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# The Themes Punishment vs. Forgiveness Present in the Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

## The Scarlet Letter

Punishment means the infliction or imposition of a penalty as retribution of an offense, whereas forgiveness means the action or process of forgiving or being forgiven. The Scarlet Letter written by Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts punishment vs. forgiveness, as well as several other themes. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote several novels including *The House of Seven Gables* and the short story "Young Goodman Brown," among many other short stories. Hawthorne's use of allegory and symbolism makes him one of the most studied writers. The title *The Scarlet Letter* refers to Hester Prynne's social exile. Hester Prynne is able to overcome the humiliation of this symbol she has to wear on her chest and is finally able to live free.

Hawthorne one of the earliest American writer, a Dark Romantic in the midst of a bunch of transcendentalists, an American novelist and short story writer. Allan Poe a fellow author in the Dark Romantic movement and influential literary critic wrote negative reviews of Hawthorne's stories (Instruction 1). From Hawthorne's point of view, people needed things like guilt or sin to learn how to be themselves, and there wasn't much room for that in utopian society (Heather 1). Many of Hawthorne's early stories were published anonymously meaning without an author's name. Hawthorne's short stories first appeared unsigned and also, low payed which is one of several issues he had to deal with. America was also in the midst of a growing feminist movement when Hawthorne wrote the *Scarlet Letter* (Seabrook 3D).

Not only did Allen Poe write negative comments about Nathaniel Hawthorne, but other critics, as well, Neal Frank Doubleday makes a similar suggestion when he states that "Hawthorne uses witchcraft as a symbol of the will of evil" (Stromberg 4C). Witch craft meaning the practice of magic, especially black magic. Nina Bay, for instance, author of an introduction to the novel, declares that Hawthorne wrote psychological fiction "before the field of psychology had developed and before fictional techniques had been developed to reflect this new knowledge" (Stromberg 4B).

There were quite a few of issues Nathaniel Hawthorne dealt with through his life good, as well as bad, but increasingly, with time, emphasis came to fall upon possibilities for material advancement offered by the New World, but to begin with New England was conceived as a place of spiritual renewal (Instruction 1). For example, *The Scarlet Letter* was one of the first mass-produced novels in America and became an instant best seller, selling over 2,500 copies in the first two weeks (American literature 7). Also, the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls N.Y., was held in 1848, two years before *The Scarlet Letter* was published (Seabrook 3E).

The *Scarlet Letter*, we discover the novel's place in transatlantic history-a history catalyzed by the English Civil War and imbued with that conflict's rhetoric of native liberty (Doyle 5B). *The Scarlet Letter* was also published in 1850, set in Puritan New England in the 17th century. With issues of grace and legalism, as well as, guilt. Many issues back in 1850 still arise in today's society. For example, *The Queen Caroline* affair which happen back in 1820 and Bill Clinton's

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affair which happen in 1998. Adultery is still current and a topic that is still trending. Wives and husbands still have secret affairs to this day, the only thing different from the puritan time and now is the type of punishment for the crime. The punishment for adultery now is once the adulteress is caught with proof it results in a divorce, but is rarely prosecuted. If convicted, it is a class 4 misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of no more than \$250.00.

Caught in a story of love and shame, of sin and salvation adulteress Hester Prynne must wear a scarlet "A" to mark her shame. Her lover Arthur Dimmesdale, remains unidentified and wracked with guilt, while her husband, Roger Chillingworth, seeks revenge. Two men too coward to bear the consequences of their own actions (Uçum 6A). The characters in Scarlet Letter are as followed, Hester Prynne, Reverend Master Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth and pearl are the main characters in the Scarlet Letter and Master Brackett is the jailer and old mistress Hibbins the bitter tempered widow of the magistrate.

There are several themes throughout Scarlet Letter, such as public guilt vs. private guilt, Hester Prynne must walk from jail with the scarlet letter "A" on her chest for everyone to see and stand in humiliation. Also sin and judgement and knowledge, Hester has relations outside of her marriage with the result of a child. Judgement is shown throughout the story, as well, Pearl the daughter of Hester Prynne also, known as the scarlet version. "Behold, verily, there is the women of the Scarlet Letter; and, of a truth, moreover, there is the likeness of the scarlet letter running along by her side (Hawthorne 47). Civilization vs wilderness and the town vs the woods Hester has been outcast from the town having to move on the outskirts of society to raise her daughter by herself living with the judgment of others.

"To find yourself, at length, in a land where iniquity is searched out, and punished in the sight of rulers and people; as here in our Godly New England" (Hawthorne 21). There are also, many more themes throughout the story.

In fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborated embroidery and fantastic flourished of gold thread, appeared the letter a (Hawthorne 13). The Scarlet letter intertwines the trial of Hester Prynne with the futile attempts of the puritan community to stabilize the import of the letter A (Savory 7A). There were many punishments in the puritan community such as if you were a thief they would brand the letter "T" on your hand. The letter "B" was branded for blasphemy and the letter "D" for drunkenness. The New Englanders resorted to unusual punishments, such as the cleft stick which slanderers, scolds and liars were liable to have a cleft stick, which was split at the end, put onto their tongues while they stood in a public place or the ear chop where they would chop of their ear.

Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should scene of her earthly punishment; and so perchance, the torture of her daily shame (Hawthorne 39). That it were wronging the very nature of women to force her to lay open her heart's secret in such broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude (Hawthorne 25). In my opinion Hester Prynne may believe that her punishment is suitable for her crime and actions here on earth as well as she is willing to accept any punishment after her time on earth. According to Foucault's Chronology, the idea of the nation emerged at approximately the same time modern states defined by their prison system (Bumas 1B). The puritans didn't do long sentences of jail time they believed more in moral behavior and clean living than with the rights of property. They took their laws form the bible.

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I could be well content that my labors, and my sorrows and my sins, and my pains, should shortly end with me and what is earthly of them be buried in my grave, and the spiritual go with me to my eternal state (Hawthorne 78). I believe Hester is saying that she can deal with her labors, sorrow and sin if they would just end with her and maybe not be passed to her daughter. Hester Prynne receives forgiveness, Hawthorne assures us several times, when the community embraces her in its deep inarticulate wisdom (Heddendorf 2A).

“And, since Satan saw fit to steal it, your reverence must needs handle him without gloves, henceforward,” remarked the old sexton, grimly smiling (Hawthorne 112). It is a commonly accepted interpretation, in the study of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* that all references to the Devil, Satan, or black man are simply images of a psychological evil, and not intended to suggest the existence of a realm of good and evil beyond human (Stromberg 4A). Hawthorne had seen the dark side of humanity and believed it lay in everyone (Heather 1).

The *Scarlet Letter* has all the qualifications related to symbolic romance: the setting of the novel is in the distant past; the languages of the characters are abstract and artificial; the plot consist of crucial experiences, obsessions, personal investigation, and escape; and a profound dependence upon a kind of symbolism which requires various steps of interpretation (Uçum 6B). The symbol on Hester Prynne’s chest no longer controls her she is finally free.

Hester throws away the scarlet letter and took of the cap that confined her hair. In the *Scarlet letter*, Hester Prynne may be seen as a victim due to public shame but throughout the story Hester shows great courage and strength she is able to stand with her head held high and deal with the remarks and judgment. Hester’s embodiment of deep contradictions: bad and beautiful, holy and sinful, conventional and radical. Hester Prynne is finally free and she survives.

How would Hester’s scarlet letter compare to some of the scarlet letters in today’s society. I believe it wouldn’t have been as severe as it was in the puritan age. Hester wouldn’t have had to stand out in the open with a scarlet letter on her chest. It wouldn’t have been big news only because in today’s society just about everyone is doing something whether it’s a crime or sin. Maybe even only her friends would have known about it or select few and she may have been criticized amongst her friends but not the entire public as a whole. Hester Prynne would have been given options, as to abort the child and therefore, no one would have known about the adultery. In today’s society men and women go years with a secret affair and depending your rank in the world it’s only publicized on social media this day and age.