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The Effects and Implications of Sin in The Scarlet Letter

Sin is the transgression of a moral code designated by either society or the transgressor. The Puritans of Boston in the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, establish a rigid moral code by which to purge their society of deviants. As this society is inherently theocratic, the beliefs and restrictions established by religion are not only incorporated into law but constitute all law. In this manner, the moral code of the Puritan society thoroughly pervades the lives of its individuals, and any presence of iniquity is felt in all aspects of their lives. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the characters' lives are controlled by the sin they commit.

Hester Prynne's adultery causes her alienation from the Puritan society in which she lives. After the term of her confinement ends, she moves into a remote, secluded cottage on the outskirts of town, inducing a physical separation from the townspeople. Because of this seclusion from society, the Puritans regard her with much curiosity and suspicion: "Children...would creep nigh enough to behold her plying her needle at the cottage-window...and discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off with a strange, contagious fear." In addition to the physical separation, a more intangible manner of exclusion also exists, in that Hester becomes a pariah. She is subject to derision and malice from the lowliest of vagrants to the most genteel of individuals of the community, though many are often the recipients of her care and attention: "The poor...whom she sought out to be the objects of her bounty, often reviled the hand that was stretched forth to succor them...Dames of elevated rank, likewise, were accustomed to distill drops of bitterness into her heart." Hester cannot feel any sort of kinship with the townspeople in light of the treatment she receives from them, thus alienating her even further from Puritan society. Formerly an inhabitant within the bounds of the community as well as a member of the community, she is now outcast in both respects. Just as the act of adultery is pivotal in Hester's life, this sin effects a similar manipulation of Arthur Dimmesdale's life.

Dimmesdale's guilt over his sin continually torments him throughout the novel and causes his unusual behavior. He resorts to self-punishment because of this guilt: "His inward trouble drove him to" whipping himself and fasting "rigorously until his knees trembled beneath him, as an act of penance." Because of his resulting weak and sickly demeanor, this illustrates the extent of his guilt in that he subjects himself to so much painful, bodily harm. In addition, this guilt induces him to publicly reveal his transgressions. The extremity of this act is an evident contrast to Dimmesdale's usual cowardice. Time after time he castigates himself on the pulpit, but he veils his vilifications knowingly to inspire awe and reverence among his audience. The pronouncement of his transgressions at the closing scaffold scene is thus an aberrant action on Dimmesdale's part and must have been prompted by the guilt he feels. His act of adultery--through guilt--thus manipulates his very actions. The effect of sin on Dimmesdale's life is similar its effect on Chillingworth.

Roger Chillingworth's obsession with vengeance results in his eventual degeneration. His physical appearance changes greatly over the years he spends in Boston because of his fixation with exacting revenge: "A large number...affirmed that Roger Chillingworth's aspect had undergone a remarkable change...At first his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face..." His unattractive appearance is the physical manifestation of his animosity towards Dimmesdale. Furthermore, Chillingworth's morals also undergo a deterioration, in that he devotes his life to tormenting Dimmesdale: in

effect, sacrificing his fellow man for self-gratification. The change from his initial integrity to his consequent depravity is apparent even to himself, as he asks Hester: "'Dost thou remember me? Was I not...a man thoughtful for others...kind, true, just, and of constant, if not warm affections?...And what am I now?...A fiend!" Because of his perverse obsession with retaliation, Chillingworth abandons his morality, an integral part of his former self.

The transgressions of the characters in the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, manipulate the characters' lives. Because of her act of adultery, Hester is exiled from Puritan society through her physical separation and status as an outcast. The guilt resulting from this very same act impels Dimmesdale to act in an extreme manner: inflicting painful punishment on himself and publicly proclaiming and denouncing his actions. Chillingworth's physical and moral deterioration are the consequences of his own sin--his obsession with vengeance. Thus, sin is a common affliction prevalent among the characters in this novel--and furthermore, among all mankind. It is the manner in which sin affects a person that provides insight into the person's soul.