

The destruction of an unconfessed soul

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In the first chapter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a solitary rosebush stands in front of a gloomy prison to symbolize "some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow" (Hawthorne 56). Serving as a symbol of beauty and solitude, this rosebush foreshadows the dismal tone that will preside over the remainder of the novel and illustrates the beauty of confession and growth in contrast to the suppression and decay apparent within the prison. Hester can be compared to the rosebush due to her growth and inner beauty following her confession of having committed adultery and because she shows passionate and brazen countenance in the face of stern rigidity. On the contrary, Dimmesdale is the prison, confining his guilt of having committed adultery within himself and thus allowing the decay of his soul. It is through immense symbolism, contrasting imagery, and Biblical allusion that Hawthorne creates both a critical and gloomy tone while speaking to the ubiquitous theme that unconfessed sin destroys the soul. Hawthorne employs Hester's scarlet letter, her punishment for committing adultery, as a powerful symbol that juxtaposes the concealed letter that Dimmesdale must face due to his hidden guilt. In the first scaffold scene, before the crowd has even witnessed Hester or the affliction that is affixed to her breast, some of the women of the town gossip over her punishment. One young woman tells her neighbors, "Let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart," (60) illustrating the fact that Hester feels shame whether or not she is forced to wear the mark. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, does not confess his sin and thus has no letter to shame his figure. On the contrary, adding to the gloom of the tone, Dimmesdale is

tormented by his concealed scarlet letter, which gives him “ an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look” (76). He is compared to “ a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own” (76). Hawthorne also uses this symbol of sin and the guilt it generates to speak to his pervasive theme that unconfessed sin deteriorates the human soul. Hester, who is honest with both God and her neighbors from the onset, is forced to wear the scarlet letter, which forces her into reclusion within her Puritanical community. However, the letter “ gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” and allowed her to realize that, “ if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom” besides her own (101). This realization, this awakening of her sense of reality, allows Hester to grow as an individual and to become more exquisite than anyone within the ordinary constraints of the otherwise stagnant Puritanical society. Personifying this stagnation, which arises from unconfessed sin, Dimmesdale does not grow as a person, and he does not gain any new senses of morality until his confession. However, by this point, he is entirely dilapidated from his guilt and dies in Hester’s arms because it is Hester’s growth and newfound strength that allows for Dimmesdale’s confession. Also within the novel, vivid imagery serves to illustrate the paradox within Puritanical society while creating a critical and gloomy tone. The dark and drab society in which Hester lives is most accurately illustrated by Hawthorne’s depiction of their prison. And, although Hester and her sinful nature are considered to be a defilement of the Puritanical society, her growth, sympathy, and compassion for others seems to be incompatible with

the state of purity her society strives to achieve. And, when society is paralleled to its prison in the fact that it is dull, dreary, and breeds stagnation, Hester serves as the rosebush, standing out and providing hope to those condemned by the paradoxical morals of society. Furthermore, society is comprised of little more than “ a throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded” (55). There are no individuals among the crowd, and every member of society seems to conform to the dreary existence that accompanies Puritanical piety. The prison is also described as being “ already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front” (56). Here again the prison reflects the gloom associated with the society as a whole, describing its dark and decrepit state. In contrast, the rosebush, which is “ rooted almost at the threshold,” is described to be “ covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems” (56). This parallels Hester’s metaphorical blossoming due to her realizations of the guilt present in all human souls and allows for Hester to become the only individual in the society who stands out in beauty and vigor, yet she is reattributed. And, by the end of the novel, Hester confirms “ that the deep heart of Nature [can] pity and be kind” to all sinners (56). It is this idea of forgiveness that radiates from both Hester’s and the rose’s beauty, while dampening the tones associated with both the prison and the Puritan society. In addition to symbolism and imagery, Hawthorne creates a Biblical allusion to further the gloom of both his tone and theme. Hester, for instance, is continually compared to Jesus through paralleled struggles. Hester is forced to march

from the prison to the scaffold wearing her scarlet letter just as Jesus was forced to walk to Calvary at the top of the hill with his crucifix. And, Hester maintains her sense of dignity under brutal conditions by stepping “ into the open air, as if by her own free will” just as Jesus marched to his death (61). Also, Hawthorne describes Pearl as being “ worthy to have been brought forth in Eden; worthy to have been left there to be the plaything of the angels after the world’s first parents were driven out” (104). Pearl, representing innocence in its purity, is worthy to live in Utopia and perfect enough to reside among angels, yet is given the attributes of an impish demon to illustrate her sinful conception. Pearl also provides the only bright and hopeful tone in the novel by personifying the purity associated with confession. It is Hester’s confession and freedom from guilt that provides for Pearl’s innocence and purity. Through pervasive symbolism, contrasting imagery, and Biblical allusion, Hawthorne creates a critical and gloomy tone and speaks to the omnipresent theme that unconfessed sin destroys the soul. Through the novel, Hester is a symbol of growth due to her freedom from the torment of unconfessed guilt while Dimmesdale represents the decay of the human spirit that results from unconfessed sin. It is Hawthorne’s dark and gloomy tone regarding Dimmesdale in contrast to the hopeful and accepting tone regarding Hester and Pearl that clearly personifies his belief that confession of sin revives the soul and allows for personal growth and empathy.