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MORAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES
in
THE SCARLET LETTER

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MORAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Introduction

One objective of the study of literature is to provide students with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the experiences of others and to make intelligent decisions concerning the positive values and attitudes they can adopt and the negative ones they should avoid.

The Christian teacher of literature has a responsibility to mold the characters of the students in the class in preparation for life here on earth, and more importantly, for the world to come. Accordingly, the teacher should use every opportunity to emphasize moral and ethical values in stories, poems, novels and other kinds of literary works. When students are led to discover values, or gain insight into human nature and suffering and man's search for truth, they will be empowered to develop a value system based on sound Christian principles.

When we speak of "ethical" and "moral" values, what do we mean? Arthur Holmes explains that "ethics is about the good (that is, what values and virtues we should cultivate) and about the right (that is, what our moral duties may be) (*Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* 10). And *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines ethics as "the system or theory of moral values," and moral as "of or relating to principles of right and wrong." The purpose of Christian education is to restore in man the image of God, so the study of literature in a Christian context must seek to help students form characters with solid Christian principles. A study of ethical and moral issues in any literary work should consider the biblical basis of thought and conduct.

Holmes notes the following concerning the biblical foundation for ethics:

1. It gives an account of the relation of morality to God's purposes in creation, our perversion of those purposes through sin and our restoration to righteous living by the grace of God.
2. We learn the principles of justice and love which describe God's character and should also characterize us.
3. From love of God and gratitude for His mercies come the motivation and dynamics for moral living (*Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* 14).

Because the Christian teacher acknowledges the Bible as the guide book for behaviour, she will want to present and discuss moral values against that background.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the ethical and moral issues involving the major characters in *The Scarlet Letter* and to consider the effect of their actions on themselves and on their relationship with others.

Background Information

The setting of *The Scarlet Letter* is Boston during the Puritan era. Anthony Trollope's telling summary will serve to introduce the reader to the plot of the narrative.

A woman [Hester Prynne] has been taken in adultery, . . . and is brought upon the stage that she may be punished by a public stigma. She was beautiful and young, and had been married to an old husband who had wandered away from her for a time. Then she has sinned, and the partner of her sin, though not of her punishment, is [Arthur Dimmesdale] the young minister of the church to which she is attached. It is her doom to wear the Scarlet Letter, the A, always worked on

her dress, --always there on her bosom, to be seen of all men. The first hour of her punishment has to be endured, in the middle of town, on the public scaffold, under the gaze of all men. As she stands there, her husband [Rodger Chillingworth] comes by chance into the town and sees her, and she sees him, and they know each other. But no one else in Boston knows that they are man and wife. Then they meet, and she refuses to tell him who has been her fellow sinner. She makes no excuse for herself. She will bear her doom and acknowledge its justice, but to no one will she tell the name of him who is the father of the baby [Pearl]. For her disgrace has borne its fruit, and she has a child. The injured husband is at once aware that he need deal no further with the woman who has been false to him. Her punishment is sure. But it is necessary for his revenge that the man too shall be punished, -- and to punish him he must know him. Then he goes to work to find him out, and he finds him out. Then he does punish him with a vengeance and brings him to death, -- does it by the very stress of mental misery. The woman suggests a way of escape, but the old man finds out and declares his intention to accompany them in their flight. The minister dies after he confesses, and the woman is left to her solitude. (240-41)

Before we consider the moral value of the work, it is worthwhile to look at the literary worth of this masterpiece of beauty and power. The largeness of its theme, the imaginative genius of the author, the symmetrical design, the ordering of plot, the allegorical significance and richness of symbolism, all contribute to the effectiveness of the work. The novel is rich in the use of symbols, some of which appear in the first chapter and abound throughout the entire work. While some are obvious and easy to identify,

others are more impressive and involved as Hawthorne makes them take on various meanings as the work progresses. One such symbol is the letter A which is a literal symbol of adultery, and takes on a number of forms, but becomes a positive symbol before the novel ends.

Hawthorne uses images in a very deliberate and artistic manner. Waggoner observes that some of these are “explicitly symbolic, others seem obscurely to be so, while still others resist every effort at translation into abstract terms.”(*The Scarlet Letter*) Among these are images having to do with color, shades of light and darkness, vegetation, places and the human heart. Metaphors and similes also abound and most of them are “fresh and effective.” Dramatic irony is also present and this arises from the theme of secret sin and concealment.

One other literary device Hawthorne uses is called the “multiple choice” technique. Terry Dibble explains that with this Hawthorne “casts doubt on his own story and suggests that an incident may have happened in quite a different way if at all.” (84-85) The reader is therefore left to decide what is literally true. An appreciation of the literary value of the work can deepen the reader’s understanding of the message.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, as in some of his other stories, Hawthorne seems obsessed with the effect of sin on the sinners themselves. His earliest ancestor was William Hathorne who arrived in Massachusetts in 1630. Hawthorne speaks of him as a soldier, legislator, judge and church leader who possessed all the Puritanical traits, both good and evil. He bitterly persecuted the Quakers and whipped them openly in the streets. One of his sons, John, great-great-grandfather of Nathaniel was one of the judges at the Salem

witch trials at which it is said, one of the victims pronounced a curse on Judge Hawthorne and his posterity.

Whether or not Hawthorne believed in curses, he did believe in the reality of sin and guilt, and shared with his Puritan ancestors the belief in man's partial depravity and inherited guilt. Bryan Bourn agrees, and writes:

The guilt that Hawthorne felt over the actions of his ancestor had an enormous impact on his writings. In the "Custom House," his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne accepts the guilt from his forefathers and offers to repent for their crimes. This unusual way of viewing guilt and sin is one driving factor in Hawthorne's writing. The other, which is closely related to the first, is the relationship between men, and of man to humanity as a whole. It centers around the consequences of breaking the basic links between humans by committing acts of sin.

The novel deals with issues that relate to human nature -- sin, guilt, hypocrisy, revenge and pride. Students of literature can therefore study the work in an effort to gain insight into human nature and to develop their own system of values. An understanding of the Christian world-view can aid them in this regard.

The Christian Worldview of Sin

As children of Adam, we have all inherited sin. "As by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). The Bible also states that "sin is the transgression of the law." Man is aware of both good and evil in this world, and of his capacity to do both. The Creator could have made

man to operate with robotic obedience; he could have been programmed to carry out God's commands and wishes. Like animals trained to obey their master, man would obey "for fear of the whip or for scraps of food," but that is not what God wants, "He wants free moral agents in whom faith, love and conviction run deep -- people who shape their lives by God's will because they love and trust him" (James 5). Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commandments." The Christian teacher can show that sin affects the relationship between man and man, and man and God, and can encourage students to maintain a healthy relationship by obeying God's laws.

What is God's attitude to us when we transgress? The Bible tells us that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1: 9). The Christian teacher must emphasize that God's love is offered freely to all. How then, should we relate to members of the human family when they sin? The Christian approach is to demonstrate what Barry Hill calls moral values – "compassion, equality, integrity, justice, tolerance" (2).

Hawthorne's Worldview

Although the novel is a detailed criticism of the Puritan way of life, Hawthorne believed in and upheld the moral principles dictated by Puritanism. His novels and stories show that sin in all its forms has a devastating effect on those who commit it. We see people who sin, and who must face the consequences of their decisions. Concealment destroys the physical, spiritual and moral fiber, but confession and repentance bring salvation.

In addition, Hawthorne believes that people should show understanding and love to those who transgress, and so he reveals his utter disgust of a society that is intently intolerant of persons who slip from the path of morality. The example of Jesus in His dealing with sinners is pertinent as we consider Hawthorne's worldview, and the Christian worldview. Hawthorne points out how unwise it is to set up one's self as a judge. Jesus declares, "Judge not that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matt 7:1,2).

Jesus did not mean that we should condone or overlook moral misconduct. Nor did he mean that we should not pass judgment against sin nor apply disciplinary measures against conduct that is wrong, sinful, or unacceptable. He did not mean that as individuals or a group we have no right to condemn sin wherever it occurs, nor to pass judgment on others. Concerning this John Fowler writes: "If no one could judge others, there would be no court system, no trials for breaking a law, no justice, and no punishment. A society without the ability to judge its members for violation of its laws would descend into chaos and eventually self-destruct" (28).

What the text prohibits is not judgment but judgmentalism, described by Fowler as "that attitude of arrogance by which one assumes an air of superiority over others by constantly indulging in criticism, faultfinding and an unforgiving spirit towards others while ignoring the same faults in oneself"(28). This is ignoring the beam in one's eye while seeing the mote in another's eye (Matt 7:3). A spirit of love, compassion, forgiveness and grace should characterize our treatment of those who err. Fowler explains that the injunction "Do not judge' prohibits us from passing judgment as to the final

salvation of an individual, however sinful that person might be. The fitness of a person for eternal life is something that will be decided by God alone.”

Hawthorne presents man as being good and evil. A large portion of the opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* contains a number of symbols which emphasize this fact. There are the "sad-colored garments, and gray, steeple-crowned hats . . . the cemetery, the prison and the grass plot" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. Chapter 1. All references to the text will be from the Norton Critical Edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text). The picture is a gloomy one except for a wild rosebush that grows beside the prison. Hawthorne hopes that this flower may serve to "symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkling close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow" (Chapter 1). As Bourn puts it, "the prison is symbolic of moral evil (sin) and the cemetery of natural evil (death). So, in the introductory part of the novel . . . the reader is already aware that the work is dealing with the relationship between good and evil and the more important realization that, 'moral good will be less strongly felt than moral . . . evil'.

Sin and Guilt

Different types of sin are represented in *The Scarlet Letter*. Arlin Turner notes that there are "sins of the flesh, sins of weakness, sins of will and the intellect. The transgression of Hester and Dimmesdale stands condemned by the laws of society" (59).

Hester stands on the scaffold wearing a drab gray dress with a large scarlet "A" on her bosom. She shows to the world the result of her sin in the form of little Pearl. While Hester's sin is visible to all, Dimmesdale's is hidden. The minister conceals his wrong, --

the fact that he has broken the moral law -- and the only suggestion that something is wrong in his life is the habit he has of constantly putting his hand over his heart. Henry James describes him as "the tormented young Puritan minister, who carries the secret of his own lapse from pastoral purity locked beneath an exterior that commends itself to the reverence of his flock, while he sees the softer partner of his guilt standing in the full glare of exposure and humbling herself to the misery of atonement"(89).

Rodger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, an older man, described as small, thin and slightly deformed, is guilty of two sins. The first is against Nature. Selfishness had led him to marry Hester, a young, passionate girl. He knew that Hester did not love him and he was not the kind of man to make her a good husband. He admits in Chapter 4, "Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay." And Hester knows it too. " It seemed a fouler offence committed by Rodger Chillingworth, than any which had since been done him, that, in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side" (Chapter15). The second sin, which seems more serious than the first, begins to take control of Chillingworth when he first appears at the scaffold in Chapter 3. " Briefly defined, this sin is the subordination of the heart to intellect. It occurs when one is willing to sacrifice his fellow man to gratify his own selfish interests. As displayed by Chillingworth, it involves a violation of two biblical injunctions: (1) 'Judge not, that ye be not judged' and (2) 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord'" (Dibble 66). In Dimmesdale's words, "He has violated in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart" (Chapter 17). Hawthorne regards this sin as a grave one and many critics support the idea. Henry James speaks of Chillingworth as devising the "infernally ingenious plan of conjoining himself with his

wronger, living with him, living upon him; and while he pretends to minister to his hidden ailment and to sympathize with his pain, revels in his unsuspected knowledge of these things, and stimulates them by malignant arts" (89).

The matronly women who stand among the residents of Salem and who have come to see the adulteress stand on the scaffold see Hester as deserving greater punishment than that meted out by the magistrates. Says one in the group, "It would be greatly for the public's behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church-goers in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactress as this Hester Prynne. . . . If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded?" (Chapter 2)

The attitude of these women is the same as that displayed by the Pharisees in Jesus' day. When the woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus, her accusers observed that according to the law of Moses, she should be stoned (John 8:5). In Hester's case, one of the self-righteous women remarked, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (Chapter 2). Concerning this judgmental attitude Ellen White writes, "Do not criticize others, conjecturing as to their motives and passing judgment upon them" (*Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings*).

Consequences of Sin and Guilt

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne is not overly concerned with the sin that has been committed; he is more concerned with the results of the sin, with its effect on the persons involved. The Christian view however, is that the sin itself as well as its effects are to be considered. God regards man's motives. He who sees and understands the intents of

the heart knows all about the spring from which man's actions flow. And to him motives are important. Furthermore, the Bible condemns sin in all its forms.

Hawthorne shows the woman suffering public shame and scorn, the sensitive and neurotic minister who conceals his participation in the sin withering inside, and the jealous old man, Chillingworth, consumed by the madness of revenge. Turner states that the author's "basic assumption is that reward and punishment are inevitable here and now—retribution for sin is certain"(58). But while Hawthorne sees punishment for the wrong doers as being meted out now, Ecclesiastes 12:14 states that "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." The biblical view is that reward is certain even if it is not immediate.

Although many critics view Hester in a positive way, some liberal ones see her as degenerating spiritually since her thoughts are on earthly love as is clear in her conversation with Dimmesdale during their meeting in the forest.. In fact, her artistic embroidery is seen as her way of "expressing and therefore soothing the passions of her life"(Crews 148-58). It is also said that she "handles her guilt more successfully than Dimmesdale because her conscience is less highly developed than his"(Crews 143). Those who see her positively emphasize the transformation that she undergoes.

Concerning the effect of Hester's sin, Gorman explains that because Hester faces the shame and ridicule of her community as she stands on the scaffold, she has nothing more to face than the "slow years of ridicule and the stony path of regeneration" (250). Over the course of the years, she becomes involved in performing acts of charity and kindness to people in the community and shows her care and concern for the sick, the poor and the dying.

As Gorman says, "Hester's guilt is absolved through her public suffering, and her great and noble will and self-command change her very badge of shame into a symbol of a lost world rewon" (251). Hawthorne observes that ". . .in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence" (Chapter 24).

Hawthorne points out that while sin which is exposed and confessed, frees the sinner's mind and often brings about a transformation in the life, sin which is concealed and cherished tends to cause ruin and death. Arthur Dimmesdale suffers during the seven years of silence. The source of his anguish is the remorse he feels for his sin. Guilt eats away at his very soul and threatens to destroy him. Concerning the close relationship between the mind and the body, Ellen White writes: "Grief, anxiety, discontent, remorse, guilt, distrust, all tend to break down the life forces and to invite decay and death" (*Ministry of Healing* 241). Frederick Crews comments on the devastating effects of guilt:

The breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired. It may be watched and guarded; so that the enemy shall not force his way again into the citadel, and might even, in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded. But there is still the ruined wall, and near it, the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph. (137)

For Crews the " 'stealthy foe' may be identified as guilt, rather than the urge to sin. . . . The original foe of his tranquility was guilt, guilt for his thoughtless surrender to passion."

Dimmesdale's moral enemy is the forbidden impulse while his psychological enemy is guilt (137).

Turner agrees that guilt destroys the minister. Dimmesdale thinks his concealment to be a sin, and this is what delivers him into the hands of Chillingworth, who exclaims at the time of the final confession that in no other way could his victim have escaped him (59).

Rodger Chillingworth, who enters the story as Hester stands on the scaffold, waits with fiendish patience to destroy the soul of his patient. He clings like a leech to the minister intent on taking his revenge and willing to become a devil. How does this affect him? He becomes more deformed and ugly. He is led to commit what some critics call the unpardonable sin by his lack of human sympathy. Of him Hester says, "That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart"(Chapter 17). Some other consequences of sin are also evident in the story.

Sin is an estrangement from God on the part of a morally free person. It occurs when one transgresses God's laws. Sin not only isolates man from God, it also alienates him from his fellowmen. The characters in *The Scarlet Letter* all suffer isolation as a result of their sins, as Arlin Turner notes:

Pearl was born an outcast and remains at war with her world until the expiation of the final confession scene. Hester lives at the edge of the village and years afterward, when Pearl has married, returns to finish out her life at the same spot. The scarlet letter, when she first wore it, 'had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself,' and as time passed, it became everywhere apparent 'that she was banished, and as

much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind.' The isolation brought on Chillingworth by his guilt is represented by the fear his dark visage and stooping posture inspires in the children as he moves about the village. (59-60)

Hawthorne presents another effect of sin on the characters. To him, they attain greater understanding as a consequence. Although one may not necessarily agree with this view in relation to Chillingworth and Pearl, it seems reasonable to believe that "the effectiveness of Dimmesdale's sermons is testimony to his extraordinary insight into human nature"(Turner 60). It seems as if his own weakness makes him more understanding and tolerant of the faults and failings of others. It is through Hester, however, most of all, that Hawthorne presents the greater understanding due to sin. According to Turner, "The scarlet letter has taught her to recognize sin in others and to look with warm sympathy into the hearts of sinners. Still, her awareness of sin in others did not destroy utterly her faith, for she 'struggled to believe that no fellow mortal was guilty like herself,' and thus refused to believe that sin is universal—'such loss of faith is ever one of the saddest results of sin'"(60).

Regeneration

While Hawthorne's characters are sinners, many of them are presented as people who actually gain salvation and regeneration before the story ends. Hester acknowledges her sin and boldly displays it to the world. The symbol of her shame, elaborately embroidered, and worn long after she could have removed it, is proof that she is trying to hide nothing. Her salvation lies in Truth. In her conversation with Dimmesdale when she

apologizes for having concealed Chillingworth's identity she says, "In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did not hold through all extremity. . . . A lie is never good, even though death threaten on the other side!"(Chapter 24) Dibble states that Hester "learns from her sin, and she grows stronger as a result of accepting her punishment. . . . At the end of the novel, she emerges from her experiences and is revealed to be a woman capable of helping others and respected by them. She has the happiness that comes of being at peace with oneself, one's fellow men, and with one's God"(62-63).

While we admire Hester for her courage, we pity Arthur Dimmesdale for his weakness in concealing his sin for seven long years. After this period of intense struggle however, the minister confesses his sin on the scaffold and experiences victory. Chilingworth's comments reveal the importance of Dimmesdale's confession: "Hadst thou sought the whole earth over, there was no one place so secret, --no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me,--save on this very scaffold"(Chapter 23). Salvation comes for him when he throws off the garb of hypocrisy that he has worn and shows his real self. Hawthorne himself points specifically to this in the "Conclusion" when he says, "Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence:--'Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!'" This is the meaning that Hawthorne wants to convey -- regeneration, victory, and salvation come after confession of sin. Through the use of questions the teacher can lead students to an understanding of the meaning of the novel.

The sample questions below can be used to generate meaningful discussion:

1. How do you think the minister's early confession would have impacted himself, his congregation and the community?
2. In what way would Hester's exposure of her partner in sin have affected the major characters if she had revealed his identity?
3. Hawthorne deals with the effects of guilt rather than with the sin. Explain why he does this. To what extent do you agree or disagree with him?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the essay shows that sin has a disastrous effect on the sinner and on his relationship with others. It causes pain and suffering and isolates the transgressor. The writer of an essay on the novel summarizes it aptly: "Hidden sin and guilt cause more suffering than open guilt First, open acknowledgment of guilt allows people to move on with their lives, instead of always worrying about the past. It also allows them to seek forgiveness from the public Hidden guilt, however, causes people to continually worry about their sins being discovered, and what punishments they may receive. This leads to the deterioration of both mental and physical health. For these reasons it is vital to be honest with one's self and others concerning transgressions, however mortal" (Notepad).

The issues presented should help students to grasp the importance of making wise decisions, to be honest and forthright in dealing with their own sins, and to be compassionate and forgiving to all sinners.

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