

The scarlet letter by nathaniel hawthorn

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An 'unpardonable sin' is the subordination of the heart to the intellect.

This type of sin is especially terrible to transcendentalist as it goes against the laws of nature; Nathaniel Hawthorne expresses his view on it through his novels. In *The Scarlet Letter*, three characters, Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, are guilty of an "unpardonable sin". Through the differences in the lives of these three characters, Hawthorne teaches that it is better to confess one's sins than to hide them. This is significant because most people prefer to hide their faults, as humans value others' opinions of themselves. However, this strive for perfection was a strong element of the Puritan society which Hawthorne rejected, showing as he uses his characters to critique the Puritanical ideas in the way he does. Chillingworth appears to be a man without a heart and therefore could not be guilty of an unpardonable sin.

However he began the novel with a heart but his punishment for sinning was his heart's blacking and dyeing. His sin is his slow revenge and torture of Dimmesdale, however because this was his goal from the beginning of the novel it is hard to find his heart. However Chillingworth does show he has heart when he saves Pearl as a baby and later leaves her a fortune. He does this for her because he feels the need to protect and provide for her. Also for Chillingworth to be human he must begin with a heart and he must be human because he displays a selfishness, in marrying Hester, that only a human is capable of. If it could be proven that Chillingworth did not have a heart then he could not be charged with unpardonable sin.

But, as he cannot be cut him open to see his heart, or lack of, it must be presumed that he does, in fact, have a heart as all humans do because he contains all the characteristics of a human. It could also be argued that Dimmesdale and Hester did not commit an unpardonable sin because they repented to each other from the heart. However they both did subordinate the heart to the intellect, and their confessions, instead of removing their sins; serve to end the consequences of their sins. Hester's sin was to hide Chillingworth's identity from Dimmesdale and Dimmesdale's sin was to hide his role in Hester's adultery from the community. Both of these sins are unpardonable because they were covered in deception and hurt loved ones.

Hawthorne does not, however, regard Hester's adultery as a sin. On the contrary Hawthorne, as a transcendentalist, believes Humans should "trust ourselves, to follow our own nature" showing that he attaches no blame to Hester or Dimmesdale and believes there actions were entirely natural (Erskine). Although the puritan community condemns this act as a sin it is the complete opposite of an unpardonable sin; the 'sin' was the reining of the heart over the intellect. This is the reverse of Hawthorne's view on sin in that he embraces the idea the heart should not be subordinate to the mind. Although Hester protects Dimmesdale from the puritan society, proving her love for him, by remaining silent as she is questioned about Pearl's father, this protection does not extend enough for her to reveal Chillingworth's true identity to Dimmesdale. Hester keeps her promise to Chillingworth to hide his identity therefore allowing him to go forth and torment Dimmesdale.

Because Hester consciously allows Chillingworth to hurt Dimmesdale, who she loves, for seven years without enlightening Dimmesdale of his bully's

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identity, she has committed an unpardonable sin. Even though Hester wore the shame of her scarlet A with pride and was able to even embrace it, but, as is often the case with heroes and heroines; this pride was also her downfall. She had too much pride to reveal that Chillingworth was her husband and too much pride to break her promise. Hawthorne uses her pride as a comment of humanity; he shows that, though people may have chapters they'd rather hide or promises they are ashamed to break, it is important to follow the orders issued from ones heart. The height of Hester's sin takes place on the scaffold in the middle of the night when Dimmesdale questions her about Chillingworth asking " Who is that man, Hester?... I shiver at him! Dost thou know the man? I hate him Hester!" and Hester remains silent and allows Dimmesdale to continue suffering (Hawthorne 153).

Because Hester hides her knowledge of Chillingworth and instead leaves Dimmesdale to believe she is still perfect, Hawthorne punishes her throughout the novel by taking away her femininity, he reports that something had died within her and how she wore a cap to hide her beautiful hair, he goes far enough to say the transformation was somewhat revolting. In contrast, when Hester finally tells Dimmesdale in the forest and confesses her sin she regains her beauty, also after taking down her hair " Her sex, her youth and the whole richness of her beauty, came back" this transformation is described as miraculous as it " came back from ... the irrevocable past" (Hawthorne 199). Through Hester, Hawthorne demonstrates a consequence of the unpardonable sin in order to stress the importance of open honesty. Although Dimmesdale loves Hester and Pearl, he refuses to stand with them

until judgment day and does not acknowledge them in public. Dimmesdale is too worried about his public image to reveal his impurity. As Erskine expresses “ There is nothing in the story to suggest condemnation of [Hester] of the minister in their sin; the only blame attaches to Dimmesdale’s cowardice, his lack of self-reliance, his unreadiness to make public acknowledgement of his love”.

Hawthorne shows the results of cowardice and worrying about self image as Dimmesdale is slowly eaten alive by guilt and weakened by self punishment. Dimmesdale’s sin was also reflected on his mental state, it was remarked that he had lost a nerve and Dimmesdale experienced paranoia in thinking that the town would recognize himself in Pearl. However after resolving to run away with Hester and make his impurity known Dimmesdale’s mind is rejuvenated he is able to give the greatest speech on Election day, it is so awe some that Hawthorne describes the crowds reaction by stating “ Within the church, it had hardly be kept down; beneath the sky, it pealed upward to the zenith” (Hawthorne 245). This is another miraculous transformation but it takes a great toll on Dimmesdale’s physical state. Also because he decides to declare his love openly he is then able to escape the Chillingworth.

Dimmesdale then climbs the scaffold with Hester and Pearl and reveals his self branded scarlet letter, because of his openness and confession he is able to die at peace. Chillingworth is the darkest character as he is the only one who fails to admit his sin. His sin, slowly killing and torturing Dimmesdale for stealing his wife, illustrates that when one devotes all there intellect to an evil purpose while ignoring their heart, they are destined to live a cursed life. In his heart he becomes the ‘ black man’ and throughout the novel as a <https://assignbuster.com/the-scarlet-letter-by-nathaniel-hawthorn/>

consequence for his sin he is eaten alive by revenge. He devotes all his intellect to punishing Dimmesdale and in doing this he foreshadows his own fate; he speaks of a plant he found in the graveyard saying that it “grew out of [the dead man’s] heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried with him, and which he had done better to confess during his lifetime” (Hawthorne 127).

In this Hawthorne offers an ominous warning to those that fail to confess an unpardonable sin that they might have committed. After Dimmesdale has died Chillingworth loses all his purpose in life because his punishment, the loss of his heart, was really irrevocable, unlike Hester’s beauty, and so he wilts and wastes away. Hawthorne used Puritanism as “a dark background for the ideas and for the experiences that deeply concern him” and one idea is the hiding of the unpardonable sin (Erskine). His commentary is known because of the stark contrast between the secretive, perfect striving puritan society to the openness to those that reveal their sins. Hester lost her femininity, Dimmesdale lost his mind, and Chillingworth lost his heart. Hawthorne displays the unnaturalness of basing moral decisions off of the intellect through the decay of something inside each character.

Before Dimmesdale and Hester confess their sins to each other they are described as ghostly and unreal apparitions in the woods. After their confessions it is as if they are meeting for the first time in the forest as new people, this is aided by the fact that the sun begins to shine through the dark leaves. Hawthorne is saying that though people commit unpardonable sins when they confess their sins they find they are not alone and that they can let go of their pride. By presenting opposite results to Dimmesdale and

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Hester's lives to that of Chillingworth's; Hawthorne shows that people are haunted when they hide their sins but emancipated with all the freedom in the world when they confess their sins. Dimmesdale's purpose in The Scarlett Letter was to show the flaws in human nature. He comments on it with his beliefs that humans are overly concerned with self image.

Hawthorne demonstrates the problem with strive for perfection evident, it is seen that no matter what image is projected on to the public, everyone has hidden sins and secrets. It is better to be open and to follow ones heart then to cower behind the intellectual curtains of deception.