Hester and Puritanism in *The Scarlet Letter*
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Abstract

The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* focuses the reader's attention on different aspects of Puritan society, thus providing varying viewpoints of the central action. In this investigation, I would like to explore what Hester thought and how she felt. At the same time, I would also like to discuss what Hawthorne seeks to show through his depiction of the Puritan society.

The story opens with Hester Prynne leaving prison with three-month old Pearl in her arms and wearing on her bosom the scarlet letter A imposed on her by Puritan society. Onlookers citing Old Testament Mosaic law scream for her to be put to death. Hester, a tall woman possessing long flowing black hair and a graceful figure, is both beautiful and impressive. The townspeople coldly view the gorgeously embroidered letter A and consider it a sign of haughtiness and rebellion against Puritan society's religious precepts and thinking. In those days, the scaffold, where people were forced to stand and endure ridicule, abuse and shame, was considered an effective tool for spiritually elevating the godly community. However, Hawthorne uses this scene to raise the questions "What is sin?" and "What constitutes an outrage against humanity?" Furthermore, at the same time, he suggests how a person who commits a sin can be released from it.

Governor Bellingham and the elder Reverend Wilson, both
representatives of Boston's Puritan society, pressure Hester who stands on the scaffold to reveal the name of the partner in adultery. But Hester does not say a word. The scene brings to mind the scene from Chapter 8 of The Gospel of John, where a woman has been arrested for adultery. The Pharisees, experts in religious law, put Jesus to the test by bringing up the fact that, according to the law, the woman is to be stoned and asking his opinion on the matter. In response, Jesus calls for the person without sin to cast the first stone, whereby everybody goes away.

Hawthorne's depiction of the Puritans' religious legalism in such a way as to encourage the reader to liken them to the Pharisees can be interpreted as a criticism of Puritanism. In the face of intense questioning by cold, hard Puritan representatives, Hester's absolute refusal, driven by blinding love, to confess the name of her partner is seen as an expression of her strength of will.

When she is finally reunited with Dimmesdale after seven years, Hester says, “What we did had a consecration of its own!” Rather than showing any mental anguish arising from some kind of religious awareness of having transgressed God's laws, Hester's words express affirmation of love and exhibit freedom of thought and romanticism.

While Hester's passionate and sensuous nature was attributed to causing Dimmesdale to fall in love with her, she was also a charming woman in her own right. However,
anti-Puritan sentiments gradually began to build up strongly inside her.

Over the years, Hester tirelessly toils to help the poor and the sick. Her scarlet letter A begins to be viewed more as representing Able, than Adulteress. The word ‘able,’ sounds exactly like ‘Abel,’ the name of the biblical personage associated with goodness. In this way, Hester becomes stronger as the result of her sufferings.

However, while outwardly appearing to follow the rules of Puritan society, Hester's thinking has moved far along the path of free thought.

Hester's will was strong enough to allow her to hold her own against Puritan society, while suppressing her feelings of romantic love. Moreover, as she was isolated from society, she lost her bonds to it and became a free thinker. Hester is a brazen temptress, a feminist, Eve.

After Dimmesdale's death, Hester and Pearl leave New England. Even though she could have lived out the rest of her life comfortably in England with Pearl, Hester returns alone to New England. Then, after a long time, she places the scarlet letter A of shame back on her bosom. Completely of her own volition, she returned to the place of her sin to once again don the scarlet letter A of punishment. At first, the letter was a punishment forcefully imposed on her by the authorities. However, now she wore the symbol out of her own inward need to atone for her past
sin. Placing the scarlet letter on her chest of her own volition symbolizes Hester's eternal confession of her sin.

Hawthorne says the scarlet letter became "something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" Here is where Hester truly repents of her sin.

As a result of Hester overcoming herself and repenting her sin, people come to her to ask for counsel.
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Introduction

Here, I would like to focus on how Hester lives her life in Puritan society in the Seventeenth Century.

D. H. Lawrence describes Hester’s temptation of Dimmesdale as a demonic act. He views her as a demon who drags a servant of God down into the mire. Moreover, Lawrence, Hester’s sternest critic, likens her to Eve. He takes a particularly severe view of her.¹

Nojima Hidekatsu considers Hester a woman of the dark and untamed forest. And he also writes concerning Hester and Dimmesdale’s plan to escape in the forest. She manipulates Dimmesdale with hypnotic power. Nojima likens Hester to the serpent which tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. He regards her as a dangerous woman.² I think Nojina bases his view of Hester only on the forest scene.

Randall Stewart opines that Hester is a beautiful and voluptuous woman and a marvelous romantic heroine. He also considers her to be the spokeswoman of R. W. Emerson.³ I think he is only viewing one aspect of Hester’s complex character.

There is a passage in the “Conclusion,” about Hester’s final mental state.

Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since 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. Because James G. Janssen views Hester in a very positive light, he reads this passage on Hester ironically. He feels that Hester is that prophetess, and it is she who speaks of her own unworthiness. It is not Hawthorne at all. Furthermore Janssen opines that the already alluded change in Hester's life of service was based now on love, not defiance.

I can agree with his opinion for the most part, but, with regard to the last stage of Hester's life, I view her in a slightly different way.

Although four critics comment on Hester as stated above, their ways of viewing her appear to be one-sided. Here, I would like to explore what Hester thought and how she felt from several different aspects. At the same time, I would also like to discuss what Hawthorne seeks to show through his description of Puritan society.
Chapter I
Hester and the Wild Rose-Bush

The first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* is called "The Prison-Door". It begins with a description of a group of stern Puritan men and women in drab attire standing before a grim wooden prison. They are all waiting to see the punishment Hester Prynne will receive for her adultery: a scarlet letter A to be worn on her bosom at all times. Clasping 3-month-old Pearl, the product of this adultery, firmly to her breast, she emerges through the sturdy oaken door clad with rusted ironwork into the icy, reproachful stares of those assembled outside. Immediately outside the prison door there is a rose bush. Perhaps it is an indication that nature shows her compassion to the prisoners who go in and out of the prison with its fragrance and beauty.

In viewing *The Scarlet Letter*, much has been written about the characters Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Moreover, many have taken up the theme of sin and guilt. Various examples of symbolism have been extracted through scores of different ways of thinking. What does the wild rose-bush that appears in the very first chapter, "The Prison-Door," represent? Is there any substance to the notion that Hawthorne included it as
some kind of "sweet moral blossom" for the purpose of softening the grim and tragic consequences springing from weakness in man's moral fiber? Was it placed there to kindle a flicker of hope amidst such a dark tale? Or perhaps Hawthorne uses the wild rose-bush to symbolize Hester, who in turn symbolizes his thinking with regard to Puritan society? It could also be the case that Hawthorne uses Hester Prynne's actions and the way she lives her life to cast criticism on Puritan society. It is this last possibility that I would like to explore.

I would like to put my thoughts together concerning some observations regarding the image of "roses". For ages, Western society considered roses to be the Queen of Flowers, thanks to the Greeks and Romans. These ancients considered roses to be the epitome of all flowers. In this sense, we see an example of a particular culture bestowing symbolic status on a particular flower. We do the very same to cherry blossoms in our own country, Japan. In every culture, flowers symbolize beauty. And few would disagree with the assertion that every culture has probably seen in the workings of plants – particularly in the budding, blossoming, fruition, and transitions of flowers – the pervasive and often occurring hint of sensuality. As a result, it is only natural that roses have symbolized the sensual beauty of women in Western
European society since early times.

Red roses, as representing fertility more than anything else, were the Flower of Venus. While it might seem contradictory at first glance, the Queen of Flowers is also considered the flower of the Virgin Mary. Mary is sometimes referred to as the *Rosa Mystica*, which translates into English as either “the Mysterious Rose” or “the Mystic Rose.” Thus, the rose was a symbol both of the sacred and the profane, holy love and erotic love. It represented two female personages revered respectively by two different religions.

However, the linking of Mary to roses did not find the smooth acceptance that associating them with the pagan goddess did. Originally, Mary was associated with the white lily. Seeing that the rose usually invoked an image of red and that red roses were considered the flower of feminine sensuality, most likely the linking of roses to the Virgin Mary met with opposition initially. At this juncture, pure white roses began to be linked with Mary, precisely because they exemplified the notion of immaculate purity and innocence. However, this mental linkage of Mary with white roses generally never reached the strength of the connection between Venus and roses. Even so, roses (including red ones) came to be associated with the Madonna as they had with Venus before.
Roses embody a myriad of things. They have presented the mother principle, carnal love, and youth. In a different vein, roses appear in the Song of Songs (2:1) in the phrase "the rose of Sharon," which is taken to mean 'lover'. The Rose of Sharon represents Israel and the idea of abundance. From the Roman practice of placing them on the foreheads of and in the tombs of the deceased, roses have come to stand for eternal love. Early Christians used them as a mark of shame and forced prostitutes to wear them. In terms of platonic love and virtue, red roses came to represent burning affection. Their complex petals became symbols not only of platonic love: They also came to symbolize the eradication of evil through purgation. Sometimes they even represented martyrdom. In literary terms, roses have, among other things, embodies youth, beauty, charm, happiness, purity, gentleness and silence.

In the poetry of Blake, roses are the flower of carnal love, while at the same time possessing the connotation of secrecy or mystery. This is not simply a whim on Blake’s part. In Latin we find the phrase “sub rosa”, which is rendered as “under the rose” in English. Both phrases refer to secrecy and mystery.

In Europe in the Middle Ages, a single rose would often be suspended from the ceiling of a council chamber. This rose was a symbol pledging each and every person in
attendance to keep secret the contents of the meeting and not reveal them beyond the chamber walls. Even today a rose or a rosette (an ornament resembling a rose) can be found in the center of a room's ceiling, a vestige of this old custom.

How is it that roses have come to suggest secrecy? Greek and Roman mythologies provide two different explanations. In the first version, the Greek goddess Aphrodite gives her son, Eros, a rose as the Flower of Love. Immediately thereafter he gives it to Harpocrates, in exchange for keeping quiet about the weaknesses of the amorous gods. In the second version, the rose is a symbol of the Egyptian god Horace, who happens to correspond to the Greek god of silence, Harpocrates. Nevertheless, mythology is, after all, after-the-fact tales of human beings seeking an attempt to explain what they felt to be the origins of things. If that be the case, what caused humans to think of the rose in terms of silence and secrecy in the first place? Perhaps it was because the rose was an irresistibly eloquent element in the language of symbolism. In general, flowers are deeply symbolic. But this one flower in particular, the rose, seems to evoke a myriad of suggestions.

Hawthorne was undoubtedly aware of the West's traditional thinking regarding roses and made use of it.
Hester Prynne is a woman symbolized by rose blossoms. The rose-bush blooming just outside the prison-door not only suggests Hester's amorous feelings, but symbolizes Hester herself. She is portrayed as a sensuous woman. As follows:

She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic, — a taste for the gorgously beautiful, which, save in exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon. Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. (83)

Hester is depicted as possessing ample feminine charms. I will argue later that in the forest scene she evokes images of the goddess of love.

The rose is sometimes used to conjure the notion of secrets and intrigue. This connotation is very important in *The Scarlet Letter*. In fact the idea of secrets is a recurring theme throughout this novel. Who was Hester's partner in adultery? Who is Pearl's father? The blossoms of rose-bush beside the prison-door suggest a hint. These intriguing questions are practically whispered by the blossoms of the rose-bush beside the prison-door.

Combining these images conjured up by roses and
Hester Prynne, we come to understand that Hester, in addition to being Pearl's mother, is also an elegant and voluptuous young married woman. She seeks to remain forever bound with her partner in adultery, Dimmesdale, whom she still loves. Despite being scorned by society, she seeks to redeem herself of her transgression by devoting herself to serving the poor, sick and needy with a zeal resembling that of a nun. Through this service, Hester manages to get the members of her community to view her sins as being redeemed. However, she continues to obscure Dimmesdale's true identity as her Pearl's father, protects her intellectual freedom from Puritan society and maintains her charm. Even looking at it in this superficial way, one can see many commonalities between Hester and rose imagery.

So, what was Hawthorne trying to say by putting that blooming rose bush right beside the gloomy prison door? I would like to examine this question in relation to Hester's relationship with severe Puritan society. In the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, the author points out that one of the first things that the Puritans did after escaping England and beginning construction of their new Utopia, was to set aside land for two practical necessities: a prison and a cemetery. Thus, they built a prison. It was separated from the road by a plot of grass, which was
mostly overgrown with such unsightly weeds as burdock and pig-weed. Darrel Abel opined that this represented the "dim, awful, mysterious, grotesque" hodgepodge of elements composing mankind's depraved thoughts. Hawthorne himself laments the unfortunate fact that Puritan society ignored mankind's natural goodness (embodied by the rose-bush) and consequently cultivated "the black flower of civilized life" (symbolized by the prison) that shared the same soil which produced the weeds. With this background, Hawthorne draws our attention from the very beginning of this work to the fact that, in their New England Utopia, the Puritans built churches first and prisons second. Hawthorne states that these prisons not only enforced their laws, but also served to buttress the religious precepts of Puritanism. Put another way, Hawthorne seems to open his novel in such a way as to show that religion, politics and law became one in the case of Seventeenth Century Puritan society — resulting in a harsh community that punished the sins of weak people with dark, grim prisons. His depiction of the wild red roses seems to show this intention.

Hawthorne seeks to cause a "sweet moral blossom" to flower amidst this otherwise grim depiction. Is Hawthorne trying to create sympathy for women and men — whose moral frailty gives rise to sin, suffering and sadness?
Chapter II
Puritanism as a dark background

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville were novelists that exemplified the American Renaissance. However, were it not for the groundwork laid by Puritanism, it is quite possible that these writers might not have arisen and the blossoming of American literature in the middle of the 19th century not taken place at all. Naturally, this is not to say that Hawthorne and Melville accepted the Puritan’s religious thinking, moral perspective or worldview in its entirety. In fact, they did not. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the two found in the Puritan tradition a source of stimulation for their creativity and thinking. As Puritanism formed the moral and spiritual foundation of both Hawthorne and Melville, they were certain to have absorbed a large amount of it during their formative years.

Even if Hawthorne’s works are in effect anti-Puritan, and notwithstanding the strong criticism of seventeenth century Puritans to be found in some of them, it can be said that Hawthorne’s approach to the topic of sin and morality stems from the Puritan’s thinking in this area. It could be argued that, while Hawthorne was critical and ashamed of his forefathers’ cruel punishment inflicted
upon the Quakers and others. It was inextricably woven into his texts.

The theme of sin and punishment, the stern morality, the somber imagery, and the symbolic expression in his works were all built atop the foundation of Puritanism. Contemplation of the awesome mystical power of evil, free will and predestination, isolation and the destructiveness of solitary despair are elements from the intellectual tradition of Puritan thinkers. Only writers nurtured in that tradition could have captured them so deftly.

However, in a way, we know shockingly little about Puritanism, though it broadly influenced American culture – its morals, religious thinking, politics, education and literature. Puritanism evokes a truly wide range of images. Some that come of mind when we think of Puritanism are: Virtues such as religious piety, a way of life that places great value on temperance and an autonomous spirit. One thinks of these along with varied and conflicting qualities such as dislike of frivolous words, intolerance, hypocrisy and gloominess. Our grasp on Puritanism in America is particularly limited. On one hand, we see it as the spiritual fountainhead from which will later emerge America, Christian nation and land of liberty. On the other hand, the image of the seemingly glum Puritan also has
wide acceptance. This apparent duality of nature, however, cannot be attributed to a lack of familiarity with American culture resulting from the failure of the Japanese to achieve a cozier relationship with Christianity. Actually, the view of Puritanism among Americans themselves is even more varied and vague than ours is. Given the overabundance of these images, the historian Degler even suggests that we tear down our preconceived notions of Puritanism as the first step towards effectively understanding it.

What is Puritanism? Reaching an answer to this question is one of the keys to understanding Hawthorne. I would like to look at it in terms of religion, literature and history. Theologically, Puritanism was often lumped together with Calvinism, though the two were not necessarily always one and the same. To many people, being a Puritan meant being opposed to merriment of any kind. This belief goes back at least as far as Shakespeare's time. In a scene in *Twelfth Night*, Maria accuses Malvolio (whose name in Latin means 'wishing evil') of being a kind of Puritan. And later, in the same vein, Sir Torby Belch reproaches him saying, "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" In the 1920's, prohibitionists were referred to as Puritans. And H.L. Mencken once defined Puritanism as "the haunting
fear that somebody somewhere may be having a good
time.”9 Shakespeare’s influence could be responsible for a
good part of this interpretation of Puritanism. Moreover,
this thinking is evidenced throughout American history.
An early instance of this is when the stern Puritan
Endicott, chopped down the maypole and demolished the
colony of Merry Mount. Nathaniel Hawthorne turned this
historical incident into the theme of a charming story,
“The Maypole of Merry Mount.” While criticizing
Endicott’s bigotry and alluding to nostalgia for the
carefree days of Merry Old England, Hawthorne attributes
Endicott’s decision in clear terms to an overemphasis on
moral severity.

Historically, Puritans typified simplicity in
worship. In the early 17th century, they sought to ‘purify’
the Church of England. They wanted to prune from the
Anglican Church papist rituals and costumes that smacked
of Rome. This brought them into direct conflict with
Archbishop Laud. The Puritans cut all ties with the
Church of England and became dissenters to it. Thereafter
a large number of Puritans settled in Massachusetts and
helped establish one of America’s great traditions: civil
dissent. Ironically while the Puritans made the crossing to
the New World in search of religious freedom and freedom
of conscience, what they actually succeeded in doing was
building a conservative, totalitarian colony devoid of religious plurality. European culture loomed large in the background of England's Puritans and broadened their level of refinement considerably. However, in the American colonies, Puritanism lost its drive to set up the Law of Moses and turned its activity and thinking towards utility. This unfavorable trend was further aggravated by the Mather Family. The Mathers, who became united with the Cotton Family through marriage, took the prejudice of theocracy and oligarchy to new heights, setting the scene for such abuses as the persecution of the Quakers (1655-57) and the Witchcraft Delusion (1692).

The downfall of Increase Mather (1639-1723) and Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the last of the Mather Dynasty, signaled the end of theocracy in New England. However, in 1734, one woman's repentance of her dissolute lifestyle lead to a revival among the average followers. People called it "the Great Awakening" and in it Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) stepped into prominence. Edwards was known for his extreme severity. He is remembered even today for his sermons, most of which evoked terrifying images of hell and punishment. As a scholar, he built his theory on philosophy and made scholarly observations regarding such things as the psychology of anguished souls. Edwards stressed God's greatness and completeness, as
well as the weaknesses of human beings and punishment. His religious thinking is expressed in his work, "An Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will." It contains elements of mysticism that would later be taken up by Emerson and Thoreau. Edwards' tragic notion that punishment invariably follows sin can be seen in the works of Hawthorne and Melville. We have taken a look at a brief outline of Puritanism. Now let's extend this argument to the doctrine of Unitarianism, whose basis was to be found in the thinking of the Concord Group.

Somewhere between the end of the Eighteenth Century and the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, Puritanism had been eclipsed by other ideas. Religious thinking began to take on a liberalism it had not had in the days of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) revered Christian revelation and felt that the Bible and Christ had authority. Furthermore he considered Calvinism to be a sad sophism of Biblical truth.

Channing reasoned that God was the perfection of mercy and that Jesus was the most virtuous part inside of every person. He rejected the idea of people being born with the Original Sin. Channing found the doctrine of atonement a repugnant and irrational one. Something of a liberal theologian, Channing opposed the doctrine of total
depravity found in Puritanism and Calvinism, espousing Unitarianism instead. Channing preached God's love and human goodness over God's righteousness and His anger and punishment. With regard to salvation, Channing vigorously asserted that a person's actions were more important than their profession of faith. This type of liberal theology, which was far removed from Christian evangelism, deeply influenced the religious thinking of Emerson. It was Channing who built Transcendentalism atop the freedom of Unitarianism.

Emerson valued individualism above all else. He viewed the individual as the fountainhead from which all things emanated and this formed the basis of his thinking on individualism. He argued that the individual could transcend phenomena, objectivity, knowledge and experience and, thus, attain an understanding of truth directly through intuition. Emerson did not argue against Christianity's idea of divinity, but rather asserted that this divineness was inside every person. This, of course, was generally interpreted as a negation of the divinity of Christ. Emerson's views found acceptance not only among Transcendentalists, but among Unitarians, as well.

"The divinity of man!" Channing and Emerson raised man to dizzying heights – heights which historians generally applaud.
Rather than actually stating agreement with the above-mentioned opinions, Hawthorne and Melville showed their criticism of them in their novels. Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand* and Melville's *Moby Dick* both showed how dangerous and frightening it could be when human beings seized God's role and usurped His "divinity." The important things to keep in mind are the fact that Channing and Emerson denied the depravity of human beings and, using the force of these new ideas, had an important impact on literature, namely that of providing a reaction in the opposite direction. Hawthorne and Melville's literal achievements could be seen as the most important resistance movement against the romanticism of authors like Channing and Emerson.

Puritanism aroused both sympathy and repulsion in Hawthorne. Although he does criticize some aspects of Puritanism, he carries on with its more basic parts. Hester Prynne, who delivers words that evoke sympathy from many readers, is virtually a spokeswoman for romanticism. She does not feel that she has committed a crime.

In the final analysis, was the aim of this Romance to disclose the Puritans' bigoted intolerance, as some readers have suspected? The answer to this question is unequivocally "yes". At the same time, it was criticizing romanticism, *The Scarlet Letter* also censured Puritanism.
Over the course of two hundred years, how the doctrine of the Original Sin was accepted changed. The Puritans believed in it and Hawthorne continued this tradition. However, Emerson did not believe in the Original Sin. Instead, he held that the natural state of human beings was good. Hester's actions reflect Emerson's thinking—a way of viewing human beings that differs from the one used by Puritan America. Therefore, *The Scarlet Letter* reflects the change in the view of human beings over two hundred years. Hawthorne was sympathetic with Hester but criticized her Emersonian Romanticism. Hawthorne was critical of Puritan intolerance but shared the view that man was innately depraved.
Chapter III

Casting the first stone

The story opens with Hester Prynne leaving prison with three-month old Pearl in her arms and wearing on her bosom the scarlet letter A imposed on her by Puritan society. Women on-lookers citing Old Testament Mosaic law scream for her to be put to death. Hester, a tall woman possessing long flowing black hair and a graceful figure, is both beautiful and impressive. The townspeople coldly view the way she uses gold thread to boldly embroider the ignominious letter A and consider it a sign of haughtiness and rebellion against Puritan society's religious precepts and thinking. In those days the scaffold, where people were forced to stand and endure ridicule, abuse and shame, was considered an effective tool for spiritually elevating the goodly community. However, Hawthorne uses this scene to raise the questions "What is sin?" and "What constitutes an outrage against humanity?"

Here I would like to explore what Hester thought and how she felt. At the same time, I would also like to discuss what Hawthorne seeks to show with this scene. Governor Bellingham and the elder Reverend Wilson, both representatives of Boston's Puritan society, pressure Hester on the pillory platform to reveal the name of
partner in adultery. But Hester does not say a word. The scene brings to mind a scene from Chapter 8 of The Gospel of John, where a woman has been arrested for adultery. The Pharisees, experts in religious law, put Jesus to the test by bringing up the fact that, by the law, the woman is to be stoned and asking his opinion on the matter. In response, Jesus calls for the person without sin to cast the first stone, whereby everybody goes away. Hawthorne's depiction of the Puritans' religious legalism in such a way that encourages the reader to compare them with the Pharisees can be interpreted as a criticism of Puritanism. In the face of intense questioning by cold, hard Puritan representatives, Hester's absolute refusal, driven by blinding love, to confess the name of her partner is seen as an expression of her strength of will. This resolve, expressed in the words "And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!", (68) has also been viewed as an expression of the depth of her love or as a kind of motherly instinct which seeks to protect her partner. However, it is also a sign that, deep in her heart, she resists the harsh religiosity of the Puritan community towards sin. Because, if we examine how she felt about the crime of adultery, we see without a doubt that she was aware that she had committed an offense. However, we also see that this awareness is of having violated the precepts of Puritan
society, which had merged religion and law, as opposed to awareness of having done wrong. However, it would be an overstatement to say that, after leaving England and living in Boston for nearly two years with no tidings whatsoever from her husband, Chillingworth, she feels any moral pangs regarding what she did. Proof of this can be found in Chapter 17, “The Pastor and His Parishioner,” where Hester, reunited with Dimmesdale, says, “What we did had a consecration of its own!” (195) Rather than showing any mental anguish caused by some kind of religious awareness of having transgressed as the result of breaking God’s laws, Hester’s words express affirmation for the joining of body and soul through love and exhibit freedom of thought and romanticism.

While Hester’s passionate and sensuous nature was credited with causing Dimmesdale to fall in love with her, she was also a charming woman in her own right. After reaching the prison from the scaffold, Hester and little Pearl are examined by Chillingworth. In the dark cell, Hester speaks frankly to Chillingworth of her feelings and of regretting her loveless marriage with him. Hester does not leave New England despite being punished by Puritan society, isolated from the community and looked upon coldly. She tells herself that New England should be where she is punished because it was where she committed her
Furthermore, she convinces herself that her daily torture of shame will purge her soul and at length make it purer than before. This, however, is only part of it. Deep in her heart, other emotions are at work. This is the land where her beloved Dimmesdale lives and, even if they can’t be together on Earth, she hopes somehow that the bar of final judgment will serve as their wedding-altar. Male, an authority on Hawthorne’s work, remarks that, while remaining in New England turns out to be a kind of penance for Hester, what really motivates her to stay and what keeps her there is her desire to stay near the one she loves.11

Although Puritan attire was mainly characterized by sable simplicity, the taste for England’s splendors had by no means died out. For ordinations, appointments and other public ceremonies, clergymen, magistrates and other men of power required richly embroidered ruffs, bands and gloves befitting their status or wealth and sought Hester’s handiwork for this purpose. However, she was never hired to embroider the pure white veils of blushing brides. Hester herself wore only the coarsest clothing of the most somber colors. She used the remainder of her income to look after the poor and destitute and to make clothes for them. Some believe she did this as a way to performing penance for her unredeemed sin. But, despite Hester’s
charitable deeds, people continued to look upon her coldly and to stab her heart with their words of scorn, leaving Hester no other recourse but to bravely endure her ordeals in silence. She was completely shunned by society.

At times, it seemed that Hester halfway believed that the scarlet letter that she wore on the outside of her chest somehow gave her sympathetic knowledge of the sins hidden inside the bosoms of others. When she passed by people, like the pious and devout clergymen and judges, her scarlet letter would throb with pain. By giving Hester this throbbing and causing her to question whether it might be "the insidious whispers of the bad angel," (86) Hawthorne creates a sort of blurring between reality and unreality in his novel. In Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," the Reverend Mr. Hooper dons a black veil during sermons—and even at weddings—to strike terror in the hearts of his parishioners. As if to show that the black veil was more than just an eccentric whim, he says in his last moments on his deathbed, "I look around me, and lo! on every visage a Black Veil." I2 I think Hawthorne uses this kind of fantasy world to paint a picture of human beings' deep psyche. Basing himself in the Biblical assertion that all men have sinned, Hawthorne views Puritans with a very skeptical eye—especially clergymen and men of power, who are revered as deeply pious. With
regard to these people, I feel that Hawthorne is drawing a picture of original sin run amuck, while leaving aside the question of whether these Puritan leaders actually did commit the sin that Hester's scarlet letter seems to insinuate.

I think we can see rather clearly how Hawthorne feels about the Puritan society in the way he describes the estate of one of its key representatives, Governor Bellingham. According to Hawthorne's description Bellingham's residence was designed along the lines of those of wealthy English families of the time. Its walls, decorated with a kind of stucco intermixed with glass fragments, gleamed like a diamond-strewn "Aladdin's palace". The cabalistic figures and diagrams and glittering effect caused wild little Pearl to jump and dance around in her somber clothes in fascination. This is Hawthorne's way of saying that Governor Bellingham, though a representative of Puritan society, had a predilection for fanciful, luxurious things. Hawthorne criticized Puritans like Bellingham, who prided themselves on the sumptuousness of their Elizabethan furnishings with these words:

But it is an error to suppose that our grave forefathers - though accustomed to speak and think of human existence as a state merely
of trial and warfare and thou unfeignedly prepared to sacrifice goods and life at the behest of duty—made it a matter of conscience to reject such means of comfort, or even luxury, as lay fairly within their grasp. (108)

The Reverend Mr. Wilson, who joined in sternly chastising Hester for her sin, had also been reared in a well-to-do English family. He, too, like the governor, also had a "legitimate taste for all good and comfortable things." It was Mr. Wilson who argued that Pearl should be taken away from Hester. Pearl was a demon offspring according to Puritan superstition. If Pearl was, in fact related to the powers of darkness, then taking such a hindrance out of Hester's environment would be the right thing to do. And, if Pearl, who exhibited possibilities for moral and religious growth, could be saved, then her upbringing should be entrusted to people more upright than Hester, "who hath stumbled and fallen, amid the pitfalls of this world." Hester, with an almost fierce expression, objects to being forced to choose between these two horrible options: "God gave me the child! She cried. 'He gave her, in requital of things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness!...Ye shall not take her! I will die first!" (113) She did not give up Pearl. But gradually anti-Puritan sentiments began to build up strongly inside her.
Over the years, Hester tirelessly toils to help the poor and the sick and her scarlet letter A begins to be viewed more as representing ‘Able’, than ‘Adulteress’. Interestingly, the word ‘able’, sounds exactly like ‘Abel’, the name of the biblical personage associated with goodness. In this way, Hester becomes stronger as the result of her sufferings. Hester’s lifestyle changes greatly. She wraps her feminine beauty in drab clothing, spending her days as if she were doing penance.

However, while outwardly appearing to follow the rules of Puritan society, Hester’s thinking has moved far along the path of free thought. Yet what is it that makes us think that Hester has adopted free thought? As I previously mentioned, this process has not been described. However it all began when they forced to her to wear the scarlet letter on her bosom. Put another way, through the process of being branded with the scarlet letter and being completely isolated from the Puritan society, which united law with its religious values, Hester became detached enough from Puritanism to view it objectively and criticize it.

The reason Hester appeared cold and marble-like is because her feelings and passionate energies were turned inward to intellectual activity. She lost her dependence on society after society cut all its bonds with her and Pearl,
forcing them to live in complete isolation from it. During this period, Hester's eyes were opened to her self and, deep within herself, she began to think about society's contradictions — and especially about what constituted happiness for women of her day. Hester began to work out her own views of what women should become in the future. With this, Hawthorne is showing us that, though freedom of thought was commonplace on the other side of the Atlantic, here in Boston, it was considered a terrible thing not to be allowed. Free thought, or commentary on social reform as it were, is the next theme I'd like to explore.

So, what is Hester's opinion about how woman should evolve? She answers this question first by clearly describing the current state of society. Then, on top of this, she describes how women should approach this situation.

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn, and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (165)

The notion that male thinking has to undergo fundamental change in order to make society more equitable to women, as well as the realization that this
would amount to completely unraveling and re-weaving society's fabric, are feminist ideas. However, Puritan society, a monolith which saw the law as a manifestation of God's will and viewed everything as the work of divine providence, could not possibly give its approval to human beings reforming society of their own volition. To do so would inherently threatened to overturn the basis of Puritan society, cutting its roots right out from under it. This would be to commit a far graver sin than that symbolized by the letter A. Such a notion would never dare darken the doorway of any New England home. In an era when existence was not worth accepting even to the happiest among the race of womanhood, nay, in order to bring about new era worth living in for women, Hester sought so hard to achieve happiness for women. Hester's thinking mirrors that of colonial era religious leader Ann Hutchinson, who founded her own sect.

While accepting the premise that the station of women must be raised, she realized that it was a hopeless task. I think that it was for this reason that she opted not to do the kinds of things Ann Hutchinson did, but to find her own path in Pearl's education.

Hawthorne, who once believed in the principles of social reform, had lived for several months at the experimental community, at Brook Farm. There he
experienced first-hand the gap spanning ideals and reality. He found the prospects of social reforms improving the condition of woman particularly bleak. Moreover, Hawthorne attributes to the scarlet letter the power to give Hester strength, making it a special device. He sympathizes with the way she spent the last seven long years undergoing emotional and physical changes which he describes as follows:

It was due in part to all these causes, but still more to something else, that there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon: nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace. (163)

But he also hints at the possibility that her feminine charms might return:

She who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transformation. (164)

Hawthorne describes Hester's thinking on society and religious precepts in this way:

Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in
his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institution, and whatever priests or legislator had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other woman dared not tread. (199)
Chapter IV
The Forest Scene

Here the present state of the outward natural scenery reflects the inner scenery of the people living there. This wild, untamed forest, where Hester and Dimmesdale are secretly meeting after seven years to determine their future, is the very wilderness of Hester's heart. This forest landscape, which is completely unfettered by laws, systems, or the commandments of the church, transforms isolation from society into freedom from society. It imbues Hester's heart with a spirit of freedom and is the scenery of freedom itself.

In this way Hester becomes a critic of the establishment, a seeker of liberty. At the same time, she continues to embrace her love for Dimmesdale, her partner in adultery. Even though she is put on display on the scaffold and pressured to reveal the name of her fellow adulterer, Hester does not reveal Dimmesdale's name. Moreover, she did not leave her town, Boston, because the one she loved lived there, trod the ground there. Needless to say that person is Arthur Dimmesdale. And, when she saw Dimmesdale, who was trying to fulfill his job as a pastor while consumed with anguish over the sin of adultery he committed and crumbling physically and
mentally under this pressure and at the hand of Chillingworth, it re-ignited the flames of her passion for him. She did her best to get Dimmesdale out of the clutches of Chillingworth, her husband turned merciless torturer. In other words, one could say that Hester was a person whose values put human beings first in a society that put God first.

Though Hester and Dimmesdale had committed the same sin, they had gone about living with it in two completely different ways. This scene is where their two hearts are commingled. Thoughts of saving her beloved Dimmesdale, who is breaking down from anguish, well up inside her. Hester meets Dimmesdale in the dark, wild forest and she tries to use her freedom of thought to hearten Dimmesdale and encourages him to escape from the Puritan society.

Exchange this false life of thine for a true one. Be if thy spirit summon thee to such a mission, the teacher and apostle of the red man. Or, "as is more thy nature, be a scholar and a sage among the wisest and the most renowned of the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die! Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou cast wear
without fear or shame. (198)

At the end of "The Pastor and His Parishioner," we see Hester's passion bloom again as she whispers her answer to broken, despondent Dimmesdale's faltering question, "Alone, Hester?" "Thou shall not go alone!" (198) is her reply. It was as if Hester's seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been condensed into that moment. Dimmesdale, seduced by Hester's logic, is swept up into the wild, free atmosphere of the "unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region" that Hester inhabited. "The past is gone!" (202) says Hester, unfastening the scarlet letter and hurled it, sending it flying far away. Rid of the mark of shame, Hester's heart was at peace for a brief time. This is because that wild, heathen Nature of the forest sympathized with the bliss of these two souls. Love always emits rays of sunshine radiating people's hearts so much that it spills out into the outside world.

This is the most erotic scene in the novel. Here Hawthorne pours out an eroticism that only he can. Needless to say, the action that vouches for the scene's eroticism, is when Hester takes off the scarlet letter and snatches off the confining cap binding up her inner woman. Hester removes the symbol of taboo and seek to give herself over to that illicit passion, freedom. With this freedom she literally lets her hair go flow free. She takes
the lead in casting aside the burden of suffering.

But, does the sunshine really penetrate the dark forest, showering the couple and sympathizing with their love? Or is the forest actually just as dark as before, the sun's rays scintillating only in Hester and Dimmesdale's eyes? One thing can be said for certain: For a brief moment the two lovers attained a nearer prospect of the sky, experiencing a glow of strange enjoyment tinted with piety. In their bliss of love, Hester and Dimmesdale's burden of suffering seems to have disappeared. Though Hester and Dimmesdale are experiencing the joy of being united with lawless nature, Hawthorne saw definite limits to the power of nature. True, nature is not ruled by human morality and divine truth. In my opinion, Hawthorne does not approve the way of Hester tempts Dimmesdale, according to her wild inner nature.

In Chapter 7 of his book, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D.H. Lawrence wrote of Hester and her temptation in the following words:

Oh, Hester, you are a demon. A man must be pure, just so that you can seduce him to a fall. Because the greatest thrill in life is to bring down the Sacred Saint with a flop into the mud. Then when you've brought him down humbly wipe off the mud with your hair, another
Magdalen...Hester Prynne is the great nemesis of woman. She is the knowing Ligeia risen diabolic from the grave. Having her own back. Understanding... This time it is Mr Dimmesdale who dies. She lives on and is Abel...Woman becomes a helpless, would-be-loving demon. She is helpless. Her very love is subtle poison...Woman is a strange and rather terrible phenomenon, to man. When the subconscious soul of woman recoils from its creative union with man, it becomes a destructive force. It exerts, willy-nilly, an invisible destructive influence. The woman herself may be as nice as milk, to all appearance, like Ligeia. But she is sending out waves of silent destruction of the faltering spirit in men, all the same. She doesn't know it. She can't even help it. But she does it. The devil is in her.13

Therefore, to D.H. Lawrence, Hester’s temptation is a demonic act. He views her as a demon who drags a servant of God down into the mire. Moreover, Lawrence, Hester’s sternest critic, likens her to Eve. He takes a particularly stern view of her. Recognizing the sad fact that in Hester’s case, both sides of a coin, the act of loving at the same time
becomes a sin, Lawrence seems to have a certain amount of compassion for her demonic nature. On the other hand, he uses irony to point out Dimmesdale's hypocrisy:

His spiritual love was a lie. And prostituting the woman to his spiritual love, as popular clergymen do, in his preaching and loftiness, was a tall white lie. Which came flop. We are so pure in spirit. Hi-tiddly-i-ty! Till she tickled him in the right place, and he fell. Flop. Flop goes spiritual love. But keep us the game. Keep up appearance. Pure Are the pure. To the pure all things, etc.

Look out, Mister, for the Female Devotee. Whatever you do, don't let her start tickling you. She knows your weak spot.

Mind your Purity.”

However, to a Puritan, denying his past, his birthright, and yet living in peace is not something that he can do. In this way, his faith decays even further and the natural thought and romanticism that she represents comes to the surface.

In Chapter 18 “A Flood of Sunshine”, Hawthorne depicts Dimmesdale, his religiously-bolstered self-restraint shaken by Hester's naturalistic passion, hesitantly agreeing with her bold escape plan. Unlike
Hester, Dimmesdale does not question the basis of Puritan society at all. He is just a person who in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the Ten Commandment. But this had been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even of purpose.

This scene patently delineates Dimmesdale's awareness of wrongdoing and Hester's different view of the same event. Whereas Dimmesdale, his heart wracked with remorse says, "Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none!" (192); Hester, in contrast, shows that she has put the past completely behind her: "Let us not look back. The past is gone!" (202)

I would like to make an important distinction here. While it is true that Hawthorne's Hester Prynne drinks in free thought and criticizes the religious thinking of Puritan society, what she criticizes and what Hawthorne criticizes are different. Hawthorne does level criticism on Puritan society, but it is criticism of its leaders and anti-Christian aspects. That is, he denounces the leaders' predilection for sumptuous and elegant things and their stern authoritarian manner, which was briefly discussed earlier. Hawthorne approved of basic Christian values, but did not support all of Hester's radical thinking about free thought. Once again we can see difference between Hawthorne and Hester with regard to awareness of
wrongdoing. It is Hawthorne's sense of awareness of wrongdoing that are shown through Dimmesdale. It is here that we can glimpse how Hawthorne's feels concerning guilt.

Dimmesdale and Hester plan to flee New England. However, after giving an Election Day sermon that impressed everyone as being divinely inspired, he suddenly gets up on the platform of the pillory and call out to Hester and Pearl to join him. Knowing that he is going to die, Dimmesdale makes his final confession of his sin in broad daylight. I think this is where he finally does the penitence he has until then been unable to perform. Confessing to the world, the sin that has weighed so heavily on him, he draws his last breath. Hester does not understand why he suddenly confesses his sin. Hester hopes that after their separation on Earth they will be bound by a purer love in Heaven:

Shall we not meet again? Whispered she...
Shall we not spend our immortal life together?...we have ransomed one another, with all this woe! Thou lookest far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest? (256)

However, because of the sin they committed, Dimmesdale could not see any hope of this happening, leaving Hester
with the dying words, "God's will be done!" An act that, for Hester was an act of love was for Dimmesdale a sin to be remembered and atoned for, bringing into stark contrast Hester's humanism and Dimmesdale's Puritanism. As Mark Van Doren points out, there is reason enough to view Hester, who is deprived of the promise of an eternal love with her beloved, as a tragic heroine.15

After Dimmesdale's death Chillingworth also dies. Hester moved to Europe and raised little Pearl into an adult. Years later, Hester returns to New England and once again puts on the scarlet letter. This time, however, it is of her own accord. To her, New England, not Europe, was where she could live with Pearl, is where she truly belongs. It is in New England where she committed her sin and it is there penitence remains to be done. Not compelled to do it, but of her own volition, Hester once again dons the scarlet letter, which has by now ceased to be a brand of social ridicule. It had become "a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too." (263) Because Hester does it completely of her own volition, it makes her penitence more real. People, especially young goodwives, come to seek out Hester's counsel as one who has overcome trials and tribulations. Hawthorne relates Hester's attitudes towards Puritan society at the very end of this work:
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)

Hawthorne expresses how he feels Puritan society should evolve, but does not say how it should do so.

Hester tells the people who consult her of her strong conviction that one day a new society will surely emerge on the more stable basis of mutual happiness of all relationships between men and women. However, she knows that she will not be the one to perform the task of bringing about this society because that work can not be entrusted to "a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow." (263)
Chapter V
Penance and Penitence

Hawthorne does not describe the actual adultery scene of the young couple at all. However he does pursue the question of sin caused by the weakness of the flesh and the spirit and internal conflict of the soul in 17th Century Puritan Society. When Dimmesdale and Hester were reunited in the forest, he spoke frankly to Hester of his anguish over his sin. Dimmesdale emphatically says, “Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none!”, (192) thereby making a distinction between penance and penitence. I would like to discuss how Hawthorne depicts Dimmesdale's expression of anguish and Hester's consciousness of having done wrong to differentiate penance from penitence. This differentiation is crucial to understanding how Hester's heart changes over the course of those seven years.

Both penance and penitence have been used in various ways historically. However, in order to avoid getting bogged down in a deep, theological discussion, I'd like to examine how Hawthorne grasps Hester's and Dimmesdale's penance. Hester made a living through embroidery and other manual arts, and used her leftover income to do good deeds, making clothes for the destitute. Hawthorne admits, “It is probable that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation”. (83) Although Hester
was able to give full play to her passions through her decorative needlework, she avoided indulging her predilection for sensual and splendidly beautiful things, considering even that a sin. That was her penance. Hawthorne comments:

This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong beneath. (83)

In Hester's form of penance, making amends for her sin precedes feelings of remorse for what she did. Dimmesdale's penance, on the other hand, was performed out of sight of the Puritan leadership and the common people. Hester's refusal on the scaffold to name her male partner, Dimmesdale, (a religious leader of the Puritan) community caused him to become more introspective, prolonging his mental anguish. In an effort to atone for his sins, he lashes his body with a belt in a secret room, resorting to the same practices used long ago by the corrupted faith of Rome. Dimmesdale fasts, "but rigorously, and until his knees trembled beneath him, as an act of penance." (144) Naturally, not even these sleepless night of punishing the flesh were able to assuage the agony of his sins or give him peace. While Hester's penance was outwardly directed towards the sick, the destitute and the needy; Dimmesdale's penance was the infliction of pain upon his own body. The penance of Hester and Dimmesdale differed in these ways. There was even greater
divergence in the way the two viewed the crime of adultery. Dimmesdale felt deep down in the marrow of his bones that it was a crime leading to death. For her part, Hester did not seem to experience any deep feelings of remorse, although it was she who received punishment from the community. However, what is common in their penance is that their repentance is restricted to outward behavior and has nothing to do with inner, spiritual remorse.

Next, I'd like to look at how Hawthorne viewed Dimmesdale and Hester in terms of penitence. Penitence is defined as an internal or spiritual process. Hawthorne felt the internal aspects of penitence were more important than its outward expression. Encouraged by Hester, physically and mentally deteriorating Dimmesdale sets aside his duty to God and plans to run away from the Puritan community. Dimmesdale's faltering heart is revived, like a fish being returned to water after having been separated from it. On his way home from the forest, he was tempted by the devil and experienced spiritual transformation. On returning home from the forest, he sets out to write a sermon for the New England's Election Day. However, the sermon that Dimmesdale wrote in ecstasy for the Election Day service itself became divinely inspired. Brimming with the Holy Spirit, the speech's divinely inspired purpose was completely different from that of Dimmesdale's plan to run away with Hester. The powerful words
pouring from his mouth elevated his soul. The sermon finished, the power that had supported him seemed to suddenly dissipate. Sickly-looking and on the verge of collapse, Dimmesdale goes to the pillory platform and suddenly calls Hester and Pearl to his side. He blurts out, “Thanks be to Him who hath led me hither!” (252) Giving thanks to God for his boundless mercy, he poured out before the masses his confession of his theretofore hidden sin of adultery, the pain of which he had borne for so long. Dimmesdale tells Hester that the way he chose is better than the escape plan they had dreamed up in the forest. He dies right after making his confession.

Though some believe that Dimmesdale’s conversion was suddenly brought about by the elevation of his soul and a presentiment of death occurring as he delivered his sermon, I believe it took place before the sermon began. Both Hester and Pearl, noticed something different about Dimmesdale as he marched in the procession heading towards the Election Day sermon. Hester, especially, noticed that he was not his usual sunken-looking self. Hester felt as if she had been abandoned. Although the word penitence is not used in relation to Dimmesdale, I feel that he experienced true contrition deep within. Hawthorne suggests that Dimmesdale’s conversion occurred as the result of Dimmesdale having been touch by God as he drafted his Election Day sermon.

He wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and
emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he...at last sunrise threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister’s bedazzled eyes. (225)

I feel this is how Dimmesdale changed inside. Once the divine revelations inspired by God’s Holy Spirit had been delivered, then Dimmesdale’s soul led his severely deteriorating body to publicly confess his sin. I believe that it was through this confession that Dimmesdale was finally released from his sin and received absolution.

I would now like to touch on Hester’s penitence. After Dimmesdale’s death, she and Pearl leave New England. Even though she could have lived a comfortable life in England with Pearl, who inherited Chillingworth’s estate; Hester returns alone to New England after many years abroad. Then, she places the scarlet letter A of shame back on her bosom for the first time in a long while. Why did Hester return to New England and its memory of sin, tribulations and shame? Did she return to be persecuted and viewed coldly by the Puritan community because that was where the earthly remains of the one she loved lay? While some people believe this was the reason, a sentence towards the end of the novel hints at a different explanation:

There was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here,
in New England. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow, and here was yet to be her penitence. (262)

Thus, completely of her own volition, Hester returned to the place of her sin to once again put on the dark letter A of punishment. At first, the letter was a punishment forcefully imposed on her by the authorities. However, now she committed the act of wearing the symbol out of her own inward need to atone for her past sin. Fick concurs with this interpretation, attributing special importance to the fact that she does it of her own free will. Fick believes that Hester’s doning of the scarlet letter after so many years shows real inward repentance precisely because it occurred as the result of her free will.16 Placing the scarlet letter on her chest of her own volition symbolizes Hester’s eternal confession of her sin. Hawthorne says it became “something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too.” (263) Here is where Hester truly repents of her sin. Even Hawthorne uses the word “penitence” with regard to Hester, saying, “Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence.” (263) Here we can glimpse the suggestion that it is at this juncture that Hester at last atones for her sin and receives absolution. As a result of Hester overcoming herself and repenting her sin, people come to her and ask for counsel.

Thus, Dimmesdale confesses verbally and Hester confesses nonverbally through her voluntary wearing of the
symbolic scarlet letter, clearly highlighting the difference between penitence and penance.
Conclusion

Through her needlework, Hester renders aid to the poor, and, in this way, acknowledges before Puritan society that what she did was wrong.

In the forest scene, Hester is a woman who tempts and adopts a bold attitude. Hester's will was strong enough to allow her to hold her own against Puritan society, while expressing her feelings of romantic love. Moreover, as she was isolated from society, she lost her bonds to it and became a free thinker. Hester is a brazen temptress, a feminist, Eve.

Moreover, after Dimmesdale's death, she crossed the Atlantic and returned to Europe. Years later, Hester returns to New England of her own volition and once again puts the scarlet letter 'A' on her bosom, of her own accord, becoming a woman who is looked upon with awe, and even reverence. I feel that the 'A' for 'adultery' that Hester wears on her breast and keeps there for the rest of her life could even be viewed as having been transformed into an 'A' for 'angel.'

It is my conclusion that Hester undergoes a three-phase transformation. First, she goes from being a respectable member of the community to a woman who seduces one of its clergy. From there, she becomes one of Puritan society's staunchest critics. And finally, her transformation ends with her accepting her fate and reconciling herself with Puritan society.
Hester, who strives to live her life by her own rules, symbolizes the new American woman that Hawthorne envisions.
Notes

Introduction


Chapter I


Chapter II


Chapter III


12 Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Minister's Black Veil" in *Twice-Told Tales* (Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974) 52.

Chapter IV


Chapter V


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