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Cover Letter

This research paper that I have written for ENG 489 has been the largest writing endeavor I've taken on in my body of work as an English major. Up until I had written this essay, my main method of writing was based on close reading rather than scholarly research. I had written a research paper for a class previous to English 489, but it was not as extensive as this assignment. So when this paper was assigned, I knew that I would be reaching into new territory and it would take a lot of self-discipline and hard work to bring about the results that I wanted.

As a writer, I needed to learn how to push through my own writer's block in order to bring about the analysis and conclusions that I wanted. This paper required me to plan out exactly what I wanted to explore, and to make sure that every claim I decided to make was supported. In other papers, where they did not require as long of a length, I was prone to brushing the surface of the evidence that I needed to provide my claim, and a lot of my arguments were up to my own analysis. In the case of this paper, I needed to make sure that my claims were backed up by evidence from other scholarly sources and not just my own thoughts and opinions. I think as a writer, I've gained a lot more appreciation for scholarly writings and the people who spend a large chunk of their time analyzing writers and their texts in order to better interpret the writings that some casual readers may take for granted.

Writing this paper took a very long time, and it also required a lot of digging into historical contexts and scholarly analysis that I had not done before. In my first five pages that I had written, I relied heavily on research. I had to learn how to set up my close reading in order to understand the magnitude of what I was analyzing, and to make clear to the reader how much of

an impact Hawthorne's writing had on American history and public discourse. Setting up my argument was the most difficult part for me, and the finished product is mostly polished from the comments I had received from peer review and my own personal revisions. Moving into close reading, I fell into the habit of making some comments in my analysis that weren't fully backed up with textual evidence. By participating in peer review with my classmates, they were able to recognize the places that I needed to work on, and I was able to look back at my claims and find evidence from the novel that helped to validate my argument.

My essay focused on analyzing Hawthorne's messages about shame and morality within *The Scarlet Letter*, along with its historical significance at the time of its publication. My goal was to get to the point of why *The Scarlet Letter* was such a controversial book at the time of its publication, beyond just the idea of Hester's affair being "scandalous", since Hawthorne's critique of the Puritans did not seem very controversial to me because that era of American history was long gone when the novel was written. I wanted to see exactly what Hawthorne's beliefs were about Puritanism, and how that carries into his beliefs about Christianity as a whole. We see this by analyzing religious connotations that Hester and Dimmesdale's characters hold, and how Hawthorne sends his messages through their development over the course of the novel.

What I will take away from this capstone course is how the influence that life and experience in a writer's life has on the evolution of their own writing in terms of themes and plot development. James and Hawthorne both use the plots of their novels to explore lessons and questions that they carry in their personal lives. After analyzing their body of work, the reader can see the personal changes and growth in understanding that both James and Hawthorne have undergone throughout their writing careers. Scholars who study their work see this change very clearly, and as a student who took this class I was able to get a glance at the work that they put in

so that we can understand the motivations of these writers who take such a large role in the history of American literature. This class has helped me become a better researcher and critical thinker, as well as it has aided in my writing skills.

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“Serving Its Office”: Shame and Reconciliation in *The Scarlet Letter*

Penance and penitence are two concepts entangled within the Puritan society in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale's personal shame and morality are clouded and impacted by the surrounding public's scorn and ostracizing attitudes towards them. Their characters and courses of reconciliation are dictated by the choices of the religious hierarchy surrounding them. Once they are removed from the public's eye and are able to focus on their personal shame for their sin, however, Hester and Dimmesdale find a different sense of shame than Puritanism has chosen for them. After suffering under Puritan influence and searching for their own sense of reconciliation, the characters come to a certain realization: “Of penance, I have had enough! Of penitence, there has been none!” (Hawthorne 116). They discover shame, but through a personal lens and through their own relationship with God, rather than the God that had been created and enforced by the Puritan influence that the characters live under.

Hawthorne's study of shame and society, along with its influence on social conversation, has been a heavy source of study by scholars since the novel's publication. Morality and sin have been at the forefront of Hawthorne's body of work, especially in relation to the Puritan history of America. Hawthorne's depiction of Hester and Dimmesdale's moral transformation serves as a reiteration of his own exploration of morality within the individual, rather than the surrounding public eye. Reading the text through the lens of New Historicism, Hawthorne's novel can be analyzed in terms of his relationship with his Puritan ancestry and his overall ideas of religious freedom in American society. The reader can discover how Hawthorne implemented his beliefs

about his heritage and his own moral values into his development of Hester and Dimmesdale's characters. Major historians and writers have analyzed Hawthorne's relationship with his Puritan ancestors and his understanding of shame and morality as tools in his writing, and analysis of his life can be used to understand why Hawthorne chose to focus his writing on these topics. From there, an analysis of critical reviews at the time of *The Scarlet Letter*'s publication offers the public's interpretation of what Hawthorne's message and conversations sparked about morality and religion to the public, and highlights the cultural prominence that Hawthorne had in order to spark such large social discussions. Finally, through a close reading of the text and analysis of Hester and Dimmesdale's struggles with penance vs. penitence, the true messages that Hawthorne seeks to send about shame, morality, and religious freedom can be discovered.

Hawthorne tends to focus on themes of morality and the individual's spiritual quest in his writing. In many of his novels and short stories, he delves into questions of faith, sin, and a sense of spirituality that have not been answered in his experiences with Christianity and organized religion as a whole. In seeking out salvation and a sense of goodness in the world, Hawthorne "believed that its true 'place' was interior only; that no 'Christian' commonwealth, no exemplary 'city,' and (more radically) no visible church could claim special status as a group elect of God" (Colacurcio 171). Therefore, in finding goodness, one should turn to oneself as a guide for repentance and forgiveness from God, rather than the social forces that seem to legislate morality from a man-made hierarchy of religious order. This can be seen in the line at the beginning of Hawthorne's novel: "Let [Hester] cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart" (Hawthorne 38). In conjunction with this belief, Hawthorne's work in *The Scarlet Letter* emphasizes the importance of personal guilt and morality, rather than use of social force to impose guilt on the individual.

In order to understand the commentary provided within the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, it is important to familiarize oneself with the attitudes and beliefs held by American society at the time of Hawthorne's writing. One way to approach this is to analyze the literary reviews that the novel received at the time of its publication. Multiple magazines and journals written by and aimed towards Christian groups at the time were deeply critical of the undertones that Hawthorne seemed to incorporate within the novel. Take, for example, a review of the novel stating that "by omitting repentance from his novel, Hawthorne was forced to exclude the final stages of forgiveness and restoration as well and thus further falsify his picture of Christianity" (Smith 139). Hawthorne's work was received by Christians as a large misrepresentation and attack on Christian values, with Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale serving as the figureheads for a so-called 'heresy' of Christian values.

Criticism of the novel also served as a testament to the novel's great popularity and its ability to influence public discourse. Negative reviews stated their worries that Hawthorne's discussion of sin and temptation in the novel sets a dangerous precedent for what kind of writing should be considered marketable and popular. Arthur Cleveland Coxe offers his opinion in the 1851 review to share this concern:

We hope our author would not willingly have it so, yet we honestly believe that "the Scarlet Letter" has already done not a little to degrade our literature, and to encourage social licentiousness: it has started other pens on like enterprises, and has loosed the restraint of many tongues, that have made it an apology for "the evil communications which corrupt good manners." We are painfully tempted to believe that it is a book made for the market, and that the market has made it merchantable, as they do game, by letting

everybody understand that the commodity is in high condition, and smells strongly of incipient putrefaction. (Coxe 250)

Given this popular mindset of literary reviewers, Hawthorne's writing and commentary is already at risk of angering the public and going against the cultural norms. *The Scarlet Letter* may open the door to more novels with a similar subject matter. Christian groups worried about the reputation of Christianity being at risk, and feared the opportunity of more exposure and disagreement to be publicly displayed by writers.

It is also important to note, though, that Hawthorne was a Christian himself. Many of his works reflect on different aspects of Christianity and interpretation of the Bible. Rather than sticking to one particular belief system, however, "Hawthorne was a God-centered writer. He was innately religious... he felt that religion was not the property of the professional and exclusive religionists" (Schwartz, 126-127). Hawthorne believed that it was valuable to construct conversations about religion and morality that may be considered risque and controversial, for the sake of moral progression and a deeper understanding of faith and its relation to the common good. Hawthorne did not seek to tear down religion or promote the abandonment of faith or belief in God, he instead sought to understand the personal relationship that one has with God rather than the standard belief systems that were commonplace at the time of his writing. By writing about the questions that one may have regarding religion during a time where such open discussion was looked down upon, Hawthorne opened the door and allowed his readers to begin asking questions similar to his own.

While novels of Hawthorne's nature may have been at risk of receiving the same critique by Christian reviewers, Coxe's review also acknowledges that this certain literary content is shown to be quite profitable. Taking this fact into account, we can see that Hawthorne's writing

may be popular *because* of its risque subject matter. Claiming that Hester and Dimmesdale were treated as victims rather than sinners, Hawthorne was ridiculed for having glorified characters that were not ‘holy’ or people to be modeled after. However, along with his other works such “Young Goodman Brown” or “The Birth Mark”, Hawthorne attracted an audience that recognized the universality of sin. Everyone has sinned in their lifetime and carries a sense of guilt with them, and Hawthorne focuses on this theme in many of his writings. With more ears open to discussion of the topic, Hawthorne’s voice and message in his novel has the potential to spark quite a large social conversation at the time of its publication. In another review of the novel by Edwin Percy Whipple, it is stated that Hawthorne’s novel is “expansive in sentiment, and suggestive in characterization... a novel of so much tragic interest and tragic power, so deep in thought and so condensed in style” (Whipple 230). Hawthorne’s writing was appealing to readers because they were impressed by his style, which made reviewers worried that Hawthorne’s “vivid, imaginative prose style would entice and corrupt unsuspecting readers” (Smith, 140). Those who did not know the novel’s subject matter but knew of Hawthorne’s praise would fall upon his novel and be influenced by the messages that he sends within it. By relying on this controversial subject matter, in addition to Hawthorne’s highly praised writing style, *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a key indicator and influence on social discussion and has the potential to mark a change in popular culture and popular belief systems.

We can see Hawthorne’s influence in popular culture and public discussion even to this day. *The Scarlet Letter* continues its legacy as a thought-provoking novel that has been incorporated into the mainstream of high school literature curriculums. Prone to controversy even now, almost every high school student has been introduced to Hawthorne’s novel and develops an opinion surrounding Hester and her sin. Is Hester to be pitied by the reader for her

public humiliation? Or is she a character that selfishly avoids the punishment that she truly deserves? Hawthorne's novel continues to serve as a tool for reflecting on social commentary and to learn of Puritan history in the United States. Even as a society that has abandoned Puritan ideologies and beliefs, Christianity and its perceptions of sin and morality continue to be dominant in American society. Because of this fact, Hawthorne's legacy and its controversy has continued to stimulate public conversation.

One of the conversations that Hawthorne is eager to start is America's Puritan history and his own relationship with his Puritan ancestors. Hawthorne made specific use of Puritanism as a main source of setting and plot motivation in *The Scarlet Letter* and many other writings of his. Hawthorne is directly linked to Puritan culture, as he regularly referred back to his Puritan heritage as a concept to explore in his writing. He is aware that he does not align himself with Puritan beliefs, despite its large influence within Hawthorne's ancestry. In "The Custom House", Hawthorne writes that "no aim, that I have ever cherished, would [Puritans] recognize as laudable; no success of mine-if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightened by success- would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful" (Hawthorne 11). He recognizes that his lifestyle would be disapproved of by Puritan society, almost mimicking the ways that the Christian reviewers disapproved of his writing as well. It is as if Hawthorne is aware of his reputation among those who cling to religious and cultural ideals of their time, and seeks to prove a point and send a message to those who carry different beliefs as him.

At the same time that Hawthorne's exploration of Puritan culture serves as a benefit to his own curiosity, he may have found this subject to be an important topic to explore because of its historical significance and impact in America. Puritan history was a great source of Romantic

inspiration for combining reality and the imaginary because “for the author himself, the strongest reality of outline or scene was in the past, especially the history of New England” (Ryskamp 280). Puritanism was the first primary religion of the American colonists, with Plymouth, Massachusetts serving as the first major colony. Hester and Dimmesdale’s guilt and moral compass, which are a main focus within Hawthorne’s novel, are directly linked to the Puritan attitudes and social hierarchy that was present in New England during the novel’s time period. Puritan ideologies were a major influence on the criminal justice system and public perception of townspeople, thus punishing those who did not subscribe to Puritan ideals or acted in accordance with the religion’s set behaviors. Given these social and historical circumstances, Hawthorne is then prompted to give his own response to the moral discussion: in his case, a response and commentary that serves as a rejection of Puritan culture and of religious fundamentalism. The aftermath of this rejection, Hawthorne may hope, is that America may come to reconsider and move on from their current state of judgement after seeing parts of their own culture reflected in Hawthorne’s depiction of Puritan society.

After understanding the historical significance to Hawthorne and the society around him, we can now turn and focus on how the text displays his attitudes surrounding Puritanism, guilt, and shame. In Eileen Dreyer’s article “‘Confession’ in ‘The Scarlet Letter’”, she notes that “the interplay between the concepts of ‘penitence’ and penance in *The Scarlet Letter* bears a striking resemblance to the distinction between ‘contrition’ and ‘attrition’ as discussed by the historical Chillingworth” (Dreyer 80). The Puritan society focuses on emphasizing penance, actual acts that are to be committed in order to bring about God’s forgiveness, rather than focusing on penitence or the actual sorrow and feeling of shame that a person should have regarding the sins that they have committed. Hester’s penance manifests itself in the scarlet “A” that the

townspeople force her to wear throughout her life while Dimmesdale's penance manifests itself in the self-harm that he deems worthy through his Puritan beliefs. With these concepts of penance and penitence in mind, we can then analyze the characters' reactions to their social punishments and personal understanding of their sin in order to discover Hawthorne's message about shame within the text.

Firstly, we can analyze Hester's character in terms of her sin and how she perceives the scarlet letter as a form of penance for her wrongdoing. The red 'A' serves as her personal reminder of her sin and affair with Dimmesdale, designed by the authorities to permanently condemn her and her actions. Hester's punishment is to wear the letter for the rest of her life, making the 'penance' that she is ordered to serve last longer than the actual shame and penitence that she has for her sin. The 'A' loses its meaning for 'adulteress' as time goes on, despite the fact that society wanted the scarlet letter to serve as a lifelong sense of condemnation and punishment for Hester. The townspeople hope that "the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast... as the figure, the body, the reality of sin" (Hawthorne 53). Hester does not view the letter as a personal reminder of her sin, but as a personal reminder of how she has been outcast from society. The penitence that she wishes to serve is overshadowed by the public disgrace that she has been given through the letter.

Hester Prynne's character outwardly rejects the condemnation that she receives from the public. As she is forced to stand upon the scaffold to expose her sin to the public, "with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, [she] looked around at her townspeople and neighbors" (Hawthorne 39). Right from the start of the novel, Hester disregards her reputation within the Puritan society, and takes her punishment with a sense of contentment rather than shame. The crowd of people around her does not need to make

sense of her decisions, and she refuses to allow the perception of herself by others to affect her own understanding of guilt for her sin. The scarlet letter is a personal reminder for her penitence, but the public's awareness of what the letter means does not help her in her journey for reconciliation. The hierarchy of her town has forced her to present her sin to others and to mark herself forever with the consequences of her actions, yet Hester seeks a life beyond the one that has been set for her by the community at large. She seeks to "leave [the] wreck and ruin here where it happened", "meddle no more with it", and "begin all anew" (Hawthorn 119) in a state where she can escape the social pressure and find her own freedom. She knows that society's forcing the letter upon herself will not bring about a true sense of penitence, since the penance is so widely known by the public and up to the judgement of the townspeople around her to decide whether or not she is truly forgiven.

Dimmesdale's reaction to his shame is similar to Hester's in the way that the punishment that has been decided for him does not feel sufficient for him to actually feel sorrow and regret for his actions. Dimmesdale's position in society as a Puritan minister guides his decision of how he is to punish someone who has committed adultery like he has. Despite the fact that the townspeople are not aware of his sin, Puritan perception still guides Dimmesdale's form as penance. He takes it upon his role as a minister, a representative of the Puritan morality that is prevalent in his community, to become his own punisher. By harming himself in such macabre, intensely painful manners, his "self-flagellations are viewed as penances, and the inferiority of such self-imposed punishments to true confession is admitted by the minister himself" (Dreyer 80). His self-harm does bring about the sense of forgiveness that he seeks to feel. In Dimmesdale's outcry of frustration, that he has had enough of penance and not enough penitence, he realizes the flaws in his own beliefs about how one should seek forgiveness and

reconcile themselves with God. In addition to this, the evolution of his sermons to the townspeople show the transformation he is undergoing, where “he preached a discourse which was held to be the richest and most powerful, and the most replete from heavenly influences that had ever proceeded from his lips” (Hawthorne 97). As Dimmesdale begins to search for reconciliation with God on his own terms, it is reflected in the work that he does in sharing his spiritual experiences with the townspeople.

Hawthorne’s message about shame becomes clear after seeing how Hester and Dimmesdale experience their punishment: by placing too much emphasis and focus on the process and manner in which the penance is delivered and symbolized, there is no room made for the sinner to actually focus on their actual sin. Hester is outcast from society and her child is almost taken away from her by Governor Bellingham and the town judge as an additional means to punish her. Hester is denied anything that could redeem her from her sin and is forced by society to wallow in her shame rather than to work towards reconciliation. In Dimmesdale’s case, he feels the need to torture himself and cause harm to his body, denying himself any healing that could bring about a changed state. Too much pressure is placed on the guilt and shaming aspect of the individual’s penance, to an almost torturing degree. Hawthorne’s descriptions of the pain and suffering of Hester and Dimmesdale from the “dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of [their] li[v]e[s]” (Hawthorne 95) shows his disapproval of this way of thinking, and how he believes that it is unsuccessful in bringing about true redemption.

By focusing on the method of penance, the sinner might even forget what they are asking forgiveness from God for. We find that “the novel insists in a variety of ways that mental development is always fullest and freest when liberated from the crushing weight of behavior’s consequences” (Korobkin 200), especially when looking at Dimmesdale’s frustration with his

self-torture. He and Hester both seek to find a place where they can understand their true feelings regarding their sin without the thought of impending punishment lingering in their minds.

Hester's retreat into the woods allows her the chance to find a place free of punishment, so that she can come to terms with her own sins without being concerned with the potential consequences. There, she finds that "she had not known the weight until she felt the freedom!" (Hawthorne 122). Hester does not realize how impactful her punishment is until she is given a chance to consider her feelings without its pressure upon her.

Hawthorne uses Hester's exploration within the woods to symbolize the absence of consequences and fear of punishment. Outside of the Puritan influence, Hester is able to explore her sense of shame and decide for herself what her own consequences and forms of penance should be. Even Dimmesdale recognizes the profoundness of the woods, as he says to Hester that "I seem to have flung myself---sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened—down upon these forest leaves and to have risen up all made anew" (Hawthorne 121). Both of the characters have had their moral compass and feelings of shame skewed by the social forces around them as if it were a sickness, and their retreat into the woods allows healing and a clearing of mind. Removed from social pressure, the characters are able to find a sense of security and freedom of thought.

Hawthorne argues that the punishing forces that cause Hester and Dimmesdale's additional suffering is linked to the Puritan attitudes towards punishment and morality. By creating a social hierarchy that is constructed by Puritanism, the social landscape becomes a toxic environment for those who are seeking reconciliation for their sins. In terms of crime and punishment, "the entire apparatus of the Puritan Rule of Law in *The Scarlet Letter* is signified by [a] small group of powerful men, accountable apparently to none but themselves and their God" (Korobkin 1). With the lack of accountability, characters like Governor Bellingham believe that

they are the true representatives of God's judgement. The construction of a hierarchy like the one built into Puritan society allows this small group of powerful individuals to decide what constitutes as penitence and what consequences and punishments serve as proper penances to people other than themselves. Hawthorne argues in the novel that these decisions are best made by the particular individual who has sinned. Reconciliation with God for personal matters can not be legislated or authorized by a group of individuals, yet that is the community that Hester and Dimmesdale find themselves ingrained within.

Hawthorne also critiques the mob mentality that is created by these opinion leaders in society. Hawthorne's depiction of Hester and Dimmesdale's penances cannot be fully understood without analyzing the influence that social pressure has on their perception of penance and God's forgiveness. Governor Bellingham and his colleagues are not the only perpetrators of Hester's guilt, the townspeople also aid in Hester's public humiliation and shame. By not having accountability for those in power, the leaders of the Puritan community can use the townspeople as leverage against the sinner. Hester's punishment is specifically designed by the social powers to place her as a target for ridicule by the entire community, not just by those who chose to punish her. The 'A' that is placed upon Hester's clothes is up to the judgement and interpretation of not just Hester, but to the community around her. Therefore, Hester's penance is written and rewritten by the perceptions of the people who view her, whether or not Hester has assigned the same meaning and feeling of penitence that they have. To actually have any power over what the letter signifies to her, Hester must retreat into the woods to avoid the social pressure that is placed upon her by the local hierarchy. Only then can she actually feel the penitence that the letter is supposed to bring upon her.

Hawthorne also condemns the actions of the Puritans and implies that their actions towards people like Hester are inherently sinful. Judgement of those around them and condemnation of sinners without valuing their penitence denotes a skewed morality as well. In “The Custom House” Hawthorne states that he “know[s] 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” (Hawthorne 11). He believes that God will punish the townspeople and people in power for being so quick to judge and persecute those within their community, and that they themselves must repent and find a penance for their own judgemental attitudes and actions. Reminiscent of Scripture when Christ asks for the people completely without sin to cast judgement, Hawthorne believes that Christians must not jump at the chance to shame and condemn those around them without first looking at themselves and analyzing their own shortcomings and sinful actions. Even today, this message serves as a warning to contemporary readers just as much as it seems to be pointed towards Hawthorne’s Puritan ancestry.

These messages sent by Hawthorne about the abandonment of social judgement were concerning to Christian groups because of its threat to hierarchy and power. By critiquing the tendency of Christians to judge and assign punishments to those who have sinned, it paints a negative portrait of Christians and their religion in general. Even if Puritanism was long gone when Hawthorne wrote the novel, there were still dominant communities of Christians that had a developed power structure to their religion. Hawthorne antagonizing powerful figures in the novel, such as Governor Bellingham, can be misconstrued as him having criticized the actual position of power, thus threatening Church hierarchy as a whole. To a belief system that is dominant in society and influences the lives of many people, any critique of its members or the

dogma as a whole can be perceived as a threat. The reviews of the novel that claimed Hawthorne's writing as a danger to society were certain that the "danger" was a negative connotation toward Christianity, even if it served as constructive criticism rather than a complete denouncement of the religion's values by Hawthorne.

Additionally, to condemn a certain action that is prevalent in the Christian community can influence the amount of people who decide to enter and leave the religion as a whole. If Hawthorne spotlights the less-than-perfect qualities of a certain belief system to the general public through his writing, won't that cause members of the public to second guess their willingness to be a part of the religion? Hester and Dimmesdale are figureheads of people who abandon their current religious practices and seek out their own faith which, while Hawthorne claims is beneficial, threatens the current existence of power in organized religion.

Hawthorne is not denying the actual need for reconciliation with God, rather, he advocates in his writing for a personal relationship with God rather than a communal understanding. Spirituality and religion are divided in the novel, with the Puritan community representing the role of religion and the woods highlighting the spirituality of the individual. It would be concerning to believe that Hawthorne is advocating for a lack of morality in detailing Hester and Dimmesdale's escape into the woods. The forest is not to be interpreted as a godless place, where morality ceases to exist, but as a land of possibility and freedom for the individual to explore their spirituality. Hester and Dimmesdale need to escape from their current states of mind that revolve around the town person's way of life and line of thinking in order to realize what type of penance will best work for their reconciliation with God.

We see, then, that the decision Hester makes after her experience in the woods is that she must stay within the Puritan community and continue to wear the letter. Rather than abandoning

the life she had built with Pearl, she “returned, therefore, and resumed – of her own free will... the symbol” (Hawthorne 154). Dimmesdale also chooses to admit his sin to the public as a penance, rather than continuing to punish himself in secret. The importance, however, lies in their choice to return. They are not swayed by public opinion and know that they have the option to disregard the penance that had been chosen for them. In order to have made this decision, the two needed to escape society and reflect upon themselves in a setting that is not subject to the judgement of people beyond themselves. After reflecting in the woods, Hester and Dimmesdale come to terms with their shame and recognize that returning to the community and choosing a penance for themselves will bring about a true sense of reconciliation between them and God.

The final observation we see is that the townspeople’s punishment and intention for Hester’s public shame does not actually succeed in the long run. The scarlet ‘A’ placed upon Hester’s clothing ceases to serve as a reminder of her adultery to the townspeople after a few years pass. Instead, the letter tells of her ‘ableness’ that results from her penitence and acceptance of her fate. The mark on Hester eventually “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, and yet with reverence, too” (Hawthorne 154). Hawthorne argues that even if we focused away from the personal torment that public shame puts individuals through, it is not a sustainable practice. Hester has proven herself to the community and has made peace with her relationship with God, and the townspeople accept this fact and acknowledge her mark as a mark of courage. For the religious authority to assign a punishment like this, we find that these actions are unsuccessful and therefore unnecessary to bring about true repentance.

Hawthorne’s writing serves to cultivate a discussion in his time about how penance and penitence should be perceived and understood in the Christian communities. It also serves as a

condemnation and criticism of the methods used to disgrace and shame sinners in the public eye, rather than trying to encourage reconciliation and penance for the sins committed by the individual. This attitude of judging others and trying to determine punishments for them did not die with the Puritans. This issue is prevalent even today, and definitely within the time that Hawthorne was alive as well. Hester and Dimmesdale's journey of self-discovery and repentance serve as an example to Hawthorne's readers of overcoming societal pressures and coming to terms with one's own morality. Through Hawthorne's lifelong work towards bringing faith and morality to the table for discussion, American society has been given more opportunities to reflect on their past and develop a better understanding of their own thoughts and connections to belief systems.

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