 18). In an early description of the townspeople in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne illuminates the apparent differences between generations in the crowd: "there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding, than in their fair descendants...for, throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom...a character of less force and solidity, than her own" (Hawthorne, 55). Moreover, Hawthorne makes a point of noting that the most compassionate of the women in the audience is also the youngest. Perhaps this is Hawthorne's attempt to evidence his own distance from predecessors of a "coarser fibre."

He further attempts to separate himself from "that early severity of the Puritan character" by expressing his dismay with the merciless crowd that condemns Hester in the opening pages of the novel (54). On a very superficial level, there is a direct correlation between the nature of one's character and one's appearance, as depicted by Hawthorne. The most severe woman in the crowd is described as the "ugliest as well as the most pitiless," which stands in direct contrast to Hester's ineffable beauty, for although she has sinned, there is a beautiful, benevolent spirit within her that Hawthorne hopes to portray physically (56). Moreover, he labels his Puritan townspeople, as "being of the most intolerant brood that ever lived," for they "had got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly, or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child; and therefore scorned them in their hearts, and not unfrequently with their tongues" (Hawthorne, 85). It is important to note that Hawthorne simply categorizes Hester and Pearl as "outlandish," which certainly detracts from the severity of Hester's sinful deed

that cast them out of mainstream society, which perhaps reflects his own opinion that her actions were not as evil and wicked as his townspeople suggest. Furthermore, the word “vague” implies that there is a greater depth to the scarlet A that resides on her breast. By merely glancing at the recognizable symbol, onlookers believe that they have all of the information they need to know: that Hester is a malicious adulteress that does not deserve a moment of explanation to justify her sin. However, Hawthorne’s classification of their idea as “vague” suggests that adultery is not the only thing that defines Hester, that it is a terrible misconception to label her as such without pursuing any line of further investigation into the circumstances surrounding the act.

Hawthorne’s creation of a compassionate heroine, one who attempts to use her artwork as a means through which she can express herself and put a twist on her branding letter, sheds light on the Puritans’ general perception that considers all adulterers to be exactly the same, regardless of the different situations in which their adulterous acts were committed or inspired. As A.N. Kaul claims in his essay “The Scarlet Letter and Puritan Ethics,” readers are encouraged to sympathize with Hester, for without

disputing the sinfulness of her deed, [Hawthorne] presents her also as a source of new life and moral vitality and as a woman of the tenderest human sympathies in a cold and intolerant society. He provides her adultery with a background of long bondage in a loveless marriage, and invests the passion which leads to it with ‘a consecration of its own’ (Kaul, 13).

Although she has certainly sinned, it is difficult *not* to sympathize with Hester, and consider the punishment bestowed by her community to be unnecessarily vindictive and extremely severe. Hawthorne presents Hester and Dimmesdale’s affair as somewhat substantiated and understandable due to Hester’s negligible relationship with Chillingworth and genuine love for Dimmesdale, individualizing her adulterous act and

separating it from other situations that are perhaps more inexcusable and less pitiable, delivering a critique on the Puritans' inability to perceive shades of gray.

Readers are further encouraged to receive Hester with compassion and empathy, for both of the men involved, her husband Chillingworth and lover Dimmesdale, displace the blame that is thrust publicly on Hester onto one another. Chillingworth, although deeply troubled by the sinful act that has been committed against his honor, does not fault Hester for much other than her weakness and inability to resist the love of another man, while he accepts responsibility for confining her in a marriage that he knew from the beginning would not thrive on love:

Misshapen from my birth-hour, how could I delude myself with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy!...[F]rom the moment when we came down the old church-steps together, a married pair, I might have beheld the bale-fire of that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path! (Hawthorne, 71).

From the moment Chillingworth arrives back in town, there is not much surprise in his reaction to the news – only anger and a deep desire to avenge the unknown man that is responsible. He does not refute Hester when she reminds him of conversations in which she warned him of her lack of love and desire for him before they were married: “Thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any” (72). It is troublesome to fault Hester for her actions, considering she had been honest with Chillingworth about her feelings for him *before* she married him, especially since her husband was presumed dead at the bottom of the sea at the time that she consummated her relationship with Dimmesdale, a man in whom she finally found love, of which she had so long been deprived.

Hester's love, not lust, for Dimmesdale makes her situation exceptional, for her relationship with him was not simply born out of a wild sexual desire that could have been fulfilled by anyone; rather, it was the product of an unadulterated love that she had never found in the husband that neglected her. Although Hester has the option of separating Pearl and herself from the community that shuns them entirely, and starting anew and unbranded elsewhere in perhaps a more understanding and supportive community, her feelings of unity and love for Dimmesdale keep her anchored to the outskirts of a town that she despises: "There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution" (75). This passage is very revealing of the way in which Hester perceives her relationship with Dimmesdale. She views their connection as one that transcends the understanding of earthly beings, believing that if the townspeople could only possess the insight of God, they could see the power and sanctity of the love she shares with Dimmesdale and not punish them for wanting to be together. It is astounding how deep her devotion is to the Dimmesdale, for she stays despite having accepted the notion that they will not be able to continue their relationship during her life time. Her love for Dimmesdale, coupled with the prospect of a united afterlife with him, is what empowers her to keep his secret and remain in isolation, enduring the torment that is inflicted upon her and their daughter.

These feelings are not unrequited. For the majority of the narrative, Dimmesdale is drained of life and sanity as he is gradually eaten away by his guilt and fear of divulging to his eager congregation his deepest and most shameful secret. While

Dimmesdale is plagued by shame and disturbed by Chillingworth's malicious attempts of revenge against him while posing as his doctor and confidant, moments of escape with Hester on the outskirts of town seem to be his only cure. Following each encounter with Hester and Pearl, the decrepit minister returns to town stronger and rejuvenated, and delivers his best and most awe-inspiring sermons. By the end of the novel, Dimmesdale is completely transformed as he marches in the procession with the knowledge that after the ceremony, he, Hester, and Pearl will leave for Europe together: "never, since Mr. Dimmesdale first set his foot on the New England shore, had he exhibited such energy as was seen in the gait and air with which he kept his pace in the procession. There was no feebleness of step, as at other times; his frame was not bent; nor did his hand rest ominously upon his heart" (184). Dimmesdale has not only recaptured the old energy to which his congregation had been accustomed, but has gained an entirely new and more powerful liveliness. This demonstrates that the prospect of Hester's love and company provides him with a greater strength and vigor than he had ever before possessed.

Hester and Dimmesdale are essentially the only two characters in *The Scarlet Letter* that are portrayed performing good deeds for other people. While Dimmesdale has long captured the admiration and esteem of his congregation, to whom he lends a sympathetic ear and invigorating words of wisdom, Hester lends a helping hand to those in need. As Moore suggests, Hawthorne holds a deep admiration for Hester, "who despite her sin grows from that experience into helping others (Moore, 250). Although she is rejected and alienated by the town, Hester serves as a benefactor for its people, namely the poor and, eventually, other young women who feel similarly oppressed by the stern and suffocating regulation of the men that control them. She is presented as having a

compassionate and helpful spirit, while the Puritans are depicted as ungrateful and cruel, as they accept her help and yet continue to scorn her: “The poor...whom she sought out to be the objects of her bounty, often reviled the hand that was stretched forth to succor them. Dames of elevated rank, likewise...were accustomed to distil drops of bitterness into her heart...that fell upon the sufferer’s defenceless breast like a rough blow upon an ulcerated wound” (Hawthorne, 79). Despite their ill treatment of her, Hester relies on her “forgiving aspirations” and the use of prayer to assist her in enduring the disrespect and hurtful cruelties that are scoffed her way in return for altruistic service.

With great strength of character, Hester continues to grace the town with her benevolent services and abide by the rules of the land, though she ponders over them with great scrutiny and disapproval within the limits of her own mind, for several years. As a result, she is able to transform the meaning of the stigmatized scarlet letter in the public eye: “Hester’s nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness...Such helpfulness was found in her, - so much power to do, and power to sympathize, - that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able” (131). Time allows Hester the opportunity to prove to the rest of the community that she is a good woman, and she eventually gains back some of the respect and trust that she had lost through her sin. After all, as Hawthorne writes, “it is to the credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates” (130). This line clearly condemns the Puritans for having treated Hester with hatred and malice, as it classifies the only plausible reason for such sentiments to have been their selfishness, rather than blaming Hester’s actions for a deserved reaction. It is “selfish” of the Puritan community to have

considered themselves as having been personally offended and sinned against by the private and intimate deeds of the pure-hearted pair, while the aftermath of a sin should be dealt with solely between the sinner and his or her God.

The manner in which Hester's public appearance and reputation is transformed truly speaks to Hawthorne's opinions regarding the evolution of succeeding generations, and the ability of one to see more clearly than one's predecessors, while nevertheless being influenced by them. Although it takes a considerable amount of time for the townspeople to become softened to Hester, it is a feat that is even more difficult for the men in the community of power, who are the most extreme and steadfast in their adherence to Puritanical law and belief:

The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people. [Their] prejudices...were fortified in themselves by an iron framework of reasoning, that made it a far tougher labor to expel them...Individuals in private life, meanwhile, had quite forgiven Hester Prynne for her frailty; nay, more, they had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, but of her many good deeds since (132).

For those who are less resolute in their convictions, acceptance is much less difficult; however, they were nevertheless originally influenced by those in power, for they treated Hester as their rulers deemed appropriate for many years. Similarly, children are influenced by their elders, for those are the people who guide them, as well as those whose actions they emulate until they grow and begin making decisions for themselves and acting of their own volition. As a result, the beliefs and principles of the second generation will in some ways begin to diverge and soften, as have those of the townspeople from their rulers. At this point in the novel especially, Hester has become an increasingly likeable character, so her acceptance is something for which readers have

long been aspiring. Therefore, respect and regard for the townspeople rises, while disgust and disapproval of the magistrates, the pitiless and self-proclaimed superior ancestors, is maintained.

It is important to note that this transformation of Hester's public reception is not without a transformation of Hester's character, as well.

It was a sad transformation, too...[for] there seemed to be...nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace...Such is frequently the fate, and such the stern development, of the feminine character and person, when the woman has encountered, and lived through, an experience of peculiar severity...Much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought...It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society (133).

The closer Hester's conversion brings her to the typical Puritan commoner, the better liked she becomes. It is also evident that although Hawthorne respects her strength of character and independent, free mind, he views her as incomplete without the passionate side that had once made her so vibrant. She has become less beautiful, which expresses that although she may be earning back the adulation of her fellow townspeople, she is not necessarily changing for the better.

Although the meaning of the scarlet letter may change in the view of others, its significance remains the same to Hester. In the beginning of the novel, the town is worried that the symbol could be easily hidden by Hester and that along with its covering, so too would disappear the guilt. However, she professes that her internal shame and despair is "too deeply branded" for any bit of it to vanish (68). Regardless, there is an importance constructed by the townspeople in their role regarding Hester's punishment, as they believe that their involvement and recognition of her token of shame is essential

in making her suffering most unbearable, and thus successful. As a result, they believe that as soon as they begin to accept Hester and acknowledge her ability to live a pure, sinless life, her sin can vanish, as if their judgment is all that matters. Despite this belief, Hester does not allow her heart and conscience to get off easy and assume this mentality; rather, her knowledge remains that her ultimate judgment is yet to be delivered by God, and she is therefore unable to separate herself from the scarlet letter and its original meaning. When Chillingworth reveals to her that it has been discussed that perhaps the letter can be removed from her breast altogether, she stands unwaveringly in defiance: “It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge” (136).

What has remained hidden from public eye is that both Hester and Dimmesdale repent for their sin on a personal level, refuting popular opinion that the pair neither understands the consequences that will be bestowed upon them as a result of their sin, nor struggles with feelings of guilt and shame. Although it is something seemingly insignificant, Hester demonstrates great restraint as she refrains from making elaborate stitches:

Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them. Much of the time, which she might readily have applied to the better efforts of her art, she employed in making coarse garments for the poor. It is probable that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation, and that she offered up a real sacrifice of enjoyment, in devoting so many hours to such rude handiwork... To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin (78).

This is a completely private act of penance, something for which she receives no credit, aside from her own knowledge of having abstained from the only thing she has left to bring her joy, and the hope that God, her true judge, bears witness to this reparatory act of

self-deprivation. By rejecting “all other joys” as well, she does not leave herself with much while isolated from all other adults and separated from her lover. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, is in a particularly interesting position in the novel, for as a minister, he, even more than the rest, realizes and understands the implications of his sinful, adulterous actions, and thus struggles more severely than does Hester. Perhaps this can in some way be attributed to the way in which he repents, as he punishes himself bodily, inflicting injury and suffering upon himself in an attempt to atone for his sins. “His inward trouble drove him to practices... Oftentimes this Protestant and Puritan divine had plied [a bloody scourge] on his own shoulders... It was his custom, too, as it had been of many other Puritans, to fast – not, however, like them, in order to purify the body and render it the fitter medium of celestial illumination, - but rigorously, and until his knees trembled beneath him, as an act of penance” (120). Not only does the pair simply bear the burdens of guilt and shame, but they also add to the punishments to which they are already subjected in an effort to intensify their suffering and make it just a bit more difficult to tolerate, on a personal level, as they see fit.

Publicly, the punishments endured by Hester and Dimmesdale present an interesting dichotomy: while Hester is tortured under the scrutiny of the entire community, to which her most immoral deed has been exposed and exploited, Dimmesdale struggles with the praise and adulation that he continues to receive from the congregation, which he regards as undeserved, considering they are not aware of his relationship with Hester. Hester walks in “agony” as she passes by her judgmental peers, feeling “as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample on,” as “venomous stabs” pierce her bosom, aware that it is the scarlet letter from which

they cannot peel their eyes (59, 60). Conversely, Dimmesdale is pained by their “reverence and trust” in him while he deems himself “a pollution and a lie”: “It is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him!” (119).

It is clear that for both characters, there is more than meets the eye – a concept that the Puritan community fails to grasp. Because they so love and respect Dimmesdale and view him as analogous to an angel that performs only good actions, they fail to acknowledge the possibility that he, like the rest of them, is capable of committing a sinful act. Similarly, they care not to look behind the letter that brands Hester and into her benevolent soul, until long after they have benefitted from her services. Hence, for several years, they simply cast her aside, disregarding the possibility that there lies an explanation behind a deed that may offer it some redemption, that there lies, out of sight, a power that is better equipped and deserving of delivering a true judgment of her character. Hawthorne scorns the Puritans as they assume the position of “self-constituted judges,” deeming themselves capable of determining the ways in which Hester Prynne should be punished and begin to repent under public scrutiny after committing what is arguably the most private of all sins: adultery. According to Thomas Hooker, an influential Puritan minister of the 1600s, believed that

by sin we jostle the law out of its place and the Lord out of His glorious sovereignty, pluck the crown from His head and the scepter out of His hand; and we say and profess by our practice, there is not authority and power there to govern, nor wisdom to guide, nor good to contact me, but I will be swayed by mine own will and led by mine own deluded reason and satisfied with my own lusts (156).

Just as Hooker would assert that Hester had taken the power from God’s hands in her sinful act of adultery, is it not true that the Puritans do the same when they assume the power of judgment against her? Is it not the right of God to judge and decide who is

worthy of heavenly redemption and who is not? Rather than leaving it to God, the Puritans take the situation into their own hands and allow their religion and law to decide the ways in which Hester should be treated and punished as the result of her sin.

Hawthorne stands in stark opposition to the Puritans' belief that they are correct in their judgments of Hester, warning that "when an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived" (Hawthorne, 107). He frames the novel in such a way that readers are directed to be skeptical of the opinions of the community, and to search for the redeeming qualities that Hester possesses. The views of the townspeople are "uninstructed," and not ones that should be accepted blindly. Perhaps this stems from Hawthorne's convictions that, in reference to the witch trials, "the accused were all innocent," describing them as "martyrs on the 'blighted path' to the gallows" (Moore, 45). Woven into his work is the notion that earthly beings are incapable and unworthy of making judgments and determining the sanctity, or lack thereof, of another person's soul, which is clear through the narrator's commentary, as well as that of Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester's secret lover and accomplice.

John Wilson, the eldest clergyman in Boston and the magistrate in charge of delivering a sentence on Hester, is described by Hawthorne as one that "had no more right than one of those portraits would have, to step forth, as he now did, and meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish" (65). It is unclear exactly why Hawthorne makes this assertion. Is it because he agrees with his character, Dimmesdale, that one should not "dare thrust himself between the sufferer and his God" (114)? Or is he suggesting that Wilson may not be of the pure and spotless morality that he is believed to possess?

As Murfin suggests, Hawthorne was extremely skeptical of those who believed in the perfection of morality, and the concept of universal sin is thus quite prevalent throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. While Hester, branded, her darkest and most shameful deed exposed to the world, struggles under the unrelenting scorn and torment of her fellow townspeople, she cannot help but consider the possibility “that the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides” her own (80). This suggestion that although the Puritans may appear to be “pure as new-fallen snow; while their hearts are [actually] all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves,” does not undermine the sinful act that has been committed by Hester and Dimmesdale; rather, it highlights the hypocrisy that is being displayed by the Puritan community (111). It is very probable that most of those in the community have sinned, yet they treat Hester as though they have not and are therefore superior to her. These sins are implied but are not evidenced by the text; however, it is important to note that as Christians, they are essentially sinning in their cruel and merciless treatment of Hester, a fellow Christian, which is a sin to which all readers are witness. Hawthorne portrays “the society which persecutes her... as not only bigoted and joyless but essentially evil; for to it belongs...the unpardonable sin of violating in cold blood the sanctity of a human heart” (Kaul,13). The Puritans are guilty of sin, even though they hope to mask and absolve their own by creating a spectacle around that of another.

Thomas Hooker argued that the original sin should be held accountable for any other sins that follow as a result: “It’s the cause which brings all other evils of punishment into the world...[t]he sting of a trouble, the poison and malignity of a

punishment and affliction, the evil of the evil of any judgment, it is the sin that brings it,” and “[i]f then sin brings all evils, and makes all evils indeed to us, then it is worse than all those evils” (161). Therefore, according to Hooker, Chillingworth and the Puritans are essentially excused from any sins they may commit simply because Hester’s sin served as a catalyst. Hawthorne, on the other hand, sought to accentuate, not overshadow, their cruel and sinful behavior by illuminating their lack of justification as judges, and portraying the detrimental effects that their attempts at revenge created. Hawthorne displays Chillingworth as immoral for seeking vengeance against Dimmesdale, even though it was the minister who wronged him first. As Hawthorne questions the ability of the Puritans to judge Hester, Dimmesdale expresses his dismay with Chillingworth for assuming the same authoritative role against him: “But who art thou, that meddlest in this matter? – that dares thrust himself between the sufferer and his God?” (114).

There is also a physical transformation that occurs, as if Chillingworth is a visible warning against the harboring of a vengeful, malicious spirit:

Calm, gentle, passionless, as he appeared, there was yet, we fear, a quiet depth of malice, hitherto latent, but active now, in this unfortunate old man, which left him to imagine a more intimate revenge than any mortal had ever wreaked upon an enemy...All that guilty sorrow, hidden from the world, whose great heart would have pitied and forgiven, to be revealed to him, the Pitiless, to him, the Unforgiving! All that dark treasure to be lavished on the very man, to whom nothing else could so adequately pay the debt of vengeance! (116).

Although Dimmesdale is the original sinner, it is clear that Hawthorne’s opinion is that Chillingworth is committing a much worse crime, thus refuting Hooker’s assessment that the first sin cancels out all which stem from it. Dimmesdale is described as having a “great heart”, while Chillingworth as an “unfortunate man” filled with malice. Further, it is evident that Hawthorne believes Dimmesdale to have committed a forgivable sin, for it

is stated that anyone, other than the man who was directly affected by his actions, would take pity on him and sympathize with him, which suggests that his otherwise pure heart, coupled with the validating reasons for his affair with Hester, is strong enough to outweigh his sinful deeds.

What truly sets Chillingworth and the Puritan community apart from Hester and Dimmesdale is intent. Hester and Dimmesdale possessed no intention to hurt anyone with their affair, while deeming Hester to be a widow and reveling in the excitement and passion of a genuine love; however, those who assume an air of judgment and conceit against them have every intention of inflicting pain and torment on their souls. It is this, as is evidenced through the demonic transformation of Roger Chillingworth as he carries out his vengeful plot, that is the true sin: “In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man’s faculty of transforming himself into a devil... This unhappy person had effected such a transformation by devoting himself, for seven years, to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture” (137). It is for this reason that Dimmesdale assures Hester that Chillingworth is the worst sinner of the three, his “revenge blacker than [their] sin,” for he has violated the sanctity of a fellow human’s heart, as have the Puritans, through his harboring of hatred against the pair (154).

Although Hawthorne was compelled to write as an act of repentance on his ancestors’ behalf, the generational trauma he was experiencing was not the sole factor that urged him to write *The Scarlet Letter*. In general, “the subject of [Hawthorne’s] fiction was often the stuff of self-delusion, faulty vision, and moral absolutism,” which was not only enacted by his ancestors, but was also, in his view, being practiced by his contemporary family members and comrades. There were other forces at work in the

middle of the 19th century that encouraged Hawthorne to take up this sense of responsibility nearly two centuries after the Salem witch trials of 1692: namely abolitionism. “[A] Puritan sensibility inspired much of the righteous indignation of antislavery thought, [and], [a]s a consequence, Hawthorne’s critique of his reform-minded contemporaries often coincided with his critique of his ancestors” (Reynolds, 56). Hawthorne was not pro-slavery, but he was against abolitionism, particularly the more radical strains, as he had a fear of revolutionary violence. Moreover, he viewed slavery as something in which earthly beings did not have a right to intervene. In his biography of Franklin Pierce, Hawthorne delivered a “notorious statement” about his views on slavery, claiming that in opposition to the position of abolitionists, there was the mentality to which he adhered, one that “looks at slavery as one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances” (50). He also found himself increasingly at odds with abolitionists as they “professed to have direct access to the will of God” (41). These themes are reverberated throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, as Hawthorne delivers a critique of the Puritan community that persecutes Hester that is strikingly similar to his view of the violently revolutionary abolitionists with whom he disagreed. Hawthorne does not believe that Hester has *not* sinned by committing adultery, but he does not deem the Puritan community capable of discerning the ways in which Hester should be punished for it. Along a parallel vision, Hawthorne does not believe that black people deserved to be enslaved, but he is nevertheless of the opinion that God alone has the right to develop a solution for it if necessary.

As Larry J. Reynolds explores in his essay, “‘Strangely Ajar with the Human Race’: Hawthorne, Slavery, and the Question of Moral Responsibility,” there are several

connections between the mentality of the witch trials and the abolitionist theory of his day that allowed him to, whether consciously or subconsciously, deliver a societal critique pertinent to both his familial past and the issues of his time:

Witch hunting and abolitionism...formed a particularly strong bond in Hawthorne's mind due to a number of parallels he would have recognized, including a Puritan religiosity intent on ridding the Devil from the land, the sensationalistic demonization of others (accused witches and slavemasters, respectively), obsession with forbidden sexual relations...and perhaps most important, a failure of vision caused by fanaticism and madness. Hawthorne may not have discerned these parallels at a conscious level, yet they entered his unconscious mind and shaped his political and moral vision (55).

Influenced by his fear of acquiring the persecuting spirit that possessed many of his ancestors, Hawthorne made the decision to stand outside of the abolitionist movement, as his "mournful gaze" of reflection on the tragedy enacted by the "faulty vision" of the witch trials "strengthened his resolve to resist the pull of religious fanaticism and righteous causes" (55). There existed a very tight connection between Hawthorne's "political views and his imaginative thought," and he thus drew upon his experiences with crazed abolitionists and accounts of the cruel judgments and vicious actions of his Puritan ancestors as he created the ruthless, bloodthirsty community, strengthened by a mob-mentality, that would surround his protagonists in *The Scarlet Letter* (43).

His political stance against abolitionism also created another realm in which Hawthorne found himself able to identify with Hester's character. He was often criticized and condemned by friends and family for his "lack of commitment to the Northern cause," and was accused of being a heartless advocate for slavery (42). Like Hester, Hawthorne was thus alienated for being of a lesser morality; however, "if Hawthorne recognized, if only subconsciously and imaginatively, the psychohistorical

parallels between the Salem witchcraft delusion he felt guilty about and the Concord abolitionism that came to possess his friends and family, then his resistance to and comments upon the latter become more understandable if not less morally irresponsible” (60). Obviously believing himself to be morally sound and considering any type of revolution incited by abolitionists likely to instigate violence and a degradation of society before bringing about any improvements, he viewed his opponents as hasty in their decision to join the cause and as incapable of free-thinking, as they gained affirmation and intensity from the comfort of groupthink.

Whether intentional or not, the demonization of black people that was apparent during the years of slavery comes through as Hawthorne has his characters refer to the devil as the “Black Man” on several occasions; however,

it is not the Black Man as devil or monster...that poses the greatest threat to the peace of the community. Rather, it is the violence-prone mob of ‘gossips’ who surround the scaffold and reveal a frightening bloodlust, wanting Hester to be branded or executed...For Hawthorne, specter evidence, lies, and mental weakness go hand in hand, and the multitude, when aroused by false stimuli, especially if it is salacious, can be positively fatal (64).

As is evidenced through his writing, in Hawthorne’s view, it is neither Hester nor the enslaved black people that should be demonized by society, for they do not threaten societal order; rather, it is the group of like-minded people that are merciless in their judgments of others who oppose their moral code and beliefs that ignite fear and pose a threat. There is a slight divergence in the parallel, for the abolitionists were fighting to free the slaves, while the Puritan community of *The Scarlet Letter* sought to enslave Hester; however, the message is nevertheless clear: Hawthorne gives priority “to faulty perception in his treatment of witch hunters, abolitionists, and self-righteous reformers,

for in his view the violence they cause represents...a failure of vision," which to Hawthorne was perhaps the greatest sin of all (58).

Pearl, though considered by the Puritan community to be "a demon offspring" brought to earth "through the agency of their mothers' sin...to promote some foul and wicked purpose," it is actually she to whom Hawthorne deals the most perceptive eye and the keenest sense of right and wrong (Hawthorne, 88). Perhaps it is because she is immediately categorized as an outcast of society upon her birth, and is thus excluded from the principles of the community that rejects her, that she is afforded a more accurate perspective of people's character and is a better judge of people and their actions. This can be read as Hawthorne's commentary that those completely outside of the Puritan community are of a better mind than those trapped within who are stifled by its "narrowness and blindness," which Hawthorne often sought to accentuate through his writing (Reynolds, 56). Even though Pearl is a being that is somewhat independent of the Puritan social order, she is, however, somewhat connected as a result of her mother's role within it. Therefore, Hawthorne enacts generational trauma through Pearl, displaying the hardships that one incurs when forced to deal with the lasting effects of an ancestor's actions, while also providing an optimistic future for her, and for all women, that reflects his belief that separating oneself from one's turbulent familial past is attainable.

From the moment she is born, Pearl inherits Hester's shame and guilt, as she is the product of sin, viewed by society as the scarlet letter personified: "Pearl suffers from the onslaught of her community's rigid beliefs as those beliefs are perpetrated against her mother. As Hawthorne points out, 'the child...seemed to have drunk in...all the turmoil, the anguish, and despair, which pervaded the mother's system' (Hawthorne, 69)"

(Daniels, 5). Without having done anything of her own volition to induce such tumultuous feelings to be harbored within her small frame, or to cause herself to be alienated by society, she must contend with both of these factors for the entirety of her youth. However, although she is influenced by Hester, who has been effectively silenced and dominated by the Puritans, she takes advantage of the freedom that has been granted to her and her mother by the scarlet letter, and refuses to conform to the wishes of society. After all, "Pearl is something new, created from the 'freedom of a broken law' - from her mother's choice to commit adultery - and her mother's choice to dress up the punishment, which thereby fills Pearl with the notion of the beauty of freedom itself" (7). From a young age, she acts with independence and defiance, aiming to appease no one if another's desires oppose her own.

Hawthorne has a tendency to describe her in a somewhat negative light, as she is often presented in moments of rebellion; however, he truly possesses a great amount of respect and admiration for her, acknowledging that she is merely perceived as demonic because she acts in violation of the traditional views of women: with courage, self-respect, pride, and a disregard for stifling authority. Hawthorne writes:

In the little chaos of Pearl's character, there might be seen emerging -- and could have been, from the very first -- the steadfast principles of an unflinching courage, -- and uncontrollable will, -- a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect, -- and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them (Hawthorne, 144).

It is clear that Hawthorne trusts Pearl's insight and judgment, which in turn encourages readers to trust her, even though the community, and even her mother, is frightened of her powers. Therefore, her responses in specific situations throughout the novel provide guidance to the reader as he or she decides how to perceive them. For example,

Pearl's indignant reaction to the children who mock her mother and herself as they walk through town provides another piece of evidence to support the notion that Hawthorne believes that the judgmental Puritans are wrong in their treatment of Hester and Pearl, and should too be punished. When the children threaten to sling mud at them, Pearl "made a rush at the knot of her enemies, and put them all to flight. She resembled, in her fierce pursuit of them, an infantile pestilence, -- the scarlet fever, or some such half-fledged angel of judgment, -- whose mission was to punish the sins of the rising generation" (90). In addition to the Puritans, she also acts in some ways as a prosecutor of Hester, refusing to accept her mother without the scarlet letter. As Cindy Lou Daniels writes in her essay, "Hawthorne's Pearl: Woman-Child of the Future":

When Hester and Arthur meet up in the forest and proclaim their continued love for one another, Pearl is stunned by her mother's ability to cast off, so quickly, the scarlet letter that has been the link between them for as long as she has had memory...She stares at her mother and Dimmesdale, until Hester catches a glimpse of her daughter and suddenly feels 'herself, in some indistinct and tantalizing manner, estranged from Pearl, as if the child...had strayed out of the sphere in which she and her mother dwelt together, and was now vainly seeking to return to it' (163). As a child, Pearl cannot make sense of the shock of seeing her mother without the letter, and she even forces her mother to don the letter again, returning order to the world as she knows it (Daniels, 8).

Although Hester feels as though this action is unkind, Pearl's actions are not intended to be malicious; rather, as Budick claims, Pearl is unable to accept her mother without the scarlet letter on her bosom, because she has come to realize that her very existence depends on it. Without the letter, there would be no Pearl. Moreover, she serves as Hawthorne's reminder that even when it becomes easy to forget that Hester and Dimmesdale have sinned at all, especially during scenes like the one cited above in the

forest, where their love appears genuine and their devotion to one another is undeniable, their actions are unpardonable by everyone other than God.

Through Pearl, Hawthorne presents an inspirational potential for women, allowing her to be "the sole character who completely casts aside the Puritan definition of the female and breaks away from the Puritan community to find happiness" (3). She is unwilling to accept the authority of a cruel, misinformed, and narrow-minded patriarchy, and finds joy as she pursues a life of her own that is independent from the forces that created and influenced her. Although Pearl is deprived of the opportunity to ever develop a true relationship with her father, the long-awaited kiss of acceptance that she delivers to Dimmesdale once he gains the courage to admit his guilt, signifies a transitional moment in which she is completely liberated from the trauma she inherited from her parents and can begin to lead the independent life she desired: "a spell was broken...and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (Hawthorne, 198). Daniels argues that Pearl's ability to act as an impetus toward good for Dimmesdale is representative of a change in the role of women, in which they are able to assert a certain power in a society that has thus far been dominated by men. Leading up to this moment, "when Dimmesdale continues to refuse to publicly acknowledge her, Pearl stands up for herself and refuses to acknowledge him. This willful action is certainly not the action of a 'good' Puritan child. It is, rather, the action of a young girl who is learning to take charge of her own life regardless of what the patriarchal society deems is appropriate" (Daniels, 8).

Although Hester and Dimmesdale are portrayed throughout the novel with much sympathy and understanding, Hawthorne does not allow a “happy ending” in which the characters have the opportunity to begin a new life together in a different and more accepting community as they had planned. Perhaps Hawthorne’s motivation for preventing Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl from ever creating a life together is the notion that “love cannot come to fruition in a world divided against itself, that the fortunes of the family community are intimately bound up with the character of the civil community in which it exists, and that, for the full realization of human happiness: ‘As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew’” (Kaul, 20). While writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne kept two particular groups in mind: the revolutionary abolitionists whose opposition divided the country and led to the Civil War, and the Puritans. By illuminating the limitations of the Puritan community and its propensity for breeding intolerant and unforgiving people, much like his forefathers for whom he felt obligated to atone, Hawthorne sought to induce a reflection and reconsideration of this lifestyle, as well as that of the abolitionists, for his belief was that nothing could be achieved in a discordant society.

In Pearl there lies the hope that succeeding generations can branch away from their ancestors and escape the sins they committed, eventually learning to develop a life of their own despite any early influences that may have existed, or family stigmas that may once have branded them. As Hawthorne is sure to note, Pearl had “nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation”; she ‘had been made afresh’ and ‘must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself’ (7). She begins life as an outcast along with her mother, considered wild and untamable, almost other

worldly, but is eventually able to overcome the early judgments that were thrust against her and develop into a successful, independent woman.

For Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* acted as a journey along which he could repent for the malicious actions of ancestors with which he did not agree. In doing so, he delivers a commentary on egocentric communities and their unworthiness to bestow judgment on another, especially when such judgment should be reserved for God. He creates a character that develops and grows in a manner similar to himself, one who manipulates his writing as a tool through which he can travel: “The scene of writing has become a space over which Dimmesdale travels, a ground he traverses to attain a goal...[and] the reader surmises, given the power of language, that the ‘word’ might just possibly transport its author (as narratively it will carry Dimmesdale) past life itself” (Diehl, 239). Hawthorne’s writing allows him to transcend his own earthly identity and assume that of another, of many others, in hopes of gaining a new understanding of those with experiences much different than his own. He thus offers a new perspective, not only to himself, but to his readers, as they suffer alongside Hester and Dimmesdale, empathizing with their suffering under ruthless scrutiny and realizing the evils of hypocrisy and faulty judgment, inspired with a desire for the reformation of humanity.

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