

“A MORAL WILDERNESS”:

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

By

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ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* portrays his understanding of Puritan doctrines and culture. He addresses sin and redemption through his primary characters Hester Prynne and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, whose adultery has resulted in the birth of Pearl and Hester's scarlet A. He demonstrates Hester's refusal to publically accept her sin as such. He also outlines the physical demise and spiritual indecision of the minister as Dimmesdale struggles to live two opposing lives. I call attention to how Hawthorne takes his knowledge of the New England Puritans and alters the historical context to emphasize his Romantic views of sin and redemption.

Insufficient attention has been given to Hawthorne's precise changing of historical Puritan beliefs in order to depict his Romantic notions. At initial glance, it appears that Hawthorne does one of two things: he either disconnects entirely or adheres strictly to Puritan doctrines and culture. But using a historical approach, I examine the Puritan background to accentuate Hawthorne's nuanced fusion of Puritanical conceptions with Romantic perceptions of sin and redemption.

For instance, while the Puritans viewed sin as evil and believed in the weight of collective guilt, Hawthorne accepts that there was "an educative effect" in sin (Mills 97). He agrees with the Puritans that sin was a result of wickedness, but disagrees that sin damned a person forever. Hester's overcoming society's stipulations placed upon her indicates Hawthorne's Romantic assertion that the individual determines her course.

Also, while the Puritans believed in predestination, Hawthorne claims that redemption consists of self-realization and empowerment. Dimmesdale attempts but fails to break free of the Puritan belief in predestination. Hester rejects predestination and becomes her own savior, eventually advising other society members. Her self-realization allows Hester to break free of the cultural norms and focus on impacting society for the good. She uses her wisdom to comfort the discouraged individuals struggling against the system.

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PREFACE

Nathaniel Hawthorne felt haunted by his familial connections to the New England Puritans. This is unsurprising in light of his progenitor's involvement in the Salem Witch Trials. The accepted account of Hawthorne's great-grandfather's involvement in the Salem Witch Trial judging indicates that Colonel John Hathorne felt no remorse for his participation. In fact, as Brenda Wineapple states, in the aftermath of the affair, "Colonel John mounted his steed and rode out to the stony promontory later known as Gallows hill, where, unyielding, he surveyed what his ironclad piety had wrought" (15-16). Many critics and scholars have written on Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, and the Puritans. However, insufficient analysis has been devoted to how the behavior of Hawthorne's characters in *The Scarlet Letter* deviates from the historically documented behaviors of New England Puritans.

In Barriss Mills' 1948 article entitled "Hawthorne and Puritanism," Mills gives a brief history of criticism up to that point, stating that some critics viewed Hawthorne as praising the Puritans, that others saw him as criticizing the Puritans, and that still a third group perceived him as trying to mesh history and his personal feelings. While W. C. Brownell "saw in Hawthorne a genuine son of the Puritans" and Herbert Schneider viewed Hawthorne as "reviving the best in Puritanism," Parrington claimed Hawthorne "criticiz[es] the Puritans from a skeptical point of view" (78 as cited in Mills). The third group stated that although Hawthorne would never be able to disregard his "Puritan

forefathers, nevertheless [...] Puritanism was no longer a way of life but rather a subject for literary art” (79). While perceptions of Hawthorne’s attraction, ambivalence, and disinterest toward the Puritans are widely circulated, one view has largely been ignored: *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthorne deviating from the Puritan beliefs and holding his characters up against the Puritans as preferred models of the redeemable person.

Hawthorne used writing as a means of purging. Michael J. Colacurcio asserts that “*The Scarlet Letter* must be seen as Hawthorne’s way of testing the limits of Puritan theology as a way of making sense out of some deep and passionate forms of human experience” (192). Hawthorne examined his past as well as his contemporary surroundings in order to work out his perceptions about sin and redemption. *The Scarlet Letter* depicts Hawthorne’s understanding of Puritan doctrines and society as well as his observations through the Romantic lens of the 1850s. He merged the perspectives in order to analyze his very personal feelings surrounding his mother’s death.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the Puritans’ view of sin, particularly as a communal burden leading to collective guilt. I contrast the historical explanation of sin with Hawthorne’s Romantic rendering of sin as a means of education for understanding humanity. In Chapter 2, I discuss the Puritans’ doctrine of redemption as it centers around predestination, which is the belief that God alone chose who was saved and who was damned. Hawthorne portrays redemption as individualized and dependent upon the person’s self-realization. In Chapter 3, I claim that Hawthorne uses the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale as the supposed Puritan standard that fails to remain true. In my concluding chapter, I assert that Hawthorne sets Hester up as the anti-Puritan intent on defying the magistrates because she believes that only she has power to determine her redemption.

Sin

In Chapter 1, I focus on the concept of sin, first from the Puritan point of view and then from Hawthorne's. The New England Puritans believed in collective guilt, as well as certain steps once sin was confessed. While Hawthorne agrees that sin was wrong, he attributes a beneficial use to sin. This shift demonstrates individuality, focusing on Dimmesdale and Hester's respective paths following their mutual sin rather than on the actual sin. As long as there was awareness of the self and a desire to grow, Romantic concepts, then sin was not detrimental in and of itself.

Puritans viewed sin as wrong in all instances. There was never an acceptable reason for sinning. Generally speaking, the Puritans were staunch believers in crushing the evil within a person and society in order to ensure the thriving of what they termed righteousness. If, however, a person sinned, then there were specific steps to be followed. After confession, the sinner was admonished to repent. If repentance was not the result, then the church had the power to excommunicate, or cast out, the sinner. Hawthorne takes the topic of sin and uses the Puritans as a backdrop for depicting his own views. He uses Dimmesdale and Hester to portray sin as an agent of change. Both characters grow and develop because of their mutual sin. Dimmesdale cultivates empathy for the sinner and is able to better minister to his parishioners. Hester, on the other hand, connects with society by holding herself aloof from society. After the magistrates recognize Hester as a sinner, the Puritan society will not accept her into their presence. Yet, when she outwardly appears to shun society, then the other members of Boston slowly draw Hester back into association with them.

The Puritans not only believed sin to be inherently wrong, but also felt that a single church member breaking the covenant resulted in collective guilt. Noted historian Edmund S. Morgan comments that “In view of such a belief the reason for restraining and punishing sin is obvious. Since the whole group had promised obedience to God, the whole group would suffer for the sins of any delinquent member, unless that member were punished” (*The Puritan Family* 10). Due to this belief in collective guilt, and in order to keep their covenants with God, the Puritans could not allow any member of their society to continue sinning once the sin had come to their attention. If they had, they would have been implicated in the sin of the sinner.

I argue that while Hawthorne did perceive sin as wrong, he also realized that there was “an educative effect in sin” (Mills 97). He felt that the person who has sinned becomes sadder, but wiser in the long run. He thought that sin was necessary in order to truly understand humanity. In this way, Hawthorne differed from the Puritans over the idea of collective guilt. Rather than feeling one person would drag down the entire society, he concentrated on “the conflict between passionate, self-assertive, and self-expressive inner drives and the repressing counterforces that exist in society and are also internalized within the self” (Baym *The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career* 124). For Hawthorne, it wasn’t a matter of collective guilt, but rather the battle of self versus self. Dimmesdale and Hester both analyze self throughout the romance. Dimmesdale cannot accept his sinful state and struggles between two selves, the public and the private.

Hester’s education in sin permits her to detach herself from the community and eventually elevates her above the collective. Through her isolation, she develops a perception and self-awareness not indicative of the other members dwelling in Boston.

Even though Hester has moments of self-doubt, her acceptance of her situation allows for a clearer view of not only herself but others. She grows as a result of her isolation, becoming less dependent and more capable. However, Hawthorne did qualify this usefulness of sin with the belief that the “educative effect” only became positive in light of the sinner’s full repentance. Without repentance, the individual would not change and become an agent for improvement. Hester changes from an intellectual recluse to a contributing member of society by slowly participating again. It is true that at first some tasks were refused her, but Hester “never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it, in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies” (Hawthorne 160). Through the pain of repeated disgrace for her sin, Hester withdraws from the community. Yet, with Pearl to provide for, Hester is forced to find occupation in town. She quietly accepts what she is given and abuses the strictures of society in the confines of her mind.

Redemption

In Chapter 2, I focus on the concept of redemption. First, I discuss the New England Puritans’ view of predestination, which stated that God alone chose and knew who was saved and who was damned. There was nothing that a person could do to change salvation, but there were certain indicators that pointed toward salvation or damnation. If a person experienced guilt after sinning, strove to promote order in society, showed forth good behavior, and enforced morality upon others, then it was commonly believed that person was saved. Hawthorne, on the other hand, portrays the conflict between predestination and individual redemption as a result of actions carried out by the person. He uses Dimmesdale to show the conflict and Hester to depict how a person’s

actions should be taken into consideration for salvation. Hawthorne focuses on this conflict to demonstrate yet another deviation from Puritan doctrine. He shows how attempting to follow the Puritan way leads to an unsatisfactory life, while pursuing an individual course of action ultimately promotes an acceptable life.

For the Puritans, God alone knew who was saved and who was condemned. This meant there was no sure way for man to know which souls were chosen by God. However, the Puritans felt that if the right sort of men made correct choices, then a proper organization could be set up as a means of helping mankind look toward God. This is why the church was established: to draw mankind away from sin. The Puritans believed that the men placed in positions of authority were qualified because of their outward behavior. In such a way, the wise and good, the true and just, could direct the repentant to God. The magistrates in *The Scarlet Letter* believe that they are chosen to guide the confused masses toward redemption. Hawthorne makes it clear that he doesn't agree when he juxtaposes the magistrates with Dimmesdale and Hester.

Hawthorne uses the character Dimmesdale to show the conflict between Puritan predestination and nineteenth-century Romantic notions of individual redemption. While Dimmesdale is viewed by the community as among the saved because of his good works and piety, Hawthorne allows the reader to know that Dimmesdale's life is far from what he shows Boston. The minister's own belief in predestination exacerbates the guilt he feels from his sin. He knows that shunning public confession means he is unwilling to repent and therefore cannot be saved.

Hawthorne's focus on the question of redemption intensified after his mother's death in July of 1849. His answer centered on the self, concentrating on the idea that

salvation is achieved through self-awareness and deep, meaningful repentance. Hawthorne writes about redemption as individualistic because after his mother's death he searches for answers. For him, the conflict present within the Puritan doctrine of salvation does not satisfy. Therefore, Hester Prynne does not gain re-admittance into Boston shortly after her sin, but rather withdraws from society. Hawthorne writes that "the world's law was no law for her mind" (164). She rejects the Puritan tenet of guilt leading to repentance and focuses instead on how to better her situation herself. She does not rely on the magistrates for forgiveness, but ponders how she can achieve forgiveness and repentance without relying on external forces. She knows that repentance will not come from the collective membership of the church, but that she will find it through a study of herself.

Boston's view of Hester shifts from sinner to saint as *The Scarlet Letter* progresses. The longer the story continues, the more the meaning of the A changes in the eyes of community. Hawthorne seems to be suggesting that the altering views have little to do with predestination and more to do with Hester's personal actions. This suggestion is another deviation from accepted Puritan views. Hester stubbornly holds to the view that performing good works and experiencing sorrow should lead to redemption. Hester's belief about redemption is supported by the community's growing respect for her throughout the romance. As for sorrow, near the end of the romance, Hester asks Dimmesdale, "Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe!" (Hawthorne 256). Her statement professes that through enough sorrow the price for redemption can be paid. She clearly believes that

redemption is available to even people who have sinned. In fact, Hester asserts that salvation is an individual experience.

Dimmesdale

In Chapter 3, I examine Dimmesdale as the Puritanical contrast to Hester the anti-Puritan. The minister attempts to follow the strictures of society, but must hide his sins of adultery and hypocrisy to remain angelic within the community. The guilt resulting from his sin drives him to perform un-Puritan like penance in privacy. His guilt also causes Dimmesdale to emphasize good works as a means of redemption. This reliance on good works marks a deviation from Puritan ideals. The Puritans felt that the self interest apparent in the act of performing good works possibly sullied the sincerity. Any person was capable of doing something good for selfish desires.

Mankind, not only Dimmesdale, is fallen. As a result of Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, God alone has the power to decide who will be saved. Redemption relies entirely upon God's grace because "grace [is] a restoration of order" (Morgan *The Puritan Family* 15). This is why Dimmesdale is not able to "buy" his way into heaven with his marvelous sermons, although they bring numerous new members into the fold of God. Dimmesdale knows in his mind and heart that he is a sinner of the worst kind and therefore cannot hope to be worthy of redemption in the Puritan sense. Acknowledging the belief that he's not worthy of God's grace, Dimmesdale reverts to midnight vigils and flogging himself behind closed doors as physical relief for the strain built through his psychological distress. With these scenes, Hawthorne shows how far the minister has fallen, as well as emphasizing Hester's superior growth and learning.

Hawthorne allows the reader multiple visits into the reverend's psyche. Part of this is accomplished by journeying with Dimmesdale into the desolate wilderness of his soul. Hawthorne writes that "by the constitution of his [Dimmesdale's] nature, he loved the truth, and loathed the lie, as few men ever did. Therefore, above all things else, he loathed his miserable self ! The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect" (144, 146). Why does a "real existence" matter and is it true that Dimmesdale exists? I believe that Dimmesdale is deluded and cannot determine reality from the fantastical. However, his anguish allows him to feel an education not found in the scriptures: a connection with mankind forged from sinning. A better understanding of mankind arises from an educative quality associated with sin. In sinning, Dimmesdale falls from his pedestal and can associate with the earthly temptations that cause his parishioners to stumble. This education acts as a catalyst for the potential to deepen the sincerity of repentance. Unfortunately, the minister's fall and refusal to openly repent also leads to insanity and self-destruction.

Hawthorne indicates that when Dimmesdale is finally able to admit his sin, then he truly feels delivered from the bondage brought on by sin. Familiar with the Puritan belief in open confession, Hawthorne deviates from that belief by having Dimmesdale's confession hampered with speculation and disbelief. After admitting to his sin, the minister rejects a personal afterlife and claims that God's will is enough.

Hester

In the closing chapter of my thesis, I analyze the characterization of Hester Prynne. I assert that Hawthorne portrays her as an anti-Puritan. Considering how the

oppressiveness of the Bostonian Puritans affects Dimmesdale, Hester as an anti-Puritan is preferable. Critics have drawn parallels between Hester the fictional character and Ann Hutchinson the historical woman. Michael Colacurcio's often quoted "Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: A Puritan Context for *The Scarlet Letter*" lays out the differences and similarities between the two. Hester committed adultery; Hutchinson was accused of heretical views because she believed she was personally communing with God. Colacurcio points out that although their sins are not equal, both hold the title of "an extraordinary woman who falls afoul of a theocratic and male-dominated society" (*Doctrine and Difference* 179). Both the historical woman and the fictional woman were punished because of the predominant culture. Both demonstrated ideas or actions that the Puritans were not willing to accept. While I agree with Colacurcio's reading, I will expound upon how Hester as an anti-Puritan is stronger and eventually happier than Dimmesdale because of the fact that she never bows beneath the weight of the theocracy. Through her sin and subsequent repentance, Hester's ideas about redemption alter to depict the Romantic notion that redemption exists in the present.

In order to appreciate Hester's role, a brief contrasting against Ann Hutchinson is needed. At private meetings hosted by her, Hutchinson counseled and exhorted the people to seek their own answers from God. Morgan states that Hutchinson proclaimed "God enabled [her] to tell with absolute certainty whether a man had saving grace or not" (*Visible Saints* 109). The Puritan leaders did not appreciate her direct attack against the rigid authority outlined by the church. John Cotton claimed that Hutchinson flagrantly led people away from the truth in order to become a teacher equal to the chosen leaders. Governor John Winthrop, who was a judicious man, could not allow a heretical person

that might incite other colonists into open rebellion. In order to avoid further retribution, Hutchinson joined the smaller colony of Rhode Island in 1638.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester remains in Boston. While the citizens openly shun and mock her, holding her up as a living allegory of sin and throwing mud at her and Pearl, Hester bears humiliation with patience. The punishment is lightened and Hester is only compelled to wear the scarlet A. The magistrates do not even demand a confession of repentance as was common when a delinquent was discovered among a Puritan community. In fact, at the beginning of Hawthorne's romance, Hester stands proudly before the magistrates, defying their injunctions to reveal the name of her lover. Not only that, but at the end of the romance Hester willingly returns to Boston and resumes wearing the scarlet letter. I see Hester's resumption of the A as transcending to a personal, alternative redemption based in her own individualism. Thus, the punishment of wearing the scarlet A is paradoxical. For the Puritans, it was to scorn Hester, but she in turn uses it as a symbol of her later actions and eventual redemption.

Although she started out with open rebellion, by the end of *The Scarlet Letter* Hester has reached equanimity and no longer needs to participate in overt forms of defiance. She does this by disregarding the Puritan doctrine of predestination and pursuing her own form of Romanticized redemption. Hester releases her hold on needing to be with Dimmesdale and instead centers on making sense of the world surrounding her. She decides that redemption can happen in the present and works to attain her redemption. Hawthorne demonstrates Hester's way as the preferred form of redemption.

CHAPTER 1: PURITANS, HAWTHORNE, AND SIN

The role of sin is deeply considered by both the New England Puritans and Nathaniel Hawthorne. According to the Puritans, sin was a direct result of the Fall and sinners detracted from society. Covenants made with God proposed a collective guilt that the Puritans were eager to avoid. Unrepentant sinners damaged the community's soul and were sometimes excommunicated or kicked out of their society. As a way to avoid sin, ministers preached against the various sins and threatened damnation for the degenerate. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* thoroughly explores the effects of sin on Hester Prynne and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. While Hawthorne agreed with his Puritan ancestors on what constitutes sin, Hawthorne attributed a beneficial use to sin if the sinner fully repented. He emphasizes a heightened self-awareness in both of his characters, a better understanding of sin when observed in others, and a shift in society's perception of sin. In this way, Hawthorne deviates from the Puritan views to emphasize the Romantic philosophies surrounding sin.

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

interact with each other and with non-Puritans. The covenants framed their daily lives, acting as a civil contract or agreement as well as spiritual (Conforti 54). The covenants gave them the perception of being anchored to something solid in a changing world. However, even Puritans were human and sinned. For them, sin was the act of moving away from the order attributed to God. Under this definition, sin entailed anything that disrupted the relationship each Puritan strove to have with God.

The Puritans fled England with the hope of finding somewhere they could practice their strict religion. They sought for the freedom to keep their own counsel and punishments. Moving from Europe to the colonies caused a shift in Puritanical views. In England, believers and non-believers were clearly identified, Puritans fought for the right to attend church and practice religion how they saw fit, and were mocked and scorned by the general populace. Once the Puritans crossed the vast ocean and arrived in the colonies, their religion focused more deeply upon the soul because there was no longer a visible enemy. “Without the surrounding wickedness of the Old World to combat, they [the Puritans] contended with their own continuing sins and corrupt nature” (Morgan *The Genuine Article* 16-17). If wickedness existed, it was because they brought it with them or succumbed to it in their new surroundings. The Puritans were forced to focus on their own foibles and follies, thus turning inward.

Puritans viewed sin as wrong in all instances. For them, there was never an acceptable reason for sinning. There was no situation that the Puritans felt warranted secrecy. If a mistake was made, then the proper action to pursue was confession. A voluntary declaration of the sins or wrongs committed was preferred. However, there were times when voluntary confession was not amply elicited from the sinner’s own

conscience. In such cases, the course of action might involve a co-sinner (Morgan *Visible Saints* 89). The Puritans believed that confession wrung from a stubborn sinner's heart due to accusation was not as valid as voluntary admittance. Still, they felt that confessing by any method was favored over hiding the sin. When sin was discovered, the Puritans looked to their ministers to help the sinner once again take steps to return to the fold of God.

In his book, *Citizens of Somewhere Else: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James*, Dan McCall quotes Henry James as claiming that “[Hawthorne’s] great complication was the pressing moral anxiety, the restless individual conscience...the laws secretly broken, the impulses secretly felt, the hidden passions, the double lives, the dark corners, the closed rooms, the skeletons in the cupboard and at the feast” (9). Hawthorne felt no need to point out that every single Puritan in society sinned. He assumed that all were fallen and used one or two people as focal points for internal struggle. Blanket statements were not Hawthorne’s specialty. Instead, he delved into the individual psyche, into the introspection of a heart that sought to hide from the prying eyes of the world. The individual was the realm of the Romantics, focusing on the interior in a positive light as opposed to the intensified self-consciousness of Puritan guilt. Both Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale kept their “skeletons in the cupboard” locked tightly. Hester’s key guarded both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth’s identity, as well as her expanding beliefs that Puritanism failed as a mode of ruling an entire society. Dimmesdale’s key hid his guilt from committing adultery.

Emil Oberholzer, Jr. states that “The prohibition of adultery furnished the basis of more ecclesiastical prosecutions than any other provision in the Decalogue [The Ten

Commandments]” (127). Obviously, adultery cases tried at court are not secret sins. While historians do indicate that Puritans believed in a strong theocratic rule, nothing suggests an over-abundance of hidden sin. Open rebellion and persistent argument against the government and/or church was swiftly suppressed. In a similar manner, exposed sinners were at first admonished. If reconciliation was not possible and the sinner violently protested the church’s decision, then the sinner was banished from society. Hawthorne did not choose a secret sin but rather one that could not be hidden, because of the child, as one focal point of discussion in his romance. Yet, on the part of Dimmesdale, the sin of adultery *does* remain hidden until the minister’s revelation near the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. The focus on Dimmesdale and his secret sin points to Hawthorne’s understanding of the paradoxical nature of Puritan society. The Puritans strove to live in accordance with God’s will, yet in order to accomplish His will they believed it was necessary to impose their lifestyle upon everyone else. The unregenerate person was not welcome among them because of the covenants that tied the entire community to God. Hawthorne takes a seemingly godly man and reveals him as the vilest of sinners, worthy of the death penalty among New England Puritan culture. Conveniently for Reverend Dimmesdale, no action can be taken against him because he dies. His death is not surprising, considering how sickly he has been portrayed throughout the romance, nor can Hawthorne be expected to close with Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl happily embarking on a new life. Skeletons in the cupboard, secrets, and hidden passions cannot stand against the full light of day (McCall 9).

Hester’s adultery is discovered because she becomes pregnant. Her hidden sin is aired in the public sphere and condemned. Yet, she manages to keep one secret; the

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

Although Hawthorne never labeled Hester’s sin as adultery, there is no doubt as to why she has been called before the magistrates at the opening of *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only has the woman conceived a child without her husband, but she refuses to name her lover, thus adding obstinacy and concealment to her growing list of sins. After Hester is permitted to leave the prison and return home, she falls into a temporary state of melancholy where she ponders how she will *become* sin to the inhabitants of Boston. She realizes that she will “become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion [...] as the figure, the body, the reality of sin” (Hawthorne 79). Indeed, such moments do occur. Nearly every time Hester and Pearl leave their house,

they are either chased by children, reviled by beggars, mocked by women, exhorted by clergymen, or serve as the visual lesson against sin on the Sabbath day. As far as the Puritans of Hawthorne's creation are concerned, Hester and Pearl are sin.

In daily life, there were numerous instances when a devout Puritan might accidentally engage in sin. Morgan asserts that "For a child to make too much of its parents, a wife of her husband, a subject of his king was to place the creature before the creator, to reverse the order of creation, to repeat the sin of Adam" (*The Puritan Family* 21). These acts of sin were not wrong in and of themselves. To love, cherish, and revere were correct displays of regard one for another. Nonetheless, the Puritans, clinging to the belief that sin was a disruption of order, asserted that putting anything above God was sinful. Morgan clarifies sin with the words "to make too much of" (21). It was only when a child, wife, or subject exhibited love that supplanted their love for God that they were treading the path of sin. This is why Reverend Dimmesdale does not believe that he and Hester should be allowed eternity together. He exclaims that "it may be, that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion" (Hawthorne 256). In their passion, they allowed the other person to rise above God. For that moment, Hester became more important to Dimmesdale than God, just as Dimmesdale became more important to Hester than God. The Puritans would not have been confused by or refuted the minister's response to Hester. Placing each other higher than God was their first sin. Adultery was the second. Attempting to hide the first two sins became their third sin.

Terribly conscious of their own folly, Puritans frequently worried about whether they were adequately avoiding sin. “What must I do to be saved, saved from sin, saved from evil? was the question they asked themselves and to which they expected answers from their ministries” (Morgan *The Genuine Article* 59). They wanted to know, specifically, what was expected of them. The Puritans didn’t accept shallow half-answers. They plied their ministers with questions, demanding to know how to avoid sin and evil. Great jeremiads were preached to this end. Jeremiads were a form of sermon in which the minister outlined the peoples’ sins, pointed out the peoples’ afflictions, and warned of greater trials to come if repentance was not immediately sought by the people. Hawthorne portrays a weak version of a jeremiad when he describes Dimmesdale’s sermons in which “[h]e had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity” (143-44). As their minister, it is Dimmesdale’s responsibility to bring sin to his parishioners’ notice. He does, but fails to clearly indicate the sin, sinner, and trials as a result of his refusal to repent. Perhaps Dimmesdale cannot bring himself to completely do his duty because of his overriding fear of public scorn. However, he does continue to answer questions and preach.

The knowledge that sin existed and each person was capable of falling plagued the Puritans into believing they were not doing enough to actively avoid sin. They accepted the knowledge that sin and evil abounded in the world, as well as the fact that each person was prone to sin unless guided by God and God’s representatives on earth. According to Joseph Conforti, the Puritans believed humanity’s fallen state was due to Adam’s sin (36). In a sense, the children were paying for the parent’s past deeds. No

matter what humanity did, Adam's sin would always be there to separate them from God. The guilt of Adam's partaking of the forbidden fruit was passed down from one generation to another. There was no escaping the judgment associated with Adam's fall. Puritans were not only attempting to rid themselves of their own sins and weaknesses, but of Adam's folly as well. Their whole-hearted belief that "the sins of one generation descend to the next" kept at the forefront of their minds how vital it was to work toward a purer life every single day (Mills 96). No man wanted to willingly pass on his own sins to his children. In New England, the goal became the minimization of sins. No man could buy his way to heaven, but by constantly recalling his covenants with God and resolutely avoiding new sins, it was possible to deal with the sins common among all. In such a way, the Puritans wanted to narrow the impact of sin.

Like the Puritans in the community, Hester and Dimmesdale are concerned with sin. The forced wearing of the scarlet *A* causes Hester to acknowledge her sin on a daily basis. Each time she leaves her cottage she is faced with townspeople who remind her of her sin. Not only that, but "another particular torture was felt in the gaze of a new eye. When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter, [...] they branded it afresh into Hester's soul; so that, oftentimes, she could scarcely refrain, yet always did refrain, from covering the symbol with her hand" (Hawthorne 85-6). Hester's mingling with the community negates any possibility of forgetting her sin. With each look, she represents to society what not to become. She is the living allegory of sin. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, hides his sin but with hypocritical confessions before the congregation strives "to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but [...] gains] only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without the momentary relief of

being self-deceived” (Hawthorne 144). Unlike Hester, the townspeople do not chastise, mock, and exhort him unto repentance. Rather, they revere him as an angel and praise him for his pure life. Such respect tortures him because Dimmesdale knows he doesn’t deserve their awe. His attempt to soothe his conscience with insincere apologies buries Dimmesdale beneath more sin.

Hester and Dimmesdale’s anxiety about sin results in both of them developing a heightened sense of self-awareness. For Hester, self-awareness comes through taking care of Pearl physically and spiritually, performing good works throughout the community, confronting Chillingworth, and confessing Chillingworth’s true identity to Dimmesdale. For Dimmesdale, self-awareness comes during his vigils and after his forest meeting with Hester. During the course of their meeting, Hester talks the minister into leaving Boston with her and Pearl. After separating from her to return to town, Dimmesdale “took an impression of change from the series of familiar objects that presented themselves [...his] own will, and Hester’s will, and the fate that grew between them, had wrought this transformation” (Hawthorne 216-17). The minister’s self-awareness expands after choosing to flee with Hester and Pearl. Prior to the discussion with Hester, he had lived as a shadow. Going into the forest, Dimmesdale had been pale, weak, and sickly. Coming from the forest, he feels alive, ready to take on any challenge and eager to perform his last duty before continuing his transformation elsewhere with Hester and Pearl.

Although the Puritans realized they were human and thus prone to making mistakes, they diligently sought to rid themselves of every false assumption about sin. While some people strove to soften the reality of truth, the Puritans looked to their

religious leaders to speak plainly of sin and the effects of sin. Thus, it was in accordance with their beliefs to state that “sin destroys everything it touches” (Mills 95). Sin was never perceived as a harmless act. In all forms, sin damaged a person’s soul. It spread not only within the sinner, but to others who frequently came in contact with the sinner. It germinated quickly, reaching out to grasp and destroy others.

This is why the citizens of Boston shun Hester when she’s initially weighed down with the bondage of the scarlet letter. Despite her attempts to adorn the letter with golden thread, the Puritan townspeople recognized the letter how it was meant to be recognized and knew that if they lived too near or freely associated with Hester Prynne then they also risked being destroyed. Hawthorne’s embellished version of the Puritans dealing with sin will not only destroy Hester and her child, but any who consistently come in contact with her. The New England Puritans were “probably no more than one-fifth of the total population,” making them the minority in Boston (Miller 150). However, this did not deter them from demanding all church members renounce sin and strive to lead holier lives. Hester, on the other hand, used golden thread in direct defiance of the magistrates and their pronounced punishment. Hawthorne writes that

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

Hester begins her punishment fighting the autocratic rule of the theologians. Rather than sink beneath the penalty for her sin, Hester boldly flaunts the scarlet A fastened to her dress, even drawing attention to it due to the decorative nature of her needlework. She does not attempt to hide the letter, as some women suggest she will, but attracts each and every eye to it. Indeed, Hester breaks another rule by the extravagance of her artistry.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan society of Boston initially treats Hester as an outcast. Their scorn of her, along with being made a physical representation of sin to all who saw her, was enough to cause Hester to distance herself. Immediately upon her release from the prison, she secludes herself in a “small thatched cottage” that had been “abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of [...] social activity” (Hawthorne 56). However, with no strictures upon where she must live, Hester strangely chooses to remain among a people who taunt and jeer at her. Not only do the devout Puritans set her up as an allegorical embodiment of sin, but they teach their children to despise her daughter Pearl. When describing how the other children respond to Pearl, Hawthorne writes “the little Puritans [...] scorned them [Hester and Pearl] in their hearts, and not unfrequently reviled them with their tongues” (94). The children speak unkindly to the sinner and her daughter because of a general feeling of dislike. They realize instinctively that Hester and Pearl are different and therefore take advantage of the opportunities to taunt them. On their way to Governor Bellingham’s house so that Hester can plead to keep Pearl, several children notice “the woman of the scarlet letter [...]and] the likeness of the scarlet letter running along by her side” and decide to “fling mud at them” (Hawthorne 102)! The Puritan children need no enticement to harass Hester and Pearl aside from the fact

that they are sinners. The bright A sewn onto the outside of her raiment names Hester as a sinner. Pearl shares in Hester's guilt for two reasons: she is the product of sin and the child of a sinner.

Hawthorne's portrayal of how the Puritan children treat Pearl appears cruel and unfair to the modern reader. However, with a belief in original sin, and the stress of a "*communal agreement*" that "explained the *collective* blessings or afflictions," the Puritan children were within their social norms to disdain Hester and Pearl (Conforti 54). The perception of a community bound by covenants made with God alters the view of the individual. Hester and Pearl cannot be seen merely as individuals because their actions affect the possible blessings for the entire town of Boston.

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

Hester blatantly flaunts her disregard for sin to the Puritan society of Boston. She chooses not to depart and dwell elsewhere. With options of other towns or a return to her native land, she moves instead to the outskirts of Boston. Although Hester does live outside of Boston, over the years she becomes a contributing, quasi-accepted citizen. She makes burial shrouds and embroiders the ceremonial robes of the clergy. The first example of her fine embroidery is displayed proudly in the golden thread used to decorate the *A* forced upon her. The matrons of the town are irritated by her ornamentation of the scarlet letter and see it as a denial of the actual penance placed upon her. They mutter about how the “brazen hussy [...laughs] in the faces of [their] godly magistrates, and make[s] a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment” (Hawthorne 54). The women’s displeasure with the lenient penalty placed upon Hester is inflamed when she continues to dwell among them. Even with her contributions to society, the townspeople shun Hester and mock her when she does venture forth from her humble cottage. They hold her accountable for adding to the communal sins placed before God. Throughout the romance, Hester changes by slowly including herself into sections of society through service. It is true that some tasks were always refused her, but Hester “never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it, in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies” (Hawthorne 160). The Puritans that Hawthorne creates eventually re-accept her as a contributing member. In fact, they even turn a blind eye to the original meaning of the scarlet *A* by the end of the romance.

The Puritans of Boston might have preferred Hester to vanish so as not to contaminate their covenants made with God. Oberholzer states that “Not every

confession resulted in the immediate restoration of the offender” (137). Sometimes the offender refused to yield, as with the documented cases of Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson, both of which took place before the historical setting of *The Scarlet Letter*. Although the magistrates and ministers of 1635 finally decided to call Williams to account for his heretical opinions, they gave him every opportunity to recant before threatening to ship him back to England (Winship 31). The magistrates accused Hutchinson of reversing gender roles by taking on “public” speaking, challenging the hierarchy and social order, and accusing them of the “covenant of good works” (Conforti 93). Her trial in the fall of 1637 eventually concluded with her family’s move to Rhode Island and a continued insistence on her part that she had no need to repent.

While it is true that not all degenerates were brought back to the saving grace of God, the theocratic rulers wanted to separate themselves from sinners. Hester, it appears, was written by Hawthorne in opposition to the ideal sociality of the historical Puritans. At the beginning of her punishment, Hawthorne writes that “Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost” (80). Hester feels the need to work out her own redemption through remaining surrounded by others who know of her guilt. Leaving Boston would offer the opportunity to forget her sin and continue without a demanded penance. However, she chooses to utilize the magistrates and their forced shame to work out her own redemption. Hester believes in sin, yet she does not believe that the oligarchy has the right to brand her. She does not reject the Puritan view of sin; rather, she attempts to reform that view through her years of good works.

Although Hawthorne did perceive sin as wrong, he also realized that there was “an educative effect in sin” (Mills 97). He felt that the person who has sinned becomes sadder but wiser in the long run. Through the resulting struggle and subsequent development of inner reflection, the sinner perceived life in a different way. This new-found perception had the possibility of allowing the sinner to understand mankind in the fallen state. Such an understanding could be useful to one choosing to assist those around him. Empathy toward fallen mankind opened new avenues of directing other sinners back to the covenants binding people to God. Hawthorne prequalifies this usefulness of sin with the belief that the “educative effect” only became positive in light of the sinner’s full repentance (Cronin 95). Without the vital step of expunging the soul of the taint caused by sin, the sinner became no more than a lost child blindly wandering from the correct path.

Sin is precisely what allows Hester to develop and change as a person. As a result of her sin, fall, eventual remorse, and penance, she rises higher than she fell (Ringe 128). Describing Hester after Dimmesdale and Chillingworth’s deaths, her departure from Boston with Pearl, and her eventual return, Hawthorne endows her with more compassion, empathy, and generosity than previously seen. When the women of Boston entreat her counsel, Hester “comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and women on a surer ground of natural happiness” (Hawthorne 263). Hester’s ability to soothe the wronged and afflicted would not have been possible if she had not truly repented. Hawthorne’s belief in “an educative

effect” of sin was void without sincere repentance as part of the equation. If Hester had sinned and then chosen not to repent, she would have remained as Adam after the Fall, cut off from the presence of God. While her repentance occurs over the course of many years, in the end she does return to Boston and Hawthorne implies that when she returns, Hester brings inner peace.

This “educative effect” should not be confused with Hester’s developing sixth sense in *The Scarlet Letter*. Her ability to sense the sins that others have committed also develops as a result of her sin, but is not directly tied to producing a beneficial outcome. The “educative effect” that Mills discusses is specifically for enhancing the sinner’s experience on the path to full repentance. The sinner’s struggle to understand the world she lives in leads to a better understanding of her fellow men as well. Hester’s sixth sense is different because there is no intent of journeying toward the renewal that comes from complete repentance. Rather, it is a keener insight into fellow sinners. Hawthorne states that “she felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (86). Hester’s insight befuddles her because she believes that others cannot have sinned as deeply as she has sinned and yet she feels that she is not alone.

In being a sinner, the sinner becomes capable of understanding other sinners. With the entire town of Boston sinning, Mistress Hibbins meeting with the Devil, and the leaders incapable of sitting in righteous judgment, Hawthorne allowed himself infinite scope. However, it is both Hester and Dimmesdale who can see into the hearts of their fellow citizens. Hester’s keen insight provoked by the scarlet letter warns her of fellow

sinners. Her understanding grows not only with perceiving other sinners, but also with the task of raising Pearl. When Governor Bellingham and the other magistrates of Boston consider taking Pearl away from her, Hester pleads with Dimmesdale to defend her. His response is that “It is good for this poor, sinful woman that she hath an infant immortality, a being capable of eternal joy or sorrow, confined to her care,—to be trained up by her in righteousness,—to remind her, at every moment, of her fall,—but yet to teach her” (Hawthorne 114-15). Through focusing on Pearl’s temporal and spiritual welfare, Hester’s love grows and promotes assisting her fellow citizens. At the end of the romance, she goes so far as to transform into a sounding board for the people of Boston, particularly the women. Instead of the sinner bringing society down, Hester as the repentant sinner becomes an asset to the community.

Dimmesdale, on the other hand, hides his sin and strives to repent in secret. He becomes even more effective as a minister, bringing numerous townspeople to God, yet slowly atrophying not only physically but spiritually. The minister desires to guide his flock to the best of his ability. Indeed, it appears that he follows Donald Ringe’s assertion that “if man is to develop the noblest qualities of mind and heart and so achieve true and profound insight into the problem of human existence, he must sin, incur the perilous state of isolation and sacrifice whatever happiness can be achieved in a troubled world” (132). For Dimmesdale, happiness was sought in furthering his career as a minister among the Puritans. Although he walked among them and led them in the things of the spirit, his mutual guilt with Hester forbade him from truly enjoying happiness. He does indeed cut himself off from the townspeople, seeming to them as an angel sent down to guide them. Hawthorne’s irony in allowing Dimmesdale to hide his sin for so long

comes out in Dimmesdale's confession when he exclaims "But there stood one in the midst of you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered! [...] It was on him [...] But he hid it cunningly from men, and walked among you with the mien of a spirit" (255)! The Puritans have been duped by a man who should have been awarded the death penalty for his sin (Winship 26). As Hester's reaction is a result of her gender, responsibilities, and opportunities, so is Dimmesdale's reaction. For a man in a position of some repute and distinction, Dimmesdale would not have been able to do good if the townspeople knew of his sin. As a clergyman, he would have been held to an even higher bar of expectation. Hawthorne writes the Reverend Dimmesdale as internally assessing his sin for seven years prior to a decision to confess. According to Hawthorne, Dimmesdale's ability to connect with his parishioners is a direct result of his own sin.

Hawthorne thought that sin was necessary in order to truly understand humanity. In this way, he debated with the Puritans over their perception of collective guilt. Rather than feeling one person would drag down the entire society, Hawthorne concentrated on the "conflict between passionate, self-assertive, and self-expressive inner drives and the repressing counterforces that exist in society and are also internalized within the self" (Baym *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* 124). But while the conflict between inner drives and social mores are indisputably a part of character in Hawthorne's works, "internalized" social counterforces may receive considerably less attention from Hawthorne than Baym asserts. This is especially seen in the case of Hester. Hester internalizes aspects of the Puritan society of Boston, such as the concept of adultery as sin, but this internalization does not keep her from committing adultery, nor does it prompt her to speedy repentance. American Romanticism in the nineteenth century

expounded the belief that the individual was more important than the collective. This movement, studied by Hawthorne, explored how searching the individual's interior brought enlightenment. Hester does not languish in guilt. She accepts responsibility and moves forward. For Hawthorne, it wasn't a matter of collective guilt, but rather the thought of self versus self. The guilt Hawthorne centered his romance around was not necessarily Hester's, but rather Dimmesdale's. The minister, torn between a spiritual desire and a carnal desire, battles his own conscience from beginning to end. Baym's observation applies more clearly to Dimmesdale than it ever does to Hester.

Although Chillingworth purposely torments Dimmesdale throughout the romance, Dimmesdale's realization that he is indeed a vile sinner haunts him. The minister, weak and afraid of open humiliation, chooses to hide in the secret safety of Hester's heart. When given the chance to speak at her public trial upon the scaffold, he flushes with relief at his lover's refusal to name him. Yet, the secrecy of Dimmesdale's sin is exactly what causes him to "[loathe] his miserable self" (Hawthorne 96). He knows that all sin is wrong before God and that hidden sin carries even more torment as a righteous punishment. Indeed, the minister's guilt exponentially grows due to the veiling of his shared sin. He immerses himself in the study of theology as a means of barricading himself from analyzing too closely his own culpability in Pearl's existence.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne takes the Puritans' perceptions of sin and deviates to strongly demonstrate how the Romantic notion of individualism benefits both Hester and Dimmesdale. While he acknowledges that the sin of adultery is wrong, Hawthorne never specifically labels the sin, nor does he infinitely punish the sinners. Although Hester is exposed and chastened, she is not expelled from the community and

in fact eventually carves out a niche for herself and Pearl within society. When Dimmesdale finally declares his guilt, Hawthorne re-emphasizes the belief that sin can help a person better understand humanity. *The Scarlet Letter* transforms from a story merely about two Puritan sinners into a nineteenth century critique about society as a whole.

CHAPTER 2: PURITANS, HAWTHORNE, AND REDEMPTION

The interest in redemption shared by Nathaniel Hawthorne and his Puritan forebearers indicates its importance in society, culture, and the mind. However, Hawthorne and the Puritans approach the topic from different perspectives. The Puritans espoused the doctrine of predestination, which states that only God knows who is saved and who is damned (Morgan *Visible Saints* 67). While they did not believe their actions altered whether or not they were saved, certain factors *could* indicate a person's redemption. These factors include order or lack of chaos, guilt leading to a desire to do better, good behavior in society, and enforcing morality upon others. Theologically, the Puritans accepted predestination and strove to live worthy of redemption. In actuality, the Puritans wanted to know who was saved and sought signs of redemption in the words and deeds of their fellow citizens. Hawthorne portrayed the issues surrounding the Puritan doctrine of predestination in his characterization of the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. On the one hand, Dimmesdale preaches with the intent of saving souls because for Puritans ignorance leads to damnation. On the other hand, Dimmesdale feels that he cannot personally be saved, yet he attempts to purge himself of the dual sins of adultery and hypocrisy before his death. In contrast to the minister, Hawthorne uses Hester to advocate the Romantic notion that the individual could reach redemption through introspection, good works, sorrow, and repentance. The Romantic internalization of redemption was an end in itself. In Hawthorne's representation of

Hester, the need for a Savior is lessened because redemption centers on the actions of the individual. There was not the focus of ever-lasting life, as with the Puritans.

Discovering whether one had saving faith or not was important to the Puritans. They understood that their doctrine of predestination conflicted with the doctrine of good works. While the doctrine of predestination firmly stated that God chose the saved as well as the damned, it also stated that an outward appearance of obedience possibly indicated the presence of saving faith. Like redemption, faith also came from God. It was a gift given to those who were already predestined for redemption. There was no way to develop faith. A person was either faithful or faithless.

In the Puritan view of predestination, if God alone has already determined who is saved and who is damned, then why study the scriptures? Why attend church meetings? Why perform good works in society? Why report sin? Why enforce morality upon others? The answer to all of these questions is both simple and complex. Simply stated: no person can know the status of his or her salvation. This leads us to the complex answer. Conforti points out the complexity of redemption in the Puritan mind when he states, "But since no one knew for certain who would be saved, Puritans were encouraged to strive in the hope that they would be among the chosen" (36). While a person cannot know for certain whether he or she is saved, there are indicators pointing toward redemption or damnation. Seeking out the signs of redemption does not determine redemption as a surety, but it could demonstrate whether redemption was a possibility.

In his romance *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays the uncertainty of the Puritan doctrine of predestination in the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. The uncertainty of redemption is central to the romance because Dimmesdale's actions and

approach toward life are a result of his belief in predestination. Dimmesdale belongs to the Puritan clergy that preaches morality, righteousness, and redemption to his parishioners. He stands with the theocracy prodding the citizens' consciences toward possible redemption. As a minister, Dimmesdale is supposed to be leading his congregation by example. His outward goodness indicates to the community that he is counted among the saved. Hawthorne writes "[The people] deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouthpiece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love. In their eyes, the very ground on which he trod was sanctified" (142). The townsfolk believe that the minister could be walking with the angels, but remains on earth to continue guiding them toward faith. Dimmesdale's appearance of obedience to God portrays the Puritan belief that although moral behavior does not ensure redemption, it can be an indication of God's favor.

However, according to Puritan doctrine, Dimmesdale is unworthy of the trust he holds in the community. Merely as a respectable citizen of the community, Dimmesdale has the responsibility of reporting sin. Compounding this responsibility is his standing as a minister. As a clergyman, the expectation to report sin is even higher. Historically, when Ann Hutchinson first began disputing the authority of the magistrates and ministers in Boston in 1636, John Cotton should have reported her. Instead, he came to her defense, until he realized he was on the verge of expulsion. After striving to gain Hutchinson an opportunity to repent and having her refuse it, Cotton deserted her to the justice of the court (Winship 133).

Dimmesdale's lack of reporting his sin to the proper authorities is a result of his belief in predestination. Hawthorne indicates that Dimmesdale must not be among the

saved if he can be such a vile sinner. Yet, if he is damned, then why attempt to reach purification with flogging, fasting, keeping vigils, and preaching? The narrator explains that,

[Dimmesdale's] inward trouble drove him to practices, more in accordance with the old, corrupted faith of Rome, than with the better light of the church in which he had been born and bred. In Mr. Dimmesdale's secret closet, under lock and key, there was a bloody scourge. Oftentimes, this Protestant and Puritan divine had plied it on his own shoulders; laughing bitterly at himself the while, and smiting so much the more pitilessly, because of that bitter laugh. It was his custom, too, as it has been that of many other pious 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. He kept vigils, likewise, night after night.

(Hawthorne 144)

The minister's actions show his belief that his sin cannot be atoned for, but he persists in weakening his body as a way of coping with his guilt. Intellectually, he understands that unrepented sins indicate he cannot be saved, but emotionally he hopes to assuage his guilt. He flogs himself as punishment for his sins of adultery and hypocrisy, but even flogging himself goes against what Puritans teach about sin and repentance. Although fasting and vigils in and of themselves were not considered wrong among the Puritans, Dimmesdale's reasoning behind fasting and performing vigils is more Catholic than Puritan as Hawthorne describes "the old, corrupted faith of Rome" (144). He does not

fast in order to draw closer to God, but rather in order to relieve his mind of guilt. The vigils that he keeps are not for the purpose of spiritual enlightenment, but as a means of finding “a moment’s peace” (Hawthorne 146).

The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale thinks of himself and his life as a shadow and desires to rid himself of the burden of hidden sin. During a theological discussion about sin and redemption, he tells Chillingworth that “it must needs be better for the sufferer to be free to show his pain [...] than to cover it all up in his heart” (Hawthorne 135).

Dimmesdale wishes he were psychologically strong enough to openly admit his sin and bear the disgrace. Unfortunately, he refuses to vocalize his sin and thus chooses to struggle with his guilt internally. Prior to declaring the better way of freedom concerning sin, Dimmesdale suggests to Chillingworth one reason people hide sin. He states that “they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because, thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them; no evil of the past redeemed by better service” (Hawthorne 132). If Dimmesdale is supposed to represent the typical views of the Puritans, then why does Hawthorne write such a conversation with Chillingworth?

The minister’s replies do not line up with the accepted Puritan theology because Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale as a point of deviation from the Puritans. Dimmesdale emphasizes that performing good works is more important than penitence. His comments indicate a disregard for the Puritan controversy centered on good works; namely that any person, good or evil, is capable of good works focused on his or her self interest.

According to the citizens of Boston, Dimmesdale is definitely chosen by God to be saved. His service and his position in society demonstrate his redemption. However, Dimmesdale’s own words condemn him, showing why he cannot be one of the saved.

In an effort to report his sin seven years after Hester stands on the scaffold in front of the entire town of Boston, Dimmesdale announces what a vile sinner he is from the pulpit. However, he does so expressly so that the listeners will hear vague admonitions and misinterpret his actual meaning. The narrator states that “He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity [...] Could there be plainer speech than this? Would not the people start up in their seats, by a simultaneous impulse, and tear him down out of the pulpit which he defiled? Not so, indeed! They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more” (Hawthorne 144). Dimmesdale knows how the citizens perceive him. He knows of their reverence for him and therefore, it can be discerned that he tells them of his sin in such a manner to add to their awe. Each time the minister announces his wretchedness from the pulpit he realizes he adds deception to his other sins, but the fear of public exposure outweighs his desire to repent. The narrator explains Dimmesdale’s reasoning behind attempting confession within his sermons. “The minister well knew—subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!—the light in which his vague confession would be viewed. He had striven to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without the momentary relief of being self-deceived” (Hawthorne 144).

Although Dimmesdale attempts to deceive himself, Hester finally realizes that by hiding the true identity of Chillingworth, she contributes to Dimmesdale’s agony. Deciding to inform the minister of his enemy, Hester purposely walks in the forest when she knows he will return from visiting the Apostle Eliot among the Indians. Over the

course of Dimmesdale and Hester's discussion in the forest, the minister agrees to run away with her. At this point, it seems that his belief in predestination is solid. As a damned soul, why should he continue struggling beneath the façade of godliness? If he is in fact damned, then why not run away with Hester and Pearl and forge a new happiness? Given the option of starting a new life, Dimmesdale thinks, "But now,—since I am irrevocably doomed,—wherefore should I not snatch the solace allowed to the condemned culprit before his execution? Or, if this be the path to a better life [...] I surely give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it" (Hawthorne 201).

Dimmesdale's attempt to break away from the Puritan belief in predestination is not complete. Between the forest meeting with Hester and Pearl and the end of the Election Sermon introducing the new governor, Dimmesdale once again changes his mind. In proclaiming his guilt, the minister follows the Puritan tenet of openly confessing sin. About Dimmesdale's confession, Robert Milder asks, "once he has eschewed outward penance and met the demand for heartfelt penitence through public confession, has he ransomed himself from the otherwise lifelong penalty of guilt and sorrow?" (11). I do not believe that Dimmesdale does in fact ransom himself. His confession is public, but not given with the hope of redemption. The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* informs us that he does not profess his sin as an assurance of his repentance, but as a way to "take [his] shame upon [him]" because he is "a dying man" (Hawthorne 254). Is he following the steps outlined by Puritanism because of a belief in his individual redemption or because he knows he is predestined for damnation? Had Dimmesdale's constitution allowed him to confess his sin seven years earlier, would he have still been a candidate for redemption? He appears to want an individual redemption,

but realizes God's control over everything with his dying words, "His will be done" (Hawthorne 257).

Dimmesdale represents the issue surrounding the Puritan doctrine of predestination. He is also an anti example of the signs of possible redemption. For the Puritans, one sign suggesting redemption is order or the lack of chaos. Order does not come naturally to mankind. The Fall of Adam destroyed any natural inclination toward order that might have existed. God, on the other hand, dwells in order and therefore will not dwell where there is no order. God made covenants with believers to assist them in the search for order. Where such men and women congregated, a society was built based upon the belief that correct leadership would lead to correct governance. For Puritans, order in society attempts to recapture the order that existed before the Fall. Since the Fall of Adam rendered mankind ignorant and filled with sin, these defects were combated through expounding the scriptures.

Aside from seeking order, Puritans focused on self-reflection to notice sinful tendencies before those tendencies converted into actions. How did they know what constituted sin? They attended church and were told by the ministers how they should live. Guilt at an improper thought hopefully dissuaded the person from sinning. However, when self-reflection alone was not enough to fend off sin, there were always the New England ministers to admonish and plead with the parishioners. What separated ministers from the common man? What gave ministers the right to preach? Robert W. Brockway explains that "the education of Puritan ministers stressed the mastery of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew so that, ideally, the minister could read the Scriptures in the original tongues rather than in translation. Clerical education also included rigorous courses in

logic to aid in the exegesis of the text” (193). The community believed that the education of the minister gave him a respected place in society. E. Brooks Holifield adds that the clergy also studied, “history, the Bible, and ‘encyclopedia’ [...because theology] required of the theologian the ability to combine two worlds of discourse—one biblical, the other grounded in reason” (28). The Puritans believed that the Bible, as the word of God, was in code and needed to be interpreted. As a result of their education, ministers were set up by the people as responsible for disseminating the vital information in the Bible.

Sometimes a person disregarded his conscience, sermons, and advice from other members of the congregation and sinned. After sinning, it was hoped that his conscience, sermons, and advice would work upon the sinner until repentance occurred. When Adam and Eve were initially created, mankind walked and talked with God. There had been a point in creation when order was natural. Holifield states that “In the covenant of works with Adam [...] God promised eternal happiness on the condition of perfect obedience. Adam’s fall broke that covenant, though without annulling its demands” (40). Moving from order to chaos, mankind was lost without a way to return to their former state of order. To this end, men organized churches to assemble together those who believed in God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. Puritans believed that if the church or even the state was directed by the correct man, then the combined efforts of believers would lead to a more righteous society. A more righteous society in turn indicated a possible, not definite, redemption. The doctrine of predestination did not lend itself to definitively ascertaining individual or communal redemption because it was impossible to know for certain who God had chosen to save.

Puritans also viewed good behavior as a possible sign of redemption. It was commonly felt that evil came from Satan and good came from God. A person going about continually doing good was seen as more likely to be saved than another who was either lazy or immoral. However, Robert Middlekauff reminds us that “sinners frequently observed the law, and they sometimes did good works. At least their action appeared good” (68). Thus, while the outward visibility of good works might point toward a regenerate or saved soul, good works alone were not conclusive evidence since any person was capable of doing good of their own will. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale is perceived as the most pious of men, yet the narrator tells us that, “it is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him” (Hawthorne 143). The minister’s outward expression of observing the law and doing good works hides the truth of his behavior. Conversely, a lack of good works did not necessarily prove damnation. Good behavior on the part of a citizen was merely one possible indicator of his standing before God.

Part of doing good included reporting known sin to the magistrates. A person’s first duty was to make sure his life was in order. Then, he was to make sure his family members were contributing positively to society. Conversely, if he sinned, he was supposed to report his sin to the magistrates. Depending upon the seriousness of the sin, the tribunal might include his minister and various state leaders, possibly even the governor. Morgan’s commentary indicates that private offenses were settled in a private meeting, but public offenses demanded public exposure and a declaration of repentance before the church (*Visible Saints* 89).

Reporting known sin led to another possible sign of redemption: enforcing morality upon others. Contrary to popular belief, the New England Puritans did not assert individualism and liberty. Rather, they settled in New England with the intention of forcing the citizens within their jurisdiction into lives of righteousness following their specific doctrines. They harassed the Quakers and Native Americans. Sometimes the Puritans focused their bouts of cleansing within their church community, as if searching for the serpent in the bosom. One well-documented incident of this type is the expulsion of Roger Williams from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1635. Every historian who discusses the New England Puritans deals with the matter of Williams and his overt desire to separate from the other Puritan churches. Darren Staloff writes that “the Salem church was furious at the court’s mixing of civil and church issues, as well as at the intrusion into their congregational independence,” but after pleading with Williams to recant concerning his displeasure with the other Puritan churches, the court “exiled him from the orthodox Puritan community” within six weeks (38). It did not matter that Williams neither asked for nor wanted the interference of the magistrates; he defied the Puritans and was banished from among them.

In the Puritan mind, those who sinned were obviously not saved. Yet, mankind was prone to make mistakes, as evidenced by Adam’s Fall in the Garden of Eden. Thus, on deeper reflection, sinning did not necessarily mean the sinner was damned. The first step was reporting the sin. After the offense was reported, the sinner was expected to show ample repentance. If a confession of repentance convinced the magistrates, then the sinner was returned to the congregation. However, if the sinner was unrepentant after strict admonition, then the ruling theocracy exerted the right to excommunicate the

sinner. In the case of Ann Hutchinson, Winship writes that she “had devoted little energy to the role of repentant sinner” (129). Refusing to repent, and persisting in her claims against the church of Boston, Hutchinson was eventually excommunicated or cast out of the church congregation. Not only was she cast out of the church congregation, but the settlement as well.

The need for New England Puritans to distance themselves from sinners was a result of the Puritan belief in collective guilt. The congregation had covenanted with God as an entire community. When sinners realized their sins and repented, then the community as a whole was spiritually strengthened. Each person who offered a confession of faith was brought into the holy congregation and viewed as contributing to society’s overall well-being. Conversely, any person who sinned detracted from society’s good standing with God. The entire congregation was culpable for one person’s sin (Morgan *Visible Saints* 114). This is largely why Dimmesdale suffers inner turmoil. As a devout Puritan, and as a clergyman, he understands that his sins affect the community’s relationship with God. During the forest meeting where Hester contrives to speak with Dimmesdale away from prying eyes, the minister exclaims, “As concerns the good which I may appear to do, I have no faith in it. It must needs be a delusion [...] I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it” (Hawthorne 191). To Hester, he openly admits that good deeds cannot counterbalance sin. He has broken society’s covenant with God and although Boston does not know, Dimmesdale has added to their collective guilt.

Even as they searched the scriptures, attended church, did good, reported sin, and enforced morality upon others, the Puritans remembered that no man could determine

who was saved and who was damned. Saving faith, a gift from God, was the surest sign of redemption. Conforti writes that the Puritans “exalted God’s absolute sovereignty in determining the recipients of saving grace” (36). Only faith saved and only God saw and knew who was blessed with faith. No amount of second-guessing and looking for signs could replace the fact that saving faith either existed in a person or it did not. If a person was not blessed with saving faith, then contributing positively to society and reporting sin would not override God’s judgment and allow the person redemption.

The Romanticism thriving in Hawthorne’s time had a different approach to redemption, society, and the individual. In 1850, when he published *The Scarlet Letter*, romanticism was pushing for progress through transformation of the social order. This ideological movement focused on the success of the individual, espoused self-reflection, and demanded a national identity separate from Europe (Pease 486). For the Romantics, searching the interior was not the same as what might be referred to as “soul searching.” There did not have to be an epiphany nor the desire to change. Self-reflection constituted a look into the heart of a person, but did not demand altering if the heart was found lacking. Rather, self-reflection allowed the person to analyze habits, intellect, and personality. No further step was required. In relation to Hawthorne, the individual searching the interior became a focal point, as evidenced through the character of Hester. She considers and thinks, but reaches no conclusions. By the end of the romance, Hester “assured them [mostly women], too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period [...] a new truth would be revealed” (Hawthorne 263). She holds a belief, yet has nothing to tie down that belief, which demonstrates more strongly her individualism.

As an ostracized person, Hester is the ultimate portrayal of individualism. Nina Baym comments that, “As the representative of individuality, Hester, rather than subjecting herself to the law, subjects the law to her own scrutiny” (“Hester as Hero” 69). Hawthorne uses Hester to demonstrate that introspection, good works, sorrow, and repentance should be rewarded with redemption. Rejected as a sinner by the Puritans, Hester abandons Puritan belief and turns inward with the intent of finding individual redemption through meditation. While the Puritans also believed in introspection, their view focused on an intensified self-consciousness and guilt. Hester does not allow herself to dwell on guilt. She deviates from the Puritan norm because she never openly admits that committing adultery is a sin. Yet, when Hester reflects upon Pearl’s existence, Hester admits “that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be for good” (Hawthorne 89-90). Hester knows what she did was wrong and she realizes she cannot expect good as a result, but she does not ever confess her thoughts to the society.

While the Puritans remained uncertain that good works truly indicated redemption, Hester holds stubbornly to the view that performing good works should lead to redemption. Hester takes upon herself the role of comforter and ministering angel. Early in the romance, she “bestow[s] all her superfluous means in charity,” and by the time of Dimmesdale’s mock repentance in the middle of the night “many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able” (Hawthorne 83, 161). She becomes a positive example of defying the discipline placed upon her by the magistrates of Boston. Hester refuses to merely accept her new station in society and deviates from the normal Puritan view of a sinner by altering the entire

community's perception of her. Alongside the early indications of her willingness to give to charity, Hawthorne also writes of her willingness to sacrifice time and talent that could be used for monetary advantage in order to make garments for the poor. Of Hester's decision to make coarse garments, the narrator states, "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" (Hawthorne 83). However, seven years after Hester's shame upon the pillory, the narrator once again describes her through the eyes of the townsfolk. She has been transformed from a woman of shame into a woman of capacity and charity. Describing this transformation in the eyes of Boston's citizens, the narrator explains,

None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty; even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have embroidered a monarch's robe. None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town. In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found her place [...] 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.

(Hawthorne 161)

There is no longer a side note mentioning Hester's willingness to perform good works as penance. Hawthorne appears to be arguing for individual redemption based upon Hester's ability to accomplish so many good works. He indicates that the shifting view

of the Puritan townsfolk has little to do with predestination and more to do with Hester's individual actions.

For the Puritans, good works did not definitively prove redemption, nor did they sorrow and remorse. Hester differs on this matter. Her belief that suffering should promote redemption coincides with the Romantic notion that redemption was contingent upon the individual and not entirely up to God. Prior to Dimmesdale's death, Hester declares that "Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe" (Hawthorne 256). She does not believe that God chooses who is saved, but rather the amount of sorrow determines redemption. With her focus on woe, Hester lessens the importance of saving faith. She does not appear to care whether she has saving faith or not, only that sorrow should lead to redemption. Hester becomes her own redeemer, a blasphemous idea to Puritans, but accepted by Romantics because of the self-defining actions of the individual. Through her woe, Hester disregards the outward punishment of the magistrates and turns inward, determining that she does not need their confining definitions in order to be saved.

What was Hester's woe? Although Hawthorne does not allow the reader deep insight into Hester's mind, there are other indications of her suffering. First, when she is released from prison, Hester must stand upon the scaffold in front of the entire town of Boston. As she stands upon the scaffold, she "felt, at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once" (Hawthorne 57). She had prepared herself for the first phase of her punishment mentally as well as decoratively, yet all her preparation does not stop the emotional strain. Next, she is required to wear the scarlet A, which

leads to “seven years of outlaw and ignominy” (Hawthorne 200). The scarlet letter carries a weight not recognized until the moment in the woods when Hester flings it away from her and feels liberated. Of that moment, the narrator comments that, “The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom” (Hawthorne 202). During her years of estrangement from society, Hester is constantly held up as a living sermon to the wayward and faithful alike. She has also been denied the companionship and love of the one man she loves.

When Pearl is three years old, the ruling theocracy questions whether or not Hester should be allowed to continue raising her. They have various reasons. One concern expressed by the narrator is that Pearl is a demon and thus impeding Hester’s repentance process. Hawthorne writes that the “good people [of Boston] not unreasonably argued that a Christian interest in the mother’s soul required them to remove such a stumbling-block from her path” (100). The magistrates and ministers do not want Hester following a demon. Another concern is that if Pearl is indeed capable of learning what she needs to in order to be redeemed, then she should be raised by a believer. In support of helping the child, the narrator explains that “If the child, on the other hand, were really capable of moral and religious growth, and possessed the elements of ultimate salvation, then, surely, it would enjoy all the fairer prospect of these advantages by being transferred to a wiser and better guardianship than Hester Prynne’s” (Hawthorne 100-01). The first argument claims to be in support of saving Hester, while the second argument claims to be in support of saving Pearl. In either version, the rulers are concerned with the redemption of a soul.

Because of her sin, Hester is not viewed by the Puritans of Boston as one of the saved chosen by God. When confronting the magistrates who condemned her to wear the scarlet A and who now want to take away her child, Hester declares “See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first” (Hawthorne 113). Hester argues that taking Pearl from her will not help either of them, but rather cause harm. Indeed, she claims that having Pearl to guide is the only reason she is not dead. Hester insists that her path to repentance is not hindered by the child, but helped through the presence of Pearl.

Over the duration of the romance, Hester continues to change as repentance becomes her goal. Her change is outward, focused on helping others poorer than herself or on teaching Pearl. Hawthorne states that when Hester returns to New England after Pearl’s supposed marriage, it is because “here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence” (263). When Dimmesdale died on the scaffold after presenting the Election Sermon, Hester still had not repented fully of her sin. After she rejects Puritanism, after she and Pearl leave New England, and after she admits that she cannot change society, she returns to continue the process of repentance. Of Hester’s return to Boston, Milder asserts, “Hester, too, is brought to accede to the force of law when years later she returns to Boston and voluntarily resumes the scarlet letter” (3). Under this description, Hester sounds to be admitting her sin anew when she is demonstrating her ability to choose. The magistrates never commanded her to remain in Boston, yet “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” (Hawthorne 80). Even Hester’s decision to stay in Boston is a deviation from Puritan doctrine and law. Her initial choice to stay and her choice to come back years after Dimmesdale’s death are both connected to him. Baym states that “her reasons for staying may be misguided, but they are her own” (“Hester as Hero” 68). Her repentance, viewed by the citizens of Boston as forced upon her by the magistrates, does not actually begin until virtually the end of the romance.

As the stronger, more heroic figure in the romance, Hester alone remains at the end. If Hawthorne had used the Puritan setting to punish and redeem, then there would have been no need for Hester’s return. However, her reunion with Boston acts as another deviation from the accepted view of the Puritans. Roberta Weldon defines Hester’s “primary task in the final stages of her life [as] to mourn, remember, and serve” after she returns to Boston (28). However, Hawthorne’s words promote another task. The narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* states, “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 too” (Hawthorne 263). She is to continue acting as a departure from Puritan doctrine and life. Hester the individual rises above the Puritans, acting as a better solution for redemption.

Through the two primary characters of Dimmesdale and Hester, Hawthorne explores and then deviates from the Puritan view of redemption in favor of the Romantic view. Hawthorne uses the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale to portray the paradoxical nature inherent in the Puritan belief in predestination. Although he attempts to break away from the stifling Puritan doctrine, Dimmesdale is not successful; he eventually dies from the

physical effects of his spiritual and emotional torment. The character Hester Prynne rejects predestination for the Romantic ideal of individual redemption resulting from introspection, good works, sorrow, and repentance. Hester overcomes her shame and suffering to become a gentle, wise force for good in her community, thus depicting the triumph of the Romantic view of redemption over the Puritan view.

CHAPTER 3: DIMMESDALE THE SECRET SINNER

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale as the supposed Puritanical standard in contrast to Hester. While Hester seems at times to flaunt her freedom from the social constructs of the community, the minister attempts to hide the ways in which he deviates from the path of the devout Puritans. Dimmesdale struggles to continue appearing as a “good” Puritan, but he cannot carry on his charade indefinitely. Although the New England Puritans believed in the doctrine of good works, they maintained that faith alone was what saved a person. Dimmesdale, lacking the faith sufficient for redemption, leans toward heresy when he tries to make his good works lead to salvation.

Dimmesdale does not feel comfortable among others. The narrator explains that “His eloquence and religious fervor had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession [...] Notwithstanding his high native gifts and scholar-like attainments, there was an air about this young minister,—an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look,—as of a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence” (Hawthorne 66). Dimmesdale’s interaction with members of the community is awkward. Young as he is, he is acclaimed in Boston for his ability to preach, but he cannot relax into his position of authority. Later, the reader understands that the minister’s awkwardness arises from sin. Benjamin Kilborne explains that Dimmesdale “seems waiting to be caught by surprise” (472). The minister’s constant air of

bewilderment and inability to connect with society stems from the suppressed shame of hidden guilt.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the New England Puritans believed that the good behavior of any person could indicate being chosen for salvation. However, the Puritans held that good works alone were not enough to confirm salvation. There were, in fact, people capable of doing good out of sheer logic or, worse, the desire to deceive. Throughout most of *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale rejects the idea of openly admitting his shared guilt in Pearl's creation. When responding to Chillingworth's assertion that some men who hide their secrets should not do so, Dimmesdale declares that "guilty as they may be, retaining, nevertheless, a zeal for God's glory and man's welfare, they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because, thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them" (Hawthorne 132). Dimmesdale seems to adhere to a doctrine of good works over grace, yet his emphasis on self-interest undermines the conviction he brings to the position. Puritans distrusted the doctrine of works because of self-interest. A person could easily do something perceived as good for his own selfish desires. Indeed, this is what Dimmesdale does when he convinces himself that good works weigh more heavily than grace and thereby he shall be saved through his ministry.

Hawthorne shows us the minister's misguided belief in order to emphasize the differences between Hester and Dimmesdale's views of redemption. Hester's redemption is psychological, dependent upon how she intellectually and morally feels about herself now. She refuses to accept that her one sin keeps her from salvation. Nor does she believe that doing as the magistrates demand will result in redemption. Instead, she

pursues ideals for her own sake. Describing Hester seven years after standing upon the scaffold, the narrator declares that “with nothing now to lose, in the sight of mankind, and with no hope, and seemingly no wish, of gaining any thing, it could only be a genuine regard for virtue that had brought back the poor wanderer to its paths” (Hawthorne 160). Without hope or the thought of recompense, Hester appears to serve the community because of virtue for virtue’s sake. This decision is a decidedly Romantic notion. However, Hester believes in what she did when she committed adultery; she goes through the motions of penance, yet she is not penitent. Dimmesdale’s perception of redemption, while it appears to line up with the Puritan belief, displays itself as an alternative form of achieving salvation. He is temporarily seduced by the offer of immediate redemption that Hester holds out to him. The minister agrees with the intellectual acceptance of God as omnipotent and omnipresent, of Jesus as the savior of mankind, and of theologians as divine counselors. However, he does not believe that he is personally adequate as a Puritan. He wants to represent the pious minister and while he is viewed as such outwardly, internally he knows his sins and thus his cold theology damns him.

Through service to his parishioners, Dimmesdale feels that he exudes a positive influence and thus connects with sinners on a more personal level. As their minister, he is expected to direct sinners toward possible redemption. During the public exposure of Hester at the start of the romance, Governor Bellingham informs Dimmesdale that “the responsibility of this woman’s soul lies greatly with you. It behooves you, therefore, to exhort her to repentance, and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof” (Hawthorne 66). Why does the responsibility lie with him? He is her minister. Of course, nobody in the community knows that Dimmesdale is responsible for Hester’s soul

not only as her minister, but as the fellow-sinner. He follows through with the expected exhortations, but cannot help exclaiming to himself “wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart” when Hester refuses to name her lover (Hawthorne 68). His culpability connects him to her. Yet his inability to openly confess his sin at that time permits him to remain “angelic” in the eyes of the community.

Dimmesdale’s connection with sinners could be the catalyst toward a deeper sincerity of repentance. As a minister, Dimmesdale holds a privileged place in Boston’s society. When Hester offers to flee Boston with Dimmesdale, the narrator explains that “at the head of the social system, as the clergymen of that day stood, he was only the more trammled by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices. As a priest, the framework of his order inevitably hemmed him in” (Hawthorne 200). While the Puritans looked to their ministers for guidance, as the minister, Dimmesdale has nobody to turn to for advice. His occupation is both a blessing and a curse. The people revere him. The other ministers foresee a long and fortuitous career for him. However, the narrator declares that “It is inconceivable, the agony with which the public veneration tortured him” (Hawthorne 143). Dimmesdale’s fear of open humiliation prejudices him against public confession. Rejecting the Puritan tenet of public confession, he attempts to work out his own redemption. He ends up boxing himself more tightly into the prescribed role of holy minister, adding to his hypocrisy by turning from repentance as the door to redemption. The Puritans of Boston feel that Dimmesdale should lead the way as an example in matters of morality and salvation, directing his parishioners to a firmer knowledge of God’s expectations of them.

Dimmesdale's outward appearance and physical health is closely connected to his inner state. As the romance progresses, Hawthorne repeatedly draws attention to the minister's health. Three years after first standing upon the scaffold, Hester pleads with the magistrates to keep Pearl, and Dimmesdale is described as "more careworn and emaciated" with "large dark eyes [that] had a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth" (Hawthorne 113). Dimmesdale's spiritual suffering manifests itself in his physique. While he retains vestiges of his former purity, such as the ability to continue presenting awe-inspiring sermons, the minister's outward appearance displays the troubled mind and disquieted heart. Soon "it had become a constant habit, rather than a casual gesture, to press his hand over his heart," and Dimmesdale who "was one of those persons whose sleep, ordinarily, is as light, as fitful, and as easily scared away, as a small bird hopping on a twig" slips into an "unwonted remoteness" that demonstrates his unease (Hawthorne 122, 138).

Dimmesdale attempts to ease his suffering by stealing to the scaffold late one evening after a restless night of punishing himself in the security of his room. He grasps onto the vain hope that if someone finds him upon the platform, then he will be forced to answer pointed questions and thus coerced into a form of confession. What occurs instead is a brief encounter between him, Hester, and Pearl where he refuses to take responsibility. When Pearl asks him to stand with her and Hester on the platform the next day, the minister says no and is eventually led home by Chillingworth. After this unorthodox meeting, Hester reflects upon Dimmesdale's physical and spiritual strength. She ponders that "his nerve seemed absolutely destroyed. His moral force was abased into more than childish weakness. It grovelled helpless on the ground, even while his

intellectual faculties retained their pristine strength, or had perhaps acquired a morbid energy, which disease only could have given them” (Hawthorne 159). Dimmesdale’s religious zeal gains strength and purpose even as his health declines. He cannot make proper judgments because he obsesses about the possibility that someone in society will discover his secret. The sharpness of his mind grows as well as his fear of shadows. Lauren Gail Berlant states that “Dimmesdale suffers greatly the pull of his ambition against his self-revulsion. But, in the public sphere, the minister’s sin manifests itself as a greater authenticity of the soul” (124). Where he should be the most honest, Dimmesdale practices the greatest amount of deception. Dimmesdale’s spirituality impacts the community positively, demonstrating itself in his sermons and his ministering unto them. He seeks to continue climbing the ecclesiastical ladder despite the knowledge of having committed adultery.

As just stated, Dimmesdale presents himself differently when he knows that others are watching him. He keeps himself focused and ecclesiastical in public, yet in the woods he “looked haggard and feeble, and betrayed a nerveless despondency in his air, which had never so remarkably characterized him in his walks about the settlement, nor in any other situation where he deemed himself liable to notice” (Hawthorne 188). Dimmesdale’s despondency arises from his inner conflict. He despises himself because of his sin, but cannot bring himself to frankly confess. William H. Nolte declares that “nothing matters to himself except himself” (172). Self-preservation keeps him from revealing his entire self to the community and increases his guilt. The guilt that he feels in turn reflects itself in his mannerisms, a deviation from the expected role of the minister in Puritan society.

Unlike Hester, who is of an “impulsive and passionate nature,” Dimmesdale tries to do what is right according to his faith (Hawthorne 57). He is the type of person for whom “it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework” (Hawthorne 123). Faith is the minister’s anchor. When he sins, Dimmesdale weakens his faith. Although he loses his peace of mind, the people revere him for his manifestations of piety. Hawthorne writes that “by the constitution of [Dimmesdale’s] nature, he loved the truth, and loathed the lie, as few men ever did,” which causes the anguishing outcome that “above all things else, he loathed his miserable self” (144). Dimmesdale’s rejection of honesty becomes a rejection of self. The Puritan hierarchy declared what was right and what was wrong. It determined, from an understanding of the Bible, what constituted sin and redemption. Their oligarchy kept the seemingly pious in power when in fact honest exploration of the self was needed. Dimmesdale can be seen as a symptom of widespread hypocrisy among the Puritan leadership. He is contrasted against Hester, who can sense the hypocrisy of community members. Intellectually, he accepts his fallen state, yet he cannot force himself to publicly admit his shame and accept punishment. If Dimmesdale were willing to accept the earthly ridicule, then he might find the capability to unburden himself of his hidden sin and place himself back on the path of personal redemption. Instead, he chooses public approbation over his own soul. Thus, his human failing damages him spiritually, indicating secular beliefs intertwined with the spiritual.

Hawthorne allows us to see what face Dimmesdale shows to the crowd as well as what the minister thinks and does in solitude. The conflict for Dimmesdale repeatedly returns to the fact that he is too weak to embrace public exposure and scorn. If he were

capable of standing beside Hester and Pearl on the scaffold prior to when he finally does admit his guilt, then perhaps he would not have felt the need for floggings, vigils, and extended fasts. The narrator tells us that “to the untrue man, the whole universe is false,—it is impalpable,—it shrinks to nothing within his grasp” (Hawthorne 145). After sinning, Dimmesdale is no longer capable of discerning truth. Sacvan Bercovitch states that for Dimmesdale “the issue [...] is guilt, not shame: not the deceiving of others, but the skewing of one’s own point of view” (13). He accepts a lie as his life and by doing so forfeits the possibility of understanding the universe. Chained by the expectations of Puritan society, his life becomes the constant trial of hiding his sin from the entire town, particularly the magistrates. Dimmesdale sacrifices his self for what he perceives, through a faulty lens, as the greater good.

This inability to discern truth leads Dimmesdale to accept Chillingworth as a friend and colleague when he should in fact flee from the old man. Instead of clearly seeing Chillingworth as his enemy, the minister has been affected by “a certain morbidness” that “renders[s] him suspicious of all mankind” (Hawthorne 130). His morbidness and suspicion arise for two reasons. First, Dimmesdale has been untrue to himself and, as a result, has become false to his entire world. Knowing that he is capable of deceit, Dimmesdale perceives everyone as practicing deceit. Having stepped off the path of truth, he continues piling secret upon secret to cover his sin. At the beginning, when the magistrates demand to know the name of Hester’s fellow-sinner, Dimmesdale publicly instructs her that hiding the name allows the man to hide behind hypocrisy (Hawthorne 67). Yet the narrator indicates Dimmesdale’s appreciation of Hester’s silence when the minister murmurs, “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s

heart! She will not speak!” (Hawthorne 68). This aside demonstrates the minister’s dual nature early on. Kilborne points out that Dimmesdale is “hiding not only from external observers (e.g., Chillingworth); more importantly, he is hiding from what he imagines such external observers want to see. He is hiding from himself, since he has betrayed his ideal of himself, represented externally by his profession as clergyman and by the respect he is held in by his congregation” (474). Unable to rise to the occasion and admit his sin, Dimmesdale feels relief when Hester allows him to continue hiding. However, his Puritan upbringing and training for the ministry prick his conscience. He knows that he should admit his guilt, or at least hope that Hester will admit his guilt for him, but instead appreciates deception.

The second reason for his morbidness and suspicion develops because Chillingworth pries into his heart. Even with the temporary setbacks when the old man thinks that Dimmesdale is pure, Chillingworth perseveres in his goal of digging for sin because of his obsession with discovering the identity of his wife’s lover. During his interview with Hester in the prison, Chillingworth informs her that “there are few things,—whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought,—few things hidden from the man, who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery” (Hawthorne 75). He lays the foundation for searching until the culprit is discovered. He will not give up or be distracted from his self-ordained cause. Chillingworth does not seek Hester’s fellow sinner with the intent of prodding the guilty man into repentance. Rather, he wants to torture Dimmesdale. Chillingworth’s concern centers on the sin of one man, as opposed to the communal culpability of breaking a covenant. He even reassures Hester with the words “Let him

live! Let him hide himself in outward honor, if he may," knowing full well that doing so will lead to an exacerbation of guilt and thus add to his torment (Hawthorne 76). For, as Dimmesdale admits, hiding his sin of adultery promotes another sin, that of hypocrisy. Hiding in outward honor, as Dimmesdale attempts for seven long years, destroys the minister's integrity as an individual. He becomes two people: the holy minister and the vile sinner. Constantly wearing the mask of holy minister wears Dimmesdale out. Not only that, but hiding in outward honor will keep the minister committed to the doctrine of external works over interior grace. As long as Dimmesdale keeps his attention on his selfish desires to appear holy, he forgets to seek reconciliation.

Through Chillingworth's persistence and probing, Dimmesdale suffers mentally and physically. Before the arrival of the physician, Dimmesdale had already begun to waste away physically, but things become far worse after Chillingworth digs into Dimmesdale's heart. Not until after Chillingworth moves in does the narrator state that "judg[ing] from the gloom and terror in the depths of the poor minister's eyes, the battle was a sore one, and the victory any thing but secure" (Hawthorne 128). Suspecting the reverend as his wife's lover, the physician seeks eternal punishment for Dimmesdale. Chillingworth strives to separate Dimmesdale from the community, thus preserving his individuality but perpetuating his damnation. The physician's probing falters repeatedly because both men distrust others. Dimmesdale distrusts because of his own dishonesty. Chillingworth distrusts because his wife has sinned against him. The physician's obsession with unearthing the secrets of Dimmesdale's heart leads Chillingworth to give up his own soul in the attempt to destroy Dimmesdale's. Hawthorne shows this in the closing scaffold scene when "Roger Chillingworth knelt down beside [Dimmesdale],

with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed” (255). Hawthorne’s ultimate destruction of both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth indicates the need for individual independence. Hester successfully broke away from the Puritan strictures and created her own moral code. She lives and successfully spirits Pearl away from the officious society. Neither of the men in the romance fare as well. Dimmesdale buried himself beneath sin and secrecy, dying in front of the entire town after delivering his most spiritually moving sermon; Chillingworth lost himself by allowing vengeance to consume him and dies soon after Dimmesdale’s death.

Chillingworth’s prodding and prying of Dimmesdale’s heart accelerates the minister’s confession and death. Dimmesdale cannot abide anyone other than Hester knowing his secret. When he discovers that Chillingworth was Hester’s husband, Dimmesdale realizes that deep down he knew the relationship all along. Then, after vehemently rejecting Hester one moment, he chooses to flee from Boston with her in nearly the next moment. There is nothing to indicate that Dimmesdale will once again change his mind and decide to confess and die rather than run. However, when Dimmesdale returns home from his forest talk with Hester, he tells Chillingworth that he needs “no more of [his] drugs” because he “hardly think[s] to tarry with [his] flock through the flitting seasons of another year!” (Hawthorne 223-24). Chillingworth’s desperate search of the minister’s heart has convinced Dimmesdale that he cannot escape public exposure, but he wants to approach the disclosure of sin on his terms. Thus, he no longer wants the medicines to extend his life, but chooses to turn aside Chillingworth’s continued offers of assistance. For Dimmesdale, open admittance of Chillingworth’s role in his life starts the path to repentance. By refusing the physician’s care, the minister

demonstrates a desire for control of his life when he confesses. He wants to cast off the man who tempts him and encourages him to further bury his sin.

While Chillingworth's interference presses on Dimmesdale, it is the minister's guilt that eventually causes his death. The physician's meddling contributes to Dimmesdale's mental instability, but the greater cause of his angst stems from the guilt of sinning. The Puritans viewed guilt as a reminder of mankind's need for God's grace. Without God's grace, not a single person would be saved. As I've already discussed at length, the Puritans believed in predestination, or the fact that God determined who was saved and who was damned. When a person sinned, his conscience was pricked with guilt. In some cases, the sinner then made a public confession and wanted to know what he could do to merit a return to God's grace. Sometimes, as with the case of Dimmesdale, a person did not openly confess. Dimmesdale chooses to hide the fact that he is Pearl's father, but in doing so he suffers by dwelling on his double sins, adultery and hypocrisy. He has broken away from the Puritan standards of confession and acceptable behavior for a minister.

In hiding his sins, Dimmesdale feeds his guilt. As a result of his guilt, he is most often described as melancholy. He loathes himself and wants to free himself of the physical and mental anguish of guilt, but lacks the strength to break the bonds of secrecy. Unlike Hester, he does not have the constitution for sin. The narrator declares that "crime is for the iron-nerved, who have their choice either to endure it, or, if it press too hard, to exert their fierce and savage strength for a good purpose, and fling it off at once! This feeble and most sensitive of spirits could do neither, yet continually did one thing or another" (Hawthorne 148). Dimmesdale attempts instead to administer his own penance

in secret. That is why he hides the bloody scourge, fasts for extreme periods of time, and sits up for late night vigils. He hopes that in performing such acts he will free himself of the sin, yet he knows his repentance to be insincere and therefore vain. In his decision to endure the secrecy of his sin, Dimmesdale realizes that he cannot handle the ever-present guilt that arises from his shame. In Kilborne's words, "for Dimmesdale shame is unalterable, inexpressible, and unbearable; it squeezes the life out of him" (473). No matter what he does, the minister cannot escape his guilt and shame indefinitely.

When Chillingworth discusses sin and confession with the minister, Dimmesdale replies that, "it must needs be better for the sufferer to be free to show his pain, as this poor woman Hester is, than to cover it all up in his heart" (Hawthorne 135). He yearns to free himself of the burden of hidden sin, but cannot accept the public scorn that comes hand in hand with confession. Robert Milder determines that "Dimmesdale's continuing sin is pride, which prevents him from humiliating himself before the community" (11). Dimmesdale cannot force himself to bear the freedom that comes with admittance of sin as Hester has been forced to choose. As expounded upon previously, Dimmesdale does not want to lose the opportunity of doing good among his parishioners. He proudly believes that he is capable of bringing sinners unto repentance, yet he himself shrinks from full repentance. He justifies himself, thinking that he cannot confess because it would injure his parishioners when it's truly himself he protects. As much as he propounds the importance of public confession, Dimmesdale cannot accept losing his position in society as a result of exposure.

Milder then goes on to ask if "once [Dimmesdale] has eschewed outward penance and met the demand for heartfelt penitence through public confession, has he ransomed

himself from the otherwise lifelong penalty of guilt and sorrow” (11)? I brought out this question in the previous chapter, but I revisit it here with Milder’s response. He quickly points out that instead of answering this question in the romance, Hawthorne has Dimmesdale die. It appears to be a recurring question saved by Hawthorne for later romances. Although Milder agrees with Hawthorne’s use of sin as educative, he protests that “sin is sin [...and] it cannot be sloughed off, transcended, incorporated into healthy, affirmative being, or absolved” (12). However, if the minister’s past can be used as an indication, then no, he would not have escaped guilt and sorrow. Although the community misconstrues his sorrow, there is visible evidence of Dimmesdale’s pain when “with every successive Sabbath, his cheek was paler and thinner, and his voice more tremulous than before,—when it had now become a habit, rather than a casual gesture, to press his hand over his heart” (Hawthorne 122). While he buries the sin of adultery for seven years before confessing, Dimmesdale’s sorrow is no less than Hester’s. In fact, it can be argued that his sorrow is greater. For, while Hester is initially scorned and shunned, she is eventually able to change the meaning of the scarlet A in the minds of the community members. She can assist her fellow men when needed. Dimmesdale’s refusal to share in the public shame at the beginning protects him from humiliation but also withholds the joy of displaying his true character.

Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale’s spiritual quandary to deviate from standard Puritan views about redemption. If Dimmesdale strictly followed the tenets of Puritanism, then the minister would confess his sin of adultery. Yet from the beginning of the romance, the minister hides behind Hester’s silence. While this is not a rejection of the doctrine of confession, Hawthorne does use Dimmesdale’s character flaw to

demonstrate failure to comply with Puritan norms. When Hester refuses to name him, he “[draws] back, with a long respiration” (Hawthorne 68). He knows that in order to repent fully he must confess. Dimmesdale’s fear of humiliation leads him to secrecy for most of the romance. Describing the relationship between the two primary characters of *The Scarlet Letter*, Brenda Wineapple writes, “Self-reliant and brave, Hester conceals the identity of her lover, the pious and passive Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, but though she protects him from civic disgrace, she can’t save him from the scourge of his own guilty self” (212). As an individual, the self is always with you. Thus, the minister can hide from his parishioners, the magistrates, and all of Boston, but he cannot hide from himself. He must eventually confront his guilt and attack it or be consumed by it.

Not quite willing to accept that confronting his guilt includes public shame, Dimmesdale grasps for temporary relief when he ventures out in the dead of night and climbs the steps of the scaffold where Hester was punished seven years ago. Nina Baym emphasizes that Dimmesdale “strenuously avoids contact with the world, hoping thereby to stay sinless” (“Passion and Authority” 215). He reaches for a penance that demands no witnesses in order to continue being viewed as holy. He knows that his life has turned into a lie, but will not take the necessary steps to regain the truth. The narrator asks “Why, then, had he come hither? Was it but the mockery of penitence? A mockery, indeed, but in which his soul had trifled with itself” (Hawthorne 148). Dimmesdale’s shallow attempt at peace of mind offers no relief. No matter what the minister does, his sins grow when he tries to free himself of the burden of hidden sin.

After talking with Hester in the forest, Dimmesdale’s pathetic half-way efforts to truly repent appear to dissolve. The narrator reports that “at every step he was incited to

do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse” (Hawthorne 217). Dimmesdale feels compelled to abandon the holy for that which is strange, wicked, and wild. For the Puritans, who viewed wilderness as a representation of the unholy, the minister’s urges directly correlate to his journey into the forest. However, for a Romantic, nature displaces God and offers an alternative path to spirituality. In any case, Dimmesdale fights the desires and eventually makes it safely to his house. Hawthorne’s description of the minister’s behavior indicates that the minister has arrived at somewhere between endurance of continued suffering and confession. In fact, the minister, with Hester’s assistance, has decided to accept a third option. He will leave New England and return to the Old World where he, Hester, and Pearl can vanish into the crowds of larger cities. The half-way efforts at repentance and willingness to confess vanish. Now, Dimmesdale “yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin” (Hawthorne 222). In choosing to run away with Hester and Pearl, the minister completely rejects the ideas of penance and confession, for the first time considering rejecting Puritanism. Hester described their departure to Dimmesdale as throwing off a false life for a true one and he temporarily believed her. However, without sincere repentance, embarking upon a new life is not exchanging the false for the true. Hawthorne writes that, “the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired [...] there is still the ruined wall, and, near it, the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph” (200-01).

Running away will not atone for their sin. They have already been found guilty and cannot remove the stain.

When asked if his good works bring him peace, Dimmesdale vehemently tells Hester, “There is no substance in it! It is cold and dead, and can do nothing for me! Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none” (Hawthorne 192). He knows that his ministry has been hollow from the time he committed adultery onward. Dimmesdale’s words to Hester at this moment reverse his earlier argument stated to Chillingworth about the legitimacy of good works at the expense of confession. The guilt pressing down upon him blocks him from reaping the rewards of his hard work. Although many have been “brought to the truth by the efficacy of [his] sermon[s], and vowed within themselves to cherish a holy gratitude towards Mr. Dimmesdale throughout the long hereafter,” Dimmesdale focuses on his sins (Hawthorne 157). His Puritan upbringing and indoctrination convince him that his sins number him among the damned. Unfortunately, for most of the romance Dimmesdale lacks the strength of conviction to utterly reject Puritanism for an individualism that finds self-redemption.

Wanda Faye Jones declares that “Dimmesdale’s secret sin is so great that the burden of carrying the secret literally kills him” (52). The minister certainly appears to believe that he dies because of his sin. As he struggles toward the scaffold after his marvelous Election Day Sermon, Dimmesdale cries upon Hester to assist him. He declares that “in the name of Him, so terrible and so merciful, who gives me grace, at this last moment, to do what—for my own heavy sin and miserable agony—I withheld myself from doing seven years ago” he will now be “guided by the will which God hath granted me” (Hawthorne 253). Dimmesdale connects his inevitable death with the burden of

hiding the sin of adultery for so long. He admits his spiritual weakness and asks Hester for some of her physical and spiritual strength to complete his ministry before he dies.

In confessing, Dimmesdale effectively escapes damnation. Chillingworth's distressed exclamation of "Thou hast escaped me!" indicates the minister's redemption (Hawthorne 256). Chillingworth, anyway, believes that Dimmesdale has escaped damnation. Self-proclaimed as a fiend, Chillingworth realizes that his years of torturing Dimmesdale have ended and were inadequate. The physician's goal of forcing eternal punishment upon Dimmesdale terminates with the public confession of Dimmesdale's sin. Although Hawthorne satirizes the citizens' misinterpretation of the minister's confession, Dimmesdale gives credit to God by proclaiming "He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people" (256-57). Dimmesdale asserts that he has found his redemption. He has overcome his fear of public exposure, openly confessed, and accepted God's hand in his death. He also abandons the hope of being with Hester, choosing instead to return to the faith of his profession. Although he dies, Dimmesdale clears his conscience and dies peacefully.

CHAPTER 4: HESTER THE ANTI-PURITAN

Dimmesdale's inability to publicly face and cope with his guilt contrasts with the highly independent attitude that Nathaniel Hawthorne gives Hester. Hawthorne's heroine falters, but never bends beneath the overbearing will of the magistrates in Boston. Hawthorne deliberately writes Hester as an anti-Puritan in *The Scarlet Letter*. He sets her up as a representation of individual redemption that the Puritans shunned. In the end, Hawthorne portrays Hester's path to redemption as preferable to that of the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. While both characters struggle with the perceptions placed upon them by the society of Boston, Hester triumphs over the strictures forced upon her by the Puritans. Although she initially rebels openly, Hester eventually abandons overt rebellion for equanimity and understanding of the self. She does not "come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect" because not only does she turn from open rebellion, but the Puritans of *The Scarlet Letter* are more forgiving than their historical counterparts (Hawthorne 165). The New England magistrates had "instituted the death penalty for adultery (with the same penalty for males as females, a radical innovation)," and if Hawthorne had followed Puritan punishment strictly, then Hester would have died before the story began (Winship 26).

In order to appreciate Hester's predicament within the community, Hawthorne takes pains to describe the gathered crowd surrounding the prison door. He explains the need for a prison because "whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might

originally project,” the colonizers eventually accepted the inevitability of vice’s consequences (47). Hawthorne carries the description of the prison so far as to emphasize the roses directly outside the door. He writes that perhaps the roses acted as a reminder of beauty and pity to the criminal. What does this have to do with Hester the anti-Puritan? Before the close of the first chapter, the narrator speculates as to the continued existence of the rosebush, stating “as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door” (Hawthorne 48). In one short chapter, he has marked the scene gravely, yet offered a symbol of hope, while reminding the reader of a legendary but unorthodox Puritan who was exiled and suggesting the story he proposes to tell is similar in tone. The choice to call Ann Hutchinson a “saint” demonstrates the ironic tone of Hawthorne’s romance at the start. He deliberately ties his protagonist to Ann Hutchinson before we ever meet Hester, suggesting that Hester, too, has and will continue to irritate the Puritans. She will also achieve an alternative form of redemption comparable to Hutchinson’s antinomian exemption from external laws.

Hester’s willful spirit surfaces at the commencement of *The Scarlet Letter*. When she emerges from the prison, Hester “repelled [the beadle], by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character,” and even standing before the entire town carries “yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed” (Hawthorne 52-3). According to Puritan society, her sin and the product of it (Pearl) should be objects of shame and result in humility. However, Hester does not show concern or a penitent attitude. Rather, she falls back on her own abilities in order to survive the ordeal. She even draws attention to the scarlet A sewn onto the bodice of her gown instead of trying

to conceal it. The narrator states that even her clothing “seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity” (Hawthorne 53). Hester, the anti-Puritan, arrives in splendor and grandeur, shocking the spectators with her self-assurance and boldness. Such an introduction to her hints that she has no intention of obeying the Puritan magistrates.

Nor does she disappoint in this matter. When ordered to reveal the name of her lover, Hester refuses. Even though the clergyman John Wilson remarks that Mr. Dimmesdale “could the better judge what arguments to use, whether of tenderness or terror, such as might prevail over [Hester’s] hardness and obstinacy,” she remains silent (Hawthorne 65). Michael Pringle asserts that “silence is part of Hester’s strategy for resistance [...] Hester’s limited power lies in the secret of her lover’s identity” (41). Although oppressed by the stern judgment of the magistrates, Hester pushes back against them with silence, presently the only form of rebellion open to her. She knows the limits of her power but uses her silence to its full potential. Exhortations from her minister, Dimmesdale, appear to have no effect on her. While her child “held up its little arms, with a half pleased, half plaintive murmur,” Hester continues silent (Hawthorne 67). When she finally does speak, she vehemently refuses to name her lover, calling instead upon God as her child’s father. Lauren Gail Berlant points out that “Hester Prynne is the conventional sign of the law, and also of the law’s failure to deter, regulate. Accustomed to the public display of her impropriety, Hester has long been the limit of what representations the law can abide of its *inability* to prevent transgression” (134). Though the decision makers in Boston attempt to curb Hester’s independent spirit, they are unable to force her to comply. Thus, the magistrates lose control over the situation and can only

scold after the fact, calling on Reverend Wilson to preach on the evils of sin in general and adultery in particular to the entire community. Hester does not care that she stands before the entire town, that the magistrates view her as uncooperative, or that she suffers agony. In this particular episode, what she cares about is the fact that her lover remains hidden. Only she and he have the power to unmask him and for her part she will not succumb to the oppressive opinions of the authorities. Moreover, she believes that she will eventually be reunited with him.

Hester's silence, while a strong attempt to undermine the stigma of the A, breaks down when she returns to the prison. Having already endured repeated demands that she reveal the name of her lover and having listened to an overwhelming discourse on sin, she no longer controls her passions. The narrator declares that she was "found to be in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe" (Hawthorne 70). Her spirit revolts against the injustice of civil penalty for a personal choice but the emotional strain causes a crack in her defenses. However, her hesitancy is short-lived and she once again rallies to revolt. Nina Baym reminds us that "Hester's lonely path, taken less out of conscious decision than out of temperamental necessity, is that of refusing to believe herself evil" ("Passion and Authority" 221). Told that she's evil and expected to believe it, Hester denies the accusations and attempts to rebuild her life.

Continuing to disregard the opinion of the townsfolk, she chooses to remain in Boston. Hawthorne writes that "kept by no restrictive clause of her condemnation within the limits of the Puritan settlement, so remote and so obscure,—free to return to her

birthplace, or to any other European land [...] it may seem marvelous, that this woman should still call that place her home, where, and where only, she must needs be the type of shame” (79). Having already seen Hester’s iron will, her decision to stay near her lover does not shock. In fact, considering the Puritan belief in collective guilt as discussed previously, Hester’s choice to live in the land of her shame becomes a constant reminder to her fellow citizens. Not only are they endlessly reminded of her sin, but they are reminded of their part in her shame because of collective guilt. She openly flings her disregard for them in their faces.

Believing herself capable of finding a new redemption without the guidance of the magistrates, Hester settles into a remote dwelling with her daughter Pearl. She “compelled herself to believe [...] perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom” (Hawthorne 80). Hawthorne emphasizes the importance of shame as a catalyst for good. Fighting against the shame weighing her down, Hester focuses instead on how her shame can produce something of value, i.e. an improved sort of redemption that exists in the here and now as opposed to only in a vague future. After the forced display on the pillory, Hester willingly chooses to become a martyr, sacrificing herself for the opportunity to find this new redemption. Her spirit rejects the apparently hollow offering of redemption from the Puritan divines. Instead of bemoaning her lost purity and relying on the mercy of her redeemer, she plans to trudge through every weary day with the hope of creating something better for herself. She settles into a routine, seeking out those “less miserable than herself” to offer charity and also “making coarse garments for the poor” (Hawthorne 83). Day after day she clothes

and feeds other citizens of Boston. Rather than hiding in her cottage, Hester persists in increasing her activity within the community. She refuses to allow society to control her actions. Baym asserts that “Hester, rather than subjecting herself to the law, subjects it to her own scrutiny” (“Hester as Hero” 69). As a result of this scrutiny, Hester finds society lacking in compassion and promptly works toward correcting the flaw.

Hester’s silence, blatant disregard for the magistrates’ opinions, and reliance upon herself for redemption in the present marks her as a heretic. While the Puritans believed that “your pious thoughts, [...] your struggles against sin, your good deeds, and your reliance on Christ” indicated your salvation, ministers also warned against “unconsciously [remaining] in a covenant of good works, trying to save [yourself] by [your] own efforts, rather than in a covenant of grace, relying completely on Christ and God’s free grace for salvation” (Winship 15). Rather than engaging in the controversy of works versus grace, Hester rejects the hierarchy and finds an alternative mode of redemption by achieving dignity outside of social pressures. Starting with her refusal to name her lover, Hester’s actions demonstrate an independence from rules and regulations. She chooses her own course, dismisses the cultural framework surrounding her, and leans heavily upon creating a personal spirituality exempt from external forces.

Hester’s willful spirit and inability to find contentment within the rigid rules of Puritanism also emerge in her daughter Pearl. Observing her daughter one day, Hester notices the same “wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart” (Hawthorne 91). Hester’s realization warns her of possible dangers, but offers her no solutions. She knows that because of her (Hester’s) sin Pearl will be shunned by the

community. Therefore, only Hester can teach Pearl what she needs to know about redemption. Hester rejects the supposedly holy men of Boston as capable teachers about redemption for Pearl. They have, after all, already failed Hester, so she chooses to wade through her own half-formed ideology, submitting Pearl to the same doubts and hopes. Hester, having the same personality as Pearl, is equipped with the tools needed to enlighten her daughter. Yet, at times, Hester does not feel up to the task. She is “appalled [...] to discern here, again, a shadowy reflection of the evil that had existed in herself. All this enmity and passion had Pearl inherited, by inalienable right, out of Hester’s heart” (Hawthorne 94). Hester acknowledges that reaching equanimity and inner peace partially hinges on how well she teaches Pearl about redemption. Forming opinions about redemption separate from those of the clergy and struggling against passion, Hester fights against herself to obtain an individual redemption now.

When Governor Bellingham and the other authority figures of Boston discuss the possibility of taking Pearl away from her, Hester protests, asserting that part of her redemption centers on having her daughter with her. She demands of the men: “See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?” (Hawthorne 113). According to Hester, her redemption cannot be fulfilled without raising Pearl. She cannot pay for her sin if the product of her sin is taken away. Of course, Hester’s definition of redemption varies from that of the magistrates inasmuch as she is concerned with today. Hester knows she must keep her daughter and continue teaching her, guiding Pearl through the difficulties of her passionate nature to a happier outcome. Still, Hester ignores the Puritan concept of predestination, not seeing her sin as a sign of damnation but as an opportunity to grow

and change. Her visible outrage at potentially losing Pearl demonstrates open rebellion against the theocracy. They “knowest [not] what is in [her] heart, and what are a mother’s rights” because they care predominantly for their version of repentance as opposed to what Hester believes best for her situation (Hawthorne 113).

After seeing Dimmesdale on the platform the night of Governor Winthrop’s death, Hester acknowledges the belief that for her redemption is connected to Dimmesdale. She breaks her oath to remain silent about Chillingworth as her husband, an act disapproved of by the Puritans, and determines that “there lay a responsibility upon her, in reference to the clergyman, which she owed to no other, nor to the whole world besides” (Hawthorne 159). Hester admits to herself that although her redemption exists outside the bounds of strict Puritan doctrine, she has an obligation to Dimmesdale. Her obligation to inform Dimmesdale of Chillingworth’s true identity influences her Romantic notion of redemption as occurring now. Hester’s love for Dimmesdale demands that she assist him. Prior to her meeting with Chillingworth, the narrator states that “she had climbed her way, since then [standing on the scaffold], to a higher point” (Hawthorne 167). Hester’s need to assist others within the confines outlined by the community contributes to her redemption in the present. She tenaciously holds on to the belief that she alone is capable of redeeming herself.

The narrator hints at Hester’s belief in a personalized redemption halfway through *The Scarlet Letter*. He begins by describing her shifting philosophical speculations. Daily, she wanders “in a dismal labyrinth of doubt,” unable to clearly piece together a new redemption (Hawthorne 99). The narrator informs us that Hester entertains certain thoughts; “shadowy guests, that would have been as perilous as demons to their

entertainer, could they have been seen so much as knocking at her door” (Hawthorne 164). Indeed, for her the long hours where she sits thinking provide a greater threat to her redemption than all of the unpleasant encounters in public. Robert Milder points out that Hester “wants no part of [Dimmesdale’s] renunciation of happiness; if she can’t have Dimmesdale on earth, she will settle for having him in heaven or, if need be, in hell” (3). At this point, considering dangerous thoughts of dissent and equality among the sexes, she willingly hopes for damnation if it means receiving what she wants. For her, redemption in the here and now includes life with Dimmesdale.

In the long drawn out hours of seclusion, Hester determines that “the world’s law was no law for her mind” (Hawthorne 164). Since the “world’s law” for her consisted of the rigid Puritan doctrine, she turns her back on it and forges ahead with a different approach. She chooses instead to create a new world where she, Dimmesdale, and Pearl live together as a family. Claudia Durst Johnson claims that “the tragedy of *The Scarlet Letter* begins with the fractured family [and] proceeds without any picture in the Puritan community of the usual family of mother, father, and children” (114). Indeed, this appears to be the case. Children are primarily portrayed in the romance as antagonists to Pearl and Hester. The only instances where mother, father, and children are seen together occur during the holidays, first when Hester is punished and then again the day of the Election Sermon. With little to impede her, other than the possibility of Dimmesdale’s rejection, Hester pursues a course to fulfill her latest impulse. She speaks with the minister, convinces him to flee back to Europe with her and Pearl, and books passage for the three of them on a ship bound in that direction. With the possibility of living with

Dimmesdale in this life, she dismisses the empowerment gained from her redemption thus far.

Hester ventures into the forest in hopes of an immediate redemption with her lover. She refutes the magistrates' claims that sin effectively damns a person and makes the wilderness her holy place. Here, Hawthorne's Romantic impressions form the basis for the setting. Instead of shunning the woods as any good Puritan would do, Hester purposely seeks out Dimmesdale with the intention of revealing Chillingworth's identity as her husband. Her announcement unsettles the minister and he declares that God's judgment "is too mighty for [him] to struggle with" (Hawthorne 196). Hester retorts that "heaven would show mercy [...] hadst thou but the strength to take advantage of it" (Hawthorne 196). Although she uses Puritan verbiage, she does so because that's what Dimmesdale understands not because she believes it. To reinforce her argument, Hester adds that "the torments that have so gnawed into thy life!—that have made thee feeble to will and to do!—[and] will leave thee powerless even to repent" must be confronted (Hawthorne 198). Upon these words, and a promise to accompany him, Hester convinces Dimmesdale that repentance cannot benefit him. Thus, the plans are agreed upon and for the next few chapters the reader believes the lovers will escape. Unfortunately, Chillingworth's intrusion impedes Hester's scheme and leads to the closing scaffold scene, pressed forward by the minister's eagerness to confess publicly and attain redemption. As stated in the previous chapter, Dimmesdale believes in predestination even if he practices non-Puritan methods of punishment in secret. He agrees with Hester about his guilt and allows himself to be temporarily lulled into a newfound sense of security within the proposal to flee to Europe with Hester and Pearl.

Dimmesdale's redemption by confessing on the scaffold, although it satisfies him, does not satisfy Hester. When the minister calls for her and Pearl, "Hester Prynne—slowly, as if impelled by inevitable fate, and against her strongest will—likewise drew near, but paused before she reached him" (Hawthorne 252). She moves toward him because he called, but she hesitates because she knows Dimmesdale will ruin the plans they've already made together. Hester wants redemption now and in her mind that includes having Dimmesdale. In actuality, wanting Dimmesdale keeps her from making sense out of life's confusion and finding her place in the world. As discussed in Chapter 3, Dimmesdale's hidden sin leads to overpowering guilt and results in his eventual death. Not strong enough to bear the hypocrisy of showing one face to the world while knowing another, Dimmesdale finally "[tears] away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! [...] for an instant the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle" (Hawthorne 255). Speculation indicates that Dimmesdale had a scarlet A branded into his chest, but the narrator refuses to specifically affirm the belief. Whatever the "ghastly miracle" pertains to, Dimmesdale dies with relief. He accepts his fate, glad to have found redemption after so many years of hiding from society in plain sight. In this scene, Hawthorne allows Dimmesdale to overshadow Hester. However, Dimmesdale dies while Hester lives and continues to adapt. In the end, Hester carves out a niche for herself and faces the world on her terms.

Hester's redemption progresses when she gives up on overtly fighting the theocracy that surrounds her. Realizing that outright rebellion cannot win her point at the present time, she takes Pearl and flees. Pringle claims that "it is not [Hester's] return, but rather her departure that signals capitulation to societal forces" (50). I disagree. Neither

her return nor her departure demonstrates defeat on Hester's part. She is wise enough to realize that in order for her to complete her path to redemption she must abandon open rebellion and return when she has reached a state of equanimity and self-identity. Her flight back to the Old World does not represent giving up or giving in, but rather a deep understanding of what redemption in the here and now means for her individually.

During Dimmesdale's death scene, Pearl cries and the tears "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 256). Boston could not be that place since the inhabitants considered Pearl a demon child and sinner. Thus, Hester removes her daughter from the environment that has shunned her for seven years in order to offer Pearl a chance at happiness.

As Sacvan Bercovitch reminds us, "Socialization is a matter not of repressing radical energies but of redirecting them, in all their radical force, into a continuing opposition between self and society" (120). While the Puritans are determined to repress sin, Hester redirects her energies. In fact, instead of repression, she flaunts her diversity. Hester refuses to be socialized in the Puritan sense. She takes her "radical force" and returns to Boston to advise the discontented community members. There continues to be opposition between her and the magisterial leaders, although of a more subtle nature on Hester's part. The narrator informs us that Hester "recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow" (Hawthorne 263). Content to accept her place in society, Hester never abandons the belief that she has an

equal right to be redeemed, although she does acknowledge that someone else will have to guide others to redemption. She is not the one to change the current system.

Hester's complete redemption does not occur until years after both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth's deaths. Hawthorne uses her redemption to re-emphasize her anti-Puritan tendencies. After fleeing Boston and leaving the New World entirely, she returns and "resume[s],—of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it,—resume[s] the symbol" (Hawthorne 263). Initially, Hester adorned the scarlet letter with fine golden thread to demonstrate her defiance toward the punishment imposed upon her. Her resumption of wearing the letter equally shows her continued independence from the Puritan laws. She decides that her penitence has yet to be completed. She does not depend upon anyone else to inform her of her spiritual state. Hester has finally relinquished the idea that reunification with Dimmesdale is redemption.

After returning to Boston, Hester recognizes the need to contest the prevailing belief system. Although she has been gone for some years, associations between men and women remain unchanged. She chooses to "[take] up her mothering again, but primarily to the community of women, continuing to believe that no happiness is possible until the relationship between men and women can be altered" (Johnson 114-15). There is still work to be done, and until changes have been made Hester continues to fight for mutual respect and love between the sexes. However, her fight now consists of counsel. Hawthorne writes that "she assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a

surer ground of mutual happiness” (263). She no longer uses silence to fight the magistrates, but words to buoy up the community members. In this way, her redemption covers a larger area than Dimmesdale’s. While he seeks to rid himself of individual guilt and pain, Hester desires to improve everyone’s lives. She understands that constantly looking toward the next life does not necessarily contribute to a peaceable life at present. Hester seeks redemption from the ills of this life. In this way, her scope outstrips that of the magistrates, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and other society members.

Hester’s return to Boston is a pinnacle within the context of the entire romance. It is not a commentary on how society eventually wins. I disagree with Sacvan Bercovitch’s statement that “*The Scarlet Letter* is the story of a stranger who rejoins the community by compromising for principle” (30). What principle has been compromised? Hester continues objecting the dogmatic rule in Boston. Yes, she returns—as a sadder but wiser person. She understands the inequality of men and women and determines to offer such solace as she can to both sexes. Brook Thomas states that Hester “returns as a woman [...] devoted, nonetheless, not to individual fulfillment, but to the interpersonal relations of civil society” (196). Having sinned and lived beneath the ever-present burden of the stigma attached to the scarlet A, Hester qualifies as a valid counselor for the erring. At the beginning of the romance, when she stood upon the pillory with Pearl, Hester’s silence acted as a demonstration of her rebellion. Her return to Boston indicates a maturity and acceptance of her position in society. She no longer needs to rebel. Instead, Hester can claim the identity that she has established for herself and use her wisdom to benefit her fellow citizens.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne illustrates that Hester's plan for redemption is preferable to that of Dimmesdale's. While Hester suffers public scorn, she is free to work out her redemption in the open. Dimmesdale, hiding his guilt from society, spends most of the seven years trying to scourge out his sin in order to be redeemed. After Dimmesdale's death, the narrator exclaims "Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred" (Hawthorne 260)! Hester did exactly that; she sinned, defied the magistrates, and then triumphed over the community and herself. Dimmesdale did exactly the opposite. He was so busy showing the angelic side of himself to Boston for fear of public shame that he nearly lost his soul to Chillingworth. Both Hester and Dimmesdale grasp at redemption psychologically, but Hester's method contains a Romantic dignity Dimmesdale lacks. She plays an active part in becoming her own source of redemption, while Dimmesdale believes that God alone does the redeeming.

Hawthorne's knowledge of the Puritans allowed him to take historically normal behaviors and change them in his characters to suit his purposes. Wineapple indicates that "*The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne's tribute to [his mother], written with grief, guilt, and unabashed freedom" (212). Her death caused him to question the purpose of life and the reality of eternity. With the happy laughter of his children contrasted against his gloomy mood, Hawthorne produced *The Scarlet Letter*. For over a century and a half, scholars have debated his understanding of Puritan theology and society. Hawthorne's expert skill in molding his characters, particularly those of the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Mistress Hester Prynne, demonstrates the full depth of his understanding. He knew Puritan society well enough to portray not only realistic

responses such as those provided by the retaliatory women at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, but the superhuman responses provided by Hester's prolonged fight against the oppressive society surrounding her.

Equally, Hawthorne's comprehension of Puritan theology is demonstrated in his renderings of sin and redemption. He captures the Puritan view on sin with the outraged mutterings of the women surrounding the pillory. They determine that "it would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women [...] should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne," "they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead," and "this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (Hawthorne 51). As a covenant people, the Puritans contracted with God to live above sin. The women's reaction toward Hester (aside from one sympathetic young mother) shows Hawthorne's knowledge of collective guilt. As a covenant people, the Puritans believed every action of every person affected the entire community. Thus, if a person promoted good works, society as a whole was favored by God. Conversely, if a person sinned, society as a whole was culpable for that sin.

Hawthorne's characters deviate from the Puritan concept of sin in two ways: Dimmesdale's private torture and Hester's refusal to acknowledge that sinning means she's damned. With the entire community's favor at stake, the Puritans actively sought to root out secrecy. If there was someone sinning, they wanted to know so that they could either call the person to repentance or excommunicate him or her. Communal guilt, a heavy load to bear, historically caused Puritans to shun unrepentant sinners. Ann Hutchinson and Roger Williams are two of the best-recorded instances of Puritan dealings with unrepentant sinners. Both were ostracized. Dimmesdale's careful hiding

of his sin, while an understandable reaction, goes against the Puritan doctrine. Dimmesdale's profession consists of "spiritual truths, as Puritan ministers continually [said], undeniable and indisputable" (Roberts-Miller 77). Dimmesdale metaphorically runs from the truth that he has sinned. Equally, Hester does not accept her sin as completely damning. With the infant Pearl in her arms, she adamantly refuses to cooperate with the magistrates and name a fellow sinner. Although not every Puritan who sinned confessed and eagerly repented, Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale and Hester to depart from historical Puritan doctrines of dealing with sin.

Redemption for the Puritans was determined by God. Before a person's birth, God had already chosen heaven or hell for that person. While a person could perform good works and try to live a worthy life, there was nothing he or she could do to change the outcome of God's will. Hawthorne repeatedly disputes this Puritan concept of redemption in *The Scarlet Letter*. He offers two very different forms of redemption: Dimmesdale's attempt at belief in predestination and Hester's stubborn determination to work out her own salvation. Dimmesdale, unwilling to carry the burden of public scorn, subjects himself to seven years of festering guilt before a final attempt at redemption prior to his imminent death. Having abused himself as a form of penance, he grasps onto the Puritan idea that confession is necessary for redemption. Hester, on the other hand, needs no confession since the magistrates and other townspeople can see the result of her sin in her daughter Pearl. Instead of yielding to the demands of justice imposed upon her by the leaders, she rebels against their idea of redemption and seeks to carve out her own redemption. Hester does not accept a pre-packaged version of salvation. She knows that

redemption is as personal and varied as the inhabitants of Boston and that it encompasses more than the afterlife.

Hester exhibits strength of character from the beginning of the romance onward. She carries not only the burden of her guilt but that of Dimmesdale's as well. Forced into penance by the magistrates, Hester psychologically if not physically turns her back on Boston. In the turmoil of her own mind, she seeks a resolution for her mortality. Hawthorne writes that "with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed from society [...Hester] had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness" (199). Her travels through that wilderness introduces her to renegade thoughts, but since Hester largely ignores the stipulations society places upon her she welcomes such thoughts and builds on her foundation of rebellion. Shifting from open rebellion to reform and finally releasing the hope of being with Dimmesdale, Hester becomes the true Romantic finding peace of mind in her present life.

After his mother's death, Hawthorne wandered in his own "untamed forest, amid the gloom" (199). His search for a better answer than what the past offered as redemption forced him to examine alternative definitions. Aware of the doctrine determined by his Puritan heritage, Hawthorne neither abandoned nor completely accepted the doctrine. He changed the rigidity of the magistrates, making them more compassionate in *The Scarlet Letter* than real life and yet not enough to benefit Hester or Dimmesdale. He purposely modifies Puritan characters and beliefs to enhance Romantic concepts, touting the present as the better way.

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