

Pathway to Purity

Human acts of purity and sin seem to continue the ages. This concept is easily shown through comparisons between recent events and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne writes of a church official who has committed a sin. It is difficult for readers not to be reminded of recent cases involving Catholic priests, who also sinfully committed sexual crimes. Nathaniel Hawthorne boldly discusses fascinating issues, many of which society is afraid to explore today. Will these priests ever be forgiven for their sins? Is it not possible for them to ever live a pure life again? In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne compares the lives of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale to show that despite sin's devastating internal and external consequences, it eventually creates purity.

Prior to regaining their lives of purity, Hester and Dimmesdale suffered from the demoralizing effects of sin in a puritan society. To illustrate their innermost emotions, Hawthorne begins the novel with a powerful description of a prison. He vividly describes its gloominess and sad colors, as well as its rundown condition. By doing this, Hawthorne sets the tone for the entire novel, where not only prisoners are held captive, but sinners are as well. Throughout the novel, Hester is locked in her own little prison, completely isolated from the rest of society. Likewise, Dimmesdale is imprisoned within himself, constantly engaged in a conflict between preservation of his reputation and what he knows to be the

truth. Both Hester and Dimmesdale are trapped in a seemingly never-ending pattern of misery, much in the same way that prisoners are tortured by the notion of what their lives could have been. However, *The Scarlet Letter* is not only a tale of sadness and imprisonment. There is a bright spot in the first chapter, “a wild rosebush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems” (Hawthorne 56). This provides an uplifting foreshadowing of light at the end of the novel, or purity at the end of the sin.

The Scarlet Letter details the ways in which sin affects not only the sinners, but all of the people involved. For Hester, sin forced her into complete isolation from society and even herself. At the beginning of the novel, Hawthorne describes her as exhibiting womanly grace, emphasizing her beautiful long hair. Long hair was a symbol of elegance and femininity, much as it still is today. However, by the end of the novel, she is depicted as having her hair concealed by a cap - her true character eclipsed by the scarlet letter “A”. This represents her transformation into an individual who has lost all respect from herself and from others. In contrast, Dimmesdale’s situation is twice as excruciating, with the truth of his sin completely unbeknownst to the rest of society. Hawthorne writes, “It is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him” (98). While lying in the forest, Dimmesdale utters, “The judgment of God is on me, he is too mighty for me to struggle with” (193). To bridge the gap between himself and God, Dimmesdale does everything he can to redeem himself, even undergoing Chillingworth’s mental torture.

In the concluding chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne states that “in the view of infinite purity, we are sinners all alike” (177). This passage is remarkably contradictory. Infinity suggests an imaginary entity which stretches the lengths of time. For purity to last for infinity, it must be ever-present throughout the entire novel. However, it is impossible for purity to exist in the world without sin to counteract it. Just as sin cannot exist without its counterpart, the sinners of *The Scarlet Letter* cannot exist without their very own counterpart – Pearl. She often serves a savior to her mother, representing unpolluted innocence, and possibly even “infinite purity.” If sin and purity truly cannot exist without the other, it seems as if Hester and Dimmesdale were predestined to eventually overcome their wrongdoings. Throughout the course of the novel, Hester shows a deep motherly affection for Pearl, hinting that she is striving for purity all along. Similarly, Dimmesdale repeatedly commits acts of penance in attempt to relieve his sin.

Despite the alienation and humiliation experienced by Hester and Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, there are some positive results to their sin at the end of the story. Hester eventually overcomes her sin and successfully raises a child. Ironically, she also manages to better understand herself by the end of the story more than she ever could have had she not committed the sin. Similarly, Dimmesdale finally becomes humanized by the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. He realizes that leading a life in which nothing is hidden can be extremely gratifying. When he finally reveals the truth about his past misdeeds, Pearl loves him for it. Perhaps the most direct evidence that sin always produces purity is

Pearl herself. Hester and Dimmesdale are two of the primary sinners of the novel, and together, they produced one thing – Pearl Prynne. She was raised in a childhood full of sin, staring at her mother’s scarlet “A” every day of her life. Pearl represents perfection in the novel, because she always speaks the truth. In a story filled to the brim with lies and deception, an honest soul such as Pearl can be seen as the epitome of purity.

The two opposite ends of the spectrum of life cannot be achieved in the world without each other. Sin cannot exist without purity, and purity is meaningless without sin. In the case of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter*, sin and purity are ironically achieved one after the other. Nathaniel Hawthorne analyzes the effects of iniquity on one’s consciousness to show that life always seems to cycle back to a state of purity.