

"the scarlet letter" – thesis

Literature, Russian Literature



One main theme present in the work “ The Scarlet Lette” is that of sin and guilt. Nathaniel Hawthorne attempts to show how guilt can be a form of everlasting punishment. The book represents sin and guilt through symbolism and character development. In his novel, “ The Scarlet Letter”, Nathaniel Hawthorne explains how the punishment of guilt causes the most suffering among those affected.

As with any piece, symbolism plays an important role in representing the main ideas of a novel. The plot in “ The Scarlet Letter” revolves around three significant events that describe the development of the story.

As both starting point and ending point of the novel, the scaffold scenes hold symbolic meaning.

The first scaffold scene introduces the reader to the story, plot, and characters. The reader meets Hester Prynne and soon discovers the means of her sin. Hester’s thoughts as she stands before the public are described at the end of the second chapter. “ Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real.

Yes! -these were her realities, -all else had vanished!” (Hawthorne, 55). At this point, Hester is still quite ashamed of her sin of adultery, and may not want to acknowledge the reality of it. As Hester is accused of her crime, the first scaffold scene represents committing and being accused of a sin.

By the time the second scaffold scene approaches, seven years later, the reader should know that Hester’s ‘ partner in crime’ is the minister Arthur

Dimmesdale. Thus far in the novel, Dimmesdale has kept his sin a secret from society. During the second scaffold scene, Reverend Dimmesdale ventured out in the night to the scaffold in seek of forgiveness from God. He hoped to reveal himself to the public, however “ No eye could see him, save that ever-wakeful one which had seen him in his closet, wielding the bloody scourge. Why, then, had he come hither?” (129) Resulting with the burden of guilt still upon his soul, his sin is not revealed which is why the second scaffold scene represents concealment of sin.

Just as the book opened at the scaffold, it closes there as well. The third and final scaffold scene involves the primary characters from both the first and second scaffold scenes. All three of these characters, Hester, her child Pearl, and Dimmesdale stand together at the scaffold. This is the point in the novel where the minister finally wishes to reveal his sin. Concealing his sin for so long had caused him to deteriorate both mentally and physically, so just as Dimmesdale confessed, his life was taken from him. The third scaffold scene represents revealing and repenting sin.

Some say that Nathaniel Hawthorne named the characters of his novel with symbolic meaning behind them. Each of the four main characters' names can be tied in one way or another to sin and guilt. First, there is the character Hester Prynne. Her last name, Prynne, rhymes with the word ' sin', which is used to represent her role in the novel. Next, there is Dimmesdale. Simply the mere sound of the name in itself gives the impression of someone dim, dark, or weak; perhaps this way from suffering guilt. Then there is Chillingworth. Again, the sound of the name gives the reader a sense that the character has a cold heart; which is sinful alone. And lastly, little Pearl.

Rather than representing the evils of sin, her name means 'salvation', and can be represented as the 'salvation of sin'. The characters alone play a symbolic role in expressing the main theme. (Online-Literature. com, Symbolism)

Nathaniel Hawthorne attempts to show how guilt can be a form of everlasting punishment by showing how each character endures much suffering from it.

Hester Prynne, the main character in the novel, suffers a variety of types of punishment for the crime of adultery she committed. She faces such punishment as public humiliation from wearing the symbol 'A' as to represent her crime, dealing with the physical outcome of her crime, and most painful, having to live with what she had done. As the book opens, Hester is brought forth from the jail and walked to the scaffold. For the first time being seen in public named an adulterer, Hester shies from the public as they mock her. However, "She 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 weight upon its sympathies." (Hawthorne 140). Soon, it did not matter what other people thought of Hester because of her sin. She chose not to live with the humiliation, but she did have to live with herself.

Having to deal with her daughter Pearl day in and day out is a punishment in itself as well. Most people, including Hester, view Pearl as a demon child. However, Hester hesitates to punish Pearl for being so. She feels guilty as it is, placing a burden on Pearl's life, for Pearl is branded as the child of an

adulterer, all of this resulting from Hester's 'passionate sin'. (Guilt as Reparation for Sin, paragraph 14).

The minister Dimmesdale is greatly affected by the weight of guilt he carries with him everyday of his proceeding life. Since his sin is unknown to society, there is not a public crowd to look down upon him, but one Roger Chillingworth who lives just to torture Dimmesdale. He wishes and prays most often that the public know of his wrong, rather than hold it secret, as it would be less painful. "Happy are you, Hester, that wear that scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!!" (Hawthorne 182). Fear, is in fact, the only reason Dimmesdale fails to confess himself. He feels guilty for not being able to be a father figure to Pearl, for letting Hester suffer on her own, and, of course, just for his own sinful actions. In the end, it is the guilt that kills him, not any public humiliation.

One may look at Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, and see no guilt within him. Truthfully, Chillingworth is a cold-hearted soul. He does, however, have some guilt. Chillingworth, indeed, feels a bit guilty for marrying Hester in the first place. He and Hester both knew they did not love each other, but decided to marry anyway. Chillingworth might have known something like what Hester did would have happened eventually. After all, Chillingworth was much too old and unattractive for a young woman like Hester to feel anything worth making the relationship work. Even though it was out of his hands, Chillingworth also feels a bit bad about leaving Hester as he did for so long.

He may feel that he could have been a catalyst in what happened, however, Chillingworth was not about to let others who contributed to it run away

freely. This explains his excuse for becoming a fiend. He may feel guilty for becoming so evil, however, he blames it on Hester and Dimmesdale's actions, and does not feel he should change his ways. "' I have already told thee what I am! A fiend! Who made me so?'" (Hawthorne 151) He felt less guilt than the other characters, however, he was the one who caused the most misery.

Although Pearl, Hester's daughter, does not directly suffer such guilt because she is the only innocent character in the novel, she does suffer from her mother's guilt and sinful actions. Because Pearl is dubbed an evil being as an illegitimate child, she suffers much public ridicule and humiliation. She also receives the blame for Hester's past seven years of suffering guilt. During the scene in " A Flood of Sunshine", when Hester throws the A into the river, she also symbolically throws away Pearl, thus rejecting and blaming her own child.

Each of the four main characters, in their own forms, has and must suffer from a form of guilt. Since Hester and Dimmesdale are the only characters that committed the sin the book revolves around, they are the ones who suffer most of the guilt. Guilt is a painful reminder of sin. The other punishments both characters had to face were painful, but in the end, all they did was make them feel further guilt and suffer further pain.

The only thing other punishments bring out is the inner guilt of a person, if they are worthy enough to realize their wrong. "' Only the man who has enough good in him to feel the justice of the penalty can be punished; the other can only be hurt.'" (Punishment Quote, paragraph 1). There are two characters in the novel who are worthy enough to be punished: Hester and

Dimmesdale. On the other side of the spectrum, there is Chillingworth. He does not see the wrong in his sin of torturing Dimmesdale.

Hester Prynne immediately feels guilty for what she had done. If anything, she'd wish to take it back, as if it had never happened. Such the same with Arthur Dimmesdale. He was not only suffering from guilt of his sin, but also was becoming a very hypocritical reverend, the last thing he may have wanted. It is quite evident that the guilt eventually drove him mad to the point of self-mutilation, because as the reader knows, in the end of the novel, Dimmesdale dies from his guilt.

If you are not worthy, you cannot feel sorry for what you have done, as the case with Roger Chillingworth. He felt it was his duty to torture the reverend Dimmesdale. He was, nonetheless, hurt by it. He had dedicated the remainder of his life to making Dimmesdale suffer, so when Dimmesdale died, so did Chillingworth shortly following.

Sin is represented in many ways throughout the novel. Because of the sins the characters have committed, they had to be punished for their actions. Letting them suffer with their own guilt is the best way of going about the matter. With this, the character is forced to live with what they did. Because both Hester and Dimmesdale saw their wrongs, guilt, for them, was effective. It just goes to show the pain the characters suffer. In his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne explains how the punishment of guilt causes the most suffering among those affected.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

“ Guilt as Reparation for Sin in The Scarlet Letter.” [<http://www.123student.com/english/1443.shtml>]. Feb. 2004.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Penguin Books, 1962.

“ Punishment Quote.” [<http://www.123student.com/english/1910.shtml>]. Feb. 2004.

Stephanie. “ Symbolism in The Scarlet Letter.” [<http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/scarletletter>]. Feb. 2004.