

Confessed Sin vs. Hidden Sin in *The Scarlet Letter*

Early on in my career, when teaching American literature to high school students, I had my first experience of literary-biblical epiphany (the first but not the last, thank God). I was in the middle of teaching *The Scarlet Letter*, and, concurrently, I was reading Psalms in my personal morning devotions. One morning I was reading Psalm 32--after having prepped a lesson plan for *The Scarlet Letter* the night before—and I was struck by the notion that Hawthorne's novel is an illustration of verses 1-5.

“People say that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to hear such a scandal in his congregation.”

We've all read the novel, but it may have been many years for some of you, so here's a reminder and some analysis. Young wife Hester Prynne moves to Puritan Boston from England. Her husband has stayed behind to settle some legal/business matters before joining her. A year has gone by, and he is presumed to have drowned at sea. Then Hester's body begins to “swell with new maternity” (Thank you, Tennessee Williams for that lovely phrase), and the citizens of Boston, as well as the reader, begin to ask “Who can the father be?” We see Hester after her daughter, Pearl, is born and how Hester lives in a “Christian” community that shuns her because she is an adulteress. There is no forgiveness or restoration in Hawthorne's Boston. The scarlet letter in the title is, of course, the red letter A that Hester must sew on her dress as a way of proclaiming to all that she has sinned. Not trying to hide it in any way, Hester uses gold thread, which further calls attention to the A. Throughout the early chapters of the novel Hawthorne weaves images coming out of the shadows and into the light. Hester has emerged from the dark prison and stands on the scaffold in the open light. The sunlight plays off of the golden thread, illuminating the scarlet letter. This is open confession indeed.

In addition to the letter upon her dress, the child, Pearl, also becomes a symbol of Hester's passionate sin. Since Hester cannot hide her sin, she lives a life of open confession. After a number of years go by, she is told that she may remove the letter, but she chooses not to. She becomes known for her works of charity, and the town's people begin to look at the A as now standing for “Able.” Hawthorne writes, “She was patient,--a martyr, indeed,--but she forebore to pray for her enemies; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse.” Hester's physical appearance is healthy and glowing; she has a beautiful complexion and lustrous hair. Open confession brings a healthy appearance.

In contrast is the young minister, Arthur Dimmesdale. The first hint that he is Pearl's father is in chapter 2, when he asks Hester to name her partner in sin in front of the whole town. You can practically feel him holding his breath, wondering if she will answer and he will be outed. But Hester refuses to name him, and he collapses with relief:

“She will not speak!” murmured Mr. Dimmesdale, who, leaning over the balcony with his hand upon his heart, had awaited the result of the appeal. He now drew back, with a long respiration, “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart!”

Hawthorne first described Dimmesdale as a childlike “angel,” but from this point on, we see Dimmesdale become weak and sickly. He was given an opportunity to confess, and he did not take it. Years go by, and he still will not confess, and Hester is left bearing the shame alone. One day the little family meets in the woods accidentally, and Hester and Arthur discuss his public silence. He justifies it saying that if he confessed, he could no longer be a pastor and his congregation would suffer. Hester kindly tells him, “Heaven would show [you] mercy...hadst thou the strength to take advantage of it,” but he is not ready.

At times Dimmesdale makes paltry attempts to both confess and to punish himself. One dark night he stands on the scaffold, just as Hester had stood seven years earlier in the bright sunlight and in the presence of the whole town. Now Arthur stands there in the dark, hoping that no one will see him. This is not biblical confession, obviously. Hester and Pearl are crossing the town and stumble upon Arthur trying his own method of punishment, and he invites Pearl up and to hold his hand. But even this small child knows it is wrong of him to ask her, and she replies, “Wilt thou stand here with mother and me tomorrow at noontide?” He will not, and she will not (take his hand).

Arthur tries other ways to punish himself. He whips himself and even carves a letter A into his skin, upon his chest. But he keeps it covered.

Just as Hester’s health flourishes, and her visage has a lustrous glow, so Dimmesdale (and what a perfect name Hawthorne chose for him) dims before our eyes. The words Hawthorne uses to describe him are, “pale,” “sad,” “haggard,” “feeble,” and “tremulous” (lots of these). Others include “agitated,” “careworn,” and “emaciated.” Hawthorne tells us, “His large, dark eyes had a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth.” As the novel draws to its conclusion, Dimmesdale grows paler and weaker. “About this period, however, the health of Mr. Dimmesdale had evidently begun to fail.”

On the day of the town holiday (the occasion of the installation of a new governor), after preaching “The Election Sermon,” Dimmesdale decides that it’s time to come clean. He stumbles up to the scaffold, hand in hand with Hester and Pearl, confessing to all Boston that he was the partner of Hester’s ignominy--and Pearl’s father. Just days earlier he and Hester had planned to run away, along with Pearl, to Europe and start a new life away from the Puritan community of Boston. But by confessing his guilt, as a hypocrite as much as an adulterer, he is able to redeem what turns out to be the last moments of his life. He experiences the freedom of open, biblical confession as he stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl. “‘Is this much better,’ murmured he, ‘than what we planned in the forest? God is merciful.’” His very long public confession (two pages) is found in chapter 23 and is worth a look, but here is a taste:

People of New England, ye have loved me! Ye that deemed me holy! Behold me here, the one sinner of the world! At last I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood.

This is a good and thorough confession. He is claiming to be the foremost of sinners, just as the Apostle Paul did (“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” 1 Timothy 1:15). Earlier Arthur has not only seen Hester’s husband, Roger, as a worse sinner than himself, but he also tells Hester that her sin of keeping from him the knowledge that Roger is her husband is one that he will never forgive her for. But now Arthur feels the full and cleansing

effect of recognizing and abhorring his own sin. It is interesting that *seven* years have gone by since the novel's opening scene. In biblical numerology seven is the number of completion, and it has taken seven years for the completion of Arthur's spiritual journey. After his confession, he opens his shirt and reveals his own letter A. In the lines that follow we see Dimmesdale free, happy at last. He is now able to die in the peace and even the joy of a clean conscience.

Now let's look at Psalm 32 and see the parallels between it and *The Scarlet Letter*.

- 1 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- 2 Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- 3 For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*
- 5 I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*

Looking at the first five verses of Psalm 32 we see the main principal that I have discussed in this article: when we are open, confessing sin and not hiding from others that we are in community with, we can expect to thrive. "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven...in whom there is no deceit." Hester thrives in the novel in many ways. Although she is lonely, she wins the respect of all. She sits by the bedside of the sick, she sews for both the poor and for the Governor. She is brave in the face of the hardest of circumstances, including the threat of having her child taken from her. And while she could have many times named Arthur as Pearl's father, she knows that naming him would force him to share in her shame, but that he will only benefit spiritually if he himself confesses.

But he doesn't confess for seven long years, as we have seen. And in the novel we see the fingerprint of this Psalm:

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer-

When Arthur is silent, he literally (and I rarely use that word) wastes away. He grows pale and faint; he knows that God's hand is heavy upon him. He confesses just in time, because soon afterward, Arthur dies upon the scaffold. David's experience is timeless and universal. When sin is hidden, we can expect not to thrive but to languish.

But Arthur makes an 11th hour confession and feels the joy that David did, as seen in verse 5:

I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

On the scaffold, Arthur does acknowledge his sin; he doesn't cover it; he confesses—and because we are confident in our faith, we can infer that those moments of joyous freedom continue with him beyond the grave.

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If you want to learn more about *The Scarlet Letter*, I highly recommend a lecture by Wheaton College English professor Leland Ryken called "Teaching a Misrepresented Classic: *The Scarlet Letter*", which can be found on Youtube.com at this address:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=np49obyD2FY>