

Jane Doe

Ms. Barklow

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The Irony in Puritan Redemption

Redemption can only be reached when one sacrifices for a completely selfless cause. When responsibility for actions weighs more heavily on one person, it is not only unfair but highlights the sorry, pathetic person attempting to protect power and reputation. Organization is inevitable in human nature, yet it often turns from innocence sorting to judgemental classing. It is a manner in which one can put oneself above others following Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. Someone capable of overcoming societal labels is one who deserves recognition and inner peace. However, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne holds total responsibility and punishment for an act that only two can accomplish, while her accomplice Arthur Dimmesdale cowers in solitary shame; Hawthorne uses this irony to exemplify how Puritan society does not allow people to resolve their inner guilt.

Dimmesdale is a weakling and coward, unable to confess his sin, simply letting it brew inside boiling his soul; he himself is ironic because he contradicts his place in society.

Dimmesdale is wholly respected and trusted by the entire community despite any attempts to inform them of the turmoil he alone faces. He is too cowardly to own up to his sin and even stoops so low as to beg his fellow sinner to oust him. As we are first introduced to Hester Prynne and her child on the scaffold, the Reverend Dimmesdale attempts to encourage her to speak:

If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so than to hide a guilty heart through life.(59)

Dimmesdale proves to be incapable of exposing himself to the community and is so desperate as to ask Hester to do it for him. It is not likely that the townspeople would even believe her, nevertheless, she refuses to take his weary shame and guilt as well as her own. It is ironic that Dimmesdale pleads “if thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace” when in reality he is begging her to preserve his own. His stature in the community makes him a coward and a despicable liar.

Furthermore, Hester struggles with her shame externally to the community, but also internally with herself and God, destroying the appearance that had originally enraged the townspeople. The irony is that she is condemned by society despite her efforts towards redemption while others live a lie and are praised. Her inner beauty is exposed to the community once they are able to overlook the A and have lost sight of the outer beauty they were once jealous of and feared. Hawthorne recognizes the loss of beauty Hester seems to be experiencing as a symbol of her internal struggles:

It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine. It was due in part to all these causes, but still more to something else, that there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for

Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statuelike, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom to make it ever again the pillow of Affection. (147)

Forced to carry the burden alone, Hester faces treacherous agony and guilt in fear that she will not be worthy for God as a result of her sin. Yet she is the purest of the community, with all her sins exposed, Hester hides nothing and lives a simple life, not judging. She exemplifies all Puritanical beliefs and values, yet Hester herself is held solely responsible for sin and that of others.

Despite Dimmesdale's half-hearted attempt to finally take responsibility, Hester is still left with the shame. He cannot even stay alive after his confession to feel the exile she was forced to face alone, proving how difficult it is for one to resolve their inner guilt in the Puritan society. He yearns for a connection he once felt with God. Finally standing upon the scaffold during daylight for all to see and accept his punishment, Dimmesdale reveals to Hester what he believes is the plan for them:

I fear! It may be, that, when we forgot our God-- when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul -- it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion... He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast!.. By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people!(234)

He tells her of his fear that it was "vain to hope that we could meet hereafter" immediately before dying, he betrays her and the closure that she deserves. Yet again, Dimmesdale has taken

the easy way out, this time in death. Hester was led to believe that she would finally be able to live in harmony with the father of her child, and he destroyed all chance of that. By default, Dimmesdale helped her to accept the A as a part of herself, and Hester no longer feels she needs to wear it to appease the townspeople, but instead, to sacrifice herself for God.

Forced to assess their sins in the eyes of Puritan society, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale both struggle with their guilt and overcome it through acceptance and death. Dimmesdale recognizes the pathetic and selfish conclusion he has chosen while Hester fights for her own serenity with God. Their strife is similar to that of any community. People are persuaded to confess or admit to their sin and once they do, it is nearly impossible to overcome the label that is presented. Society is inquisitive and judgemental, making the act of confession for redemption a void.