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## THE POWER OF SIN AND GUILT IN THE SCARLET LETTER

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### Abstract

The Scarlet Letter(1850), the romantic fiction, is written by renowned American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. The present article analyzes sin and guilt in The Scarlet Letter. Different types of sin are represented in The Scarlet Letter. There are sins of the flesh, sins of weakness, sins of will and the intellect. Hester stands on the scaffold wearing a dull gray dress with a large scarlet "A" on her bosom. She shows to the world the result of her sin in the form of little Pearl. While Hester's sin is noticeable to all, Dimmesdale's sin is hidden. The minister hides his wrong, the act that he has broken the moral law. Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, an older man is guilty of two sins. In The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne is not overly concerned with the sin that has been committed; he is more concerned with the results of the sin. Hawthorne points out that while sin which is exposed and confessed, frees the sinner's mind and often brings about a transformation in the life, sin which is concealed and cherished tends to cause ruin and death. While Hawthorne's characters are sinners, many of them are presented as people who actually gain salvation and regeneration before the story ends.

Keywords : Power, sin, Scarlet Letter, Guilty, Moral Law

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### 1.Introduction

The Scarlet Letter (1850), the romantic fiction, is written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. He was American novelist and short-story writer, a master of the allegorical and symbolic tale. One of the greatest fiction writers in American literature, he is best-known for The Scarlet Letter and The House of the Seven Gables (1851). In the present article an attempt has been made to analyze sin, guilt and regeneration in The Scarlet Letter. A sin is an act that violates a known moral rule. The term sin may also refer to the state of having committed such a violation. Commonly, the moral code of conduct is ordered by a divine entity, i.e. divine law. Fundamentally, sin is rebellion against, or resistance to, the direction of

supreme authority, and enmity toward, avoidance of, or hatred of the good. Guilt is the fact of being responsible for the commission of an offense. It is also a cognitive or an emotional experience that occurs when a person realizes or believes—accurately or not—that he or she has violated a moral standard, and bears significant responsibility for that violation. It is closely related to the concept of repentance. Regeneration means Spiritual or moral revival or rebirth. The purpose of this article is to examine the sin and guilt in the major characters in The Scarlet Letter

## **2.Context**

The setting of the novel The Scarlet Letter is Boston during the Puritan era. Anthony Trollope's summary of the novel reveals the plot of the novel: A woman [Hester Prynne] has been taken in adultery . . . and is brought upon the stage that she may be punished by a public stigma. She was beautiful and young, and had been married to an old husband who had wandered away from her for a time. Then she has sinned, and the partner of her sin, though not of her punishment, is [Arthur Dimmesdale] the young minister of the church to which she is attached. It is her doom to wear the Scarlet Letter, the A, always worked on her dress, -always there on her bosom, to be seen of all men. The first hour of her punishment has to be endured, in the middle of town, on the public scaffold, under the gaze of all men. As she stands there, her husband [Rodger Chillingworth] comes by chance into the town and sees her and she sees him, and they know each other. But no one else in Boston knows that they are man and wife. Then they meet, and she refuses to tell him who has been her fellow sinner. She makes no excuse for herself. She will bear her doom and acknowledge its justice, but to no one will she tell the name of him who is the father the baby [Pearl]

For her disgrace has borne its fruit, and she has a child. The injured husband is at once aware that he need deal no further with the woman who has been false to him. Her punishment is sure. But it is necessary for his revenge that the man too shall be punished, -- and to punish him he must know him. Then he goes to work to find him out, and he finds him out. Then he does punish him with a vengeance and brings him to death, -- does it by the old man finds out and declares his intention to accompany them in their flight. The minister dies after he confesses, and the woman is left to her solitude. (240-41).

## **3.Sin and Guilt**

Different types of sin are represented in The Scarlet Letter. Arlin Turner notes that there are "sins of the flesh, sins of weakness, sins of will and the intellect. The transgression of Hester and Dimmesdale stand condemned by the laws of society"(59). Hester stands on the scaffold wearing a dull gray dress with a large scarlet "A" on her bosom. She shows to the world the result of her sin in the form of little Pearl. While Hester's sin is noticeable to all, Dimmesdale's sin is hidden. The minister hides his wrong, the fact that he has broken the moral law – and the only suggestion that something is wrong in his life is the habit he has of constantly putting his hand over his heart. Rodger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, an older man is guilty of two sins. The first is against Nature. Selfishness had led him to marry Hester, a young, passionate girl. He knew that Hester did not love him and he was not the kind of man to make her a good husband. He admits in Chapter 4, "Mine was

the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay." The second sin is to take control of Chillingworth when he first appears at the scaffold in Chapter 3.

"Briefly defined, this sin is the subordination of the heart to intellect. It occurs when one is willing to sacrifice his fellow man to Sin, Guilt, and Regeneration in *The Scarlet Letter* gratify his own selfish interests. As displayed by Chillingworth, it involves a violation of two biblical injunctions: (1) 'Judge not, that ye be not judged' and (2) 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord'" (Dibble 66). Hawthorne regards this sin as a crucial one and many critics support the idea. Henry James speaks of Chillingworth as planing the "infernally ingenious plan of conjoining himself with his wronger, living with him, living upon him; and while he pretends to minister to his hidden ailment and to sympathize with his pain, revels in his unsuspected knowledge of these things, and stimulates them by malignant arts" (89).

The matronly women who stand among the residents of Salem and who have come to see the adulteress stand on the scaffold see Hester as deserving greater punishment than that meted out by the magistrates. Says one in the group, "It would be greatly for the public's behalf, if we women, being of mature age and church-goers in good repute, should have the handling of such male actress as this Hester Prynne . . . . If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded?" (Chapter 2). In Hester's case, one of the self-righteous women remarked, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (Chapter 2).

#### **4. Consequences of Sin and Guilt**

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne is not overly concerned with the sin that has been committed; he is more concerned with the results of the sin, with its effect on the persons involved. The Christian view however, is that the sin itself as well as its effects are to be considered. God regards man's motives. And to him motives are important. Furthermore, the Bible condemns sin in all its forms. Hawthorne shows the woman suffering public shame and contempt, the sensitive and disturbed minister who hides his participation in the sin withering inside, and the jealous old man, Chillingworth, addicted by the madness of revenge. Turner states that the author's "basic assumption is that reward and punishment are inevitable here and now--retribution for sin is certain" (58). Although many critics view Hester in a positive way, some liberal one sees her as degenerating spiritually since her thoughts are on earthly love as is clear in her conversation with Dimmesdale during their meeting in the forest. It is also said that she "handles her guilt more successfully than Dimmesdale because her conscience is less highly developed than his" (Crews 143). Those who see her positively emphasize the transformation that she undergoes. Over the course of the years, she becomes involved in performing acts of charity and kindness to people in the community and shows her care and concern for the sick, the poor and the dying. Hawthorne observes that ". . . in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence" (chapter 24). Hawthorne points out that while sin which is exposed and confessed, frees the sinner's mind and often brings

about a transformation in the life, sin which is concealed and cherished tends to cause ruin and death. Arthur Dimmesdale suffers during the seven years of silence. The source of his anguish is the regret he feels for his sin. Guilt eats away at his very soul and threatens to destroy him. Concerning the close relationship between the mind and the body, Ellen White writes: "Grief, anxiety, discontent, remorse, guilt, distrust, all tend to break down the life forces and to invite decay and death" (Ministry of Healing 241). Frederick Crews comments on the devastating effects of guilt: The breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired. It may be watched and guarded; so that the enemy shall not force his way again into the citadel, and might even, in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded. But there is still the ruined wall, and near it, the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph. (137) For Crews the "'stealthy foe' may be identified as guilt, rather than the urge to sin. . . . The original foe of his tranquility was guilt, guilt for his thoughtless surrender to passion." Dimmesdale's moral enemy is the forbidden impulse while his psychological enemy is guilt (137). Turner agrees that guilt destroys the minister. Dimmesdale thinks his concealment to be a sin, and this is what delivers him into the hands of Chillingworth, who exclaims at the time of the final confession that in no other way could his victim have escaped him (59). Rodger Chillingworth, who enters the story as Hester stands on the scaffold, waits with fiendish patience to destroy the soul of his patient. He clings like a leech to the minister intent on taking his revenge and willing to become a devil. How does this affect him? He becomes more distorted and ugly. He is led to commit what some critics call the unpardonable sin by his lack of human sympathy. Of him Hester says, "That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart" (Chapter 17). Some other consequences of sin are also evident in the story. Sin is an estrangement from God on the part of a morally free person. It occurs when one transgresses God's laws. Sin not only isolates man from God, it also alienates him from his fellowmen. The characters in *The Scarlet Letter* all suffer isolation as a result of their sins, as Arlin Turner notes: Pearl was born an outcast and remains at war with her world until the expiation of the final confession scene. Hester lives at the edge of the village and years afterward, when Pearl has married, returns to finish out her life at the same spot. The scarlet letter, when she first wrote it, 'had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself,' and as time passed, it became everywhere apparent 'that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind.' The isolation brought on Chillingworth by his guilt is represented by the fear his dark visage and stooping posture inspires in the children as he moves about the village. (59-60). Hawthorne presents another effect of sin on the characters. To him, they attain greater understanding as a consequence. Although one may not necessarily agree with this view in relation to Chillingworth and Pearl, it seems reasonable to believe that "the effectiveness of Dimmesdale's sermons is testimony to his extraordinary insight into human nature" (Turner 60). It seems as if his own weakness makes him more understanding and tolerant of the faults and failing of others. It is through Hester, however, most of all that Hawthorne presents the greater understanding due to sin. According to Turner, "The scarlet letter has taught her to recognize sin in others and to look with warm sympathy into the hearts of sinners. Still, her awareness of sin in others did not destroy utterly her

faith, for she 'struggle to believe that no fellow mortal was guilty like herself,' and thus refused to believe that sin is universal--'such loss of faith is ever one of the saddest result of sin" (60).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that sin has a disastrous effect on the sinner and on his relationship with others. It causes pain and suffering and isolates the transgressor. It leads to the deterioration of both mental and physical health. It can also be said that hidden sin and guilt cause more suffering than open guilt. Hidden guilt, however, causes people to continually worry about their sins being discovered, and what punishments they may receive. For these reasons it is important to be honest with one's self and others concerning misbehaviors, however mortal.

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