Unpardonable Sin?

Hawthorne’s View on Adultery in *The Scarlet Letter*

Marisa Flöttmann
Heidelberger Straße 9
69151 Neckargemünd
Marisa.floettmann@web.de
American Studies – 3rd semester
Student ID – 3174260
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Honor Pledge
I. Introduction

“Within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals” (King).

This proposition is taken from a sermon that was delivered by the American pastor Martin Luther King at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1957. King recognized sin as an inevitable feature of humankind and argued that everyone contains adverse and vicious affections within themselves. At the same time, the pastor submits that even the most disastrous sinner is shaped by some favorable characteristics or actions. However, King was not the first person to reflect upon the sinful nature of mankind. There were, in fact, many writers who incorporated the topic of sin into their works. In this instance, the focus is directed to the American novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne and his magnum opus, *The Scarlet Letter*.

*The Scarlet Letter* is a romantic and historical novel that was published in 1850. It tells the story of the adulteress Hester Prynne and her accomplice Arthur Dimmesdale, who live in Puritan Boston during the mid-17th century. As already mentioned, Hawthorne considers themes of sin and guilt as he elaborates on Hester’s and her lover’s handling of their transgression. Related to the issue of sin, the subjects of repentance and forgiveness are not far to seek. Hence, a few obvious questions arise: does Hawthorne consider Hester’s adultery as a forgivable or an unpardonable sin? Can her guilt be excused in the light of the rigorous and intolerant views of Puritan judgment and religion? Finally, what are the prerequisites for remission in Hawthorne’s work?

The aim of this paper is to analyze Hawthorne’s view on adultery and to argue that he considers every sin that is driven by human instincts to be venial – thus including adultery – as long as the sinner confesses his transgression and shows sincere repentance. This persuasion is based on three reasons: First, Hawthorne does not utterly agree on the classic theological views of the Puritans, but creates his own religion that rests on sympathy for the main part. Second, Hawthorne emphasizes that the internal suffering caused by compunction is punishment enough, so that a refusal to grant forgiveness is redundant. Third, Hawthorne accentuates that a sinner is not only characterized by condemnable sin, but also by other qualities and abilities that can be of use in societal affairs.

This paper will provide a definition of what an unpardonable sin generally is and how this designation has been used originally. It will subsequently take a look at adultery in *The
Scarlet Letter and examine Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s handling of their sin. Afterwards, the indications of an inexcusable sin will specifically be applied to the protagonists in The Scarlet Letter arguing that adultery does not fall into the category of unpardonable sins.

II. Definition Unpardonable Sin

There are many various explanatory approaches when dealing with the unpardonable sin. This paper will solely focus on the definitions that are relevant to Hawthorne’s view on guilt. The American scholar Sheila Dwight provides worthwhile pieces of background information about the origin of unpardonable sin.

“The Christian concept of the ‘unpardonable sin’ stems from a warning in the New Testament given by the apostles Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that those who sin against the Holy Ghost will not be forgiven either in this world or the next. Theologians through the ages had put various interpretations on the meaning of the unpardonable sin, but it was not until the advent of the Puritans with their emphasis upon the Scriptures that individuals began to concern themselves about the great transgression” (Dwight 449). The Scriptures elucidate the unpardonable sin as a sin that is deeply entrenched in a person’s heart and that cannot be committed off-handedly. Dwight also makes clear, that a person who commits this sin can neither receive forgiveness in life, nor be blessed with eternal salvation. Who is this warning addressed to? What does that mean in practice? Sinning against the Holy Ghost, as Dwight writes, means that a person resists and rejects the spirit of God and also performs blasphemy against it. “The laity, along with the theologians, were not quite sure just what this sin entailed. It was interpreted variously as pride, rejection of the Word of God, despair of salvation, willful impenitency and so on” (Dwight 449). Even though there are various interpretations of what it means to sin against the Holy Spirit, it is pretty obvious in which direction this definition is going. The unpardonable sin is not a non-recurring crime or a bad action that a fellow being suffers from, but rather an inveterate attitude based on rancor. It is a sin directed at one component of the Trinity, a sin against a higher power. It takes a profound interior progression in order to commit the unpardonable sin as it somehow requires a conscious decision against the Holy Ghost.

How does this Christian concept relate to Hawthorne’s beliefs about sin? “Hawthorne, always fascinated by the problematical nature of evil, was deeply intrigued by the concept of such a thing as an unpardonable sin” (Dwight 449). Otherwise, he would probably not address the subject of sin in his works. He does not only write about sin in The Scarlet Letter, but also
in his other stories. On that account, “most critics feel that Hawthorne believed the unpardonable sin to be a ‘separation of the intellect from the heart,’ also phrased as the ‘deliberate destruction of the Spirit of God in Man.’ More practically, the unpardonable sin is ‘… divorcing one’s head from one’s heart and oneself from humanity.’” (hmmler). Again, it becomes clear that the unpardonable sin is a deliberate decision that requires a vitriolic heart. Divorcing oneself from humanity can also be interpreted in many ways. It could imply complete isolation and leaving behind fellow men, but it could also mean that someone no longer pursues human desires or virtues. Whatever the case may be, the unpardonable sin is justifiably not excusable, because it is a severe crime that is not practiced due to human instincts or the sinful human nature, but due to a conscious and tedious decision. No one is forced to commit the unpardonable sin by human drives. Rejection of the Holy Spirit and isolation are intended measures based on exasperation and volitional malignity – traits that a person could vanquish and eliminate with the help of the Holy Ghost if one wished to do so.

III. Adultery in The Scarlet Letter

III. I. Hester Prynne’s Handling of Her Sin

In The Scarlet Letter, the focus is not on the sin of adultery itself, but more likely on its repercussions. The reader does not get to know for what reasons Hester and Dimmesdale have committed adultery. “The sin as such is pushed into the background. The apple has been eaten a full year before, and it is Hawthorne’s problem to see what happens to the souls of Hester […] and Dimmesdale” (Clark 25). It does not go without notice that Clark references the fall of Adam and Eve by comparing Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s sin to the forbidden fruit that has been eaten in the Garden of Eden. In fact, many scholars make a comparison between the first biblical sinners and the protagonists of The Scarlet Letter. Consequently, Hester’s preferential precursor could be Eve. “The most notable scenes in this vein occur in the garden of Governor Bellingham’s mansion, where Hester can hear ‘voices in the garden’ […] , and in the forest, where Hester tempts Dimmesdale to abandon his God and defy the authority of the magistrates, just as Eve tempts Adam to eat from the apple” (Courtmanche 31). Even though Hester wants Dimmesdale to abandon the Lord, she does not commit the unpardonable sin. She does not reject the Holy Spirit or the word of God due to an embittered heart, but because of her desire for Dimmesdale. Even the original sin, the adultery itself, has probably been conducted by fleshly and reasonable appetite.
Hester’s handling of her sin is ambivalent. On the one hand, her “sin with Dimmesdale brings her almost unbearable suffering and humiliation” (Clark 27). Hester cannot flee from her sin and her shame and is aware of the long-windedness of her guilt. She knows that the Puritan community is resentful and ungenerous and will continue to hold her delinquency against her as long as she lives. “She could no longer borrow from the future to help her through the present grief. To-morrow would bring its own trial with it; so would the next day, and so would the next; each its own trial, and yet the very same that was now so unutterably grievous to be borne” (Hawthorne 55). Hester’s sin forces her to live an isolated life. With her child Pearl, she moves into a cottage on the outskirts of town. “Lonely as was Hester’s situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to how himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want” (57). Hester either thinks that she does not deserve the company of others due to her sin or she simply is not interested in social interacting and does not mind being alone with Pearl. Two obvious questions come to mind here: how is Hester able to stand her shame and live a sealed off life considering that Hawthorne describes the consequences of her sin as something unbearable? Which fortitudes help her live with her guilt?

“In this manner, Hester […] came to have a part to perform in the world. With her native energy of character, and rare capacity, it could not entirely cast her off, although it had set a mark upon her, more intolerable to a woman’s heart than that which branded the brow of Cain” (58) Hawthorne describes Hester as a strong woman with valuable and useful character traits that allow her to keep her head up. It feels like Hester intentionally keeps the grudge of her fellows at distance and does not allow society to destroy her emotional life. She knows how to encounter her sin. “By the strength of her own will she bears her humiliation and suffering, gathering in turn strength and development from them and from her unselfish service to suffering humanity. […] She wears the badge of shame with great dignity, almost with pride and at times defiance” (Clark 27). Hester does not only manage to go on living with her sin, but is yet able to benefit from her situation.

As already mentioned, Hester suffers from her shame one the one hand. On the other hand, she becomes even stronger and more prudent. “What she is experiencing is an intellectual development which leads her into deep speculation in the realms of morality” (Clark 27). Hester begins to reflect on various topics: womanhood, truth, revenge, and her personal development. She becomes an earnest and profound thinking lady and dares to resist

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and oppose the established moral and the generally accepted attitude to life on a cognitive level. “Her life had turned […] from passion and feeling, to thought. Standing alone in the world, […] she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world’s law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and wider range than for many centuries before” (107). Hester grows and moves with the changes of her time – not least because the scarlet letter on her breast gives her the courage to do so.

Even though Hester lives isolated in some way, she nevertheless commits herself to the sense of well-being of society. She gets involved in helping the people of her community. “[Hester] was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man, whenever benefits were to be conferred. […] In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found her place. She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble” (105). Hester sets herself to help the people that actually excoriate her. Once again, Hawthorne emphasizes her good-natured heart through this situation. As a result of Hester’s commitment, the scarlet letter on her breast is no longer seen as it was before. “The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her, - so much power to do, and power to sympathize, - that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne” (106). It is quite possible that Hester’s ability to sympathize with her fellow beings enabled the community to sympathize with her in return.

Taken together, Hester’s handling of her sin is dichotomous. On one side, the sin evokes feelings of guilt and shame and causes her to live in isolation. At the same time, Hester benefits from the letter on her breast as it lets her experience personal development and gives her the courage to reflect and think about her sin in depth. The adultery shapes and influences Hester undoubtedly, but is not the only aspect that characterizes her. Being unfaithful to her husband is not the only deed she is able to do.

III. II. Arthur Dimmesdale’s Handling of His Sin

Dimmesdale’s attitude towards his sin changes over the course of the novel. First, he refuses to confess his fault in public. “His original sin, of course, is the adultery, but it is not this that results in his deterioration so much as it is his self-centered pride” (Clark 26). One could say that Dimmesdale’s handling of the sin is even worse than the adultery itself. Unlike Hester, he is not forced to confess his sin in public and is not sentenced to wear a noticeable A on his
breast. He does not account for what he has done and a reader in modern times could thus consider him to be disloyal to Hester and her child, because he “has let Hester bear alone her public degradation at the scaffold” (Clark 26). In a conversation with Roger Chillingworth, Dimmesdale expresses what he thinks about public confession of guilt. “The heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed” (88). Dimmesdale clearly references the Day of Judgment and argues that every sinner will be judged righteously by God at the proper time. His mindset is not convincing. Dimmesdale does not only seem to indicate God’s judgment because of his profession and personal conviction, but also due to simple craveness and shakiness. It is not the case that Dimmesdale does not acknowledge to himself that he has sinned. Quite the contrary, he feels very guilty and constricted and suffers from his guilt on a physical and mental level. Nevertheless, he does not find the courage to stand up for his sin. “Aware of the healing power of confession, Dimmesdale loves too much his position in the eyes of the world to give it up for the ignominy of confession. Suffering remorse enough from his original deed, he sees that remorse multiplied many times over by his own awareness of the falseness of his position” (Clark 26). Dimmesdale’s handling of his sin initially appears to be an unlikeable and selfish manner. But as soon as the reader gains knowledge of his internal conflicts, Dimmesdale begins to be pitied rather than despised. In the mentioned colloquy with Chillingworth, Dimmesdale talks about men who do not reveal their secrets. “So, to their own unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures, looking pure as new-fallen snow; while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves” (88). Chillingworth suspects that Dimmesdale intrinsically talks more about himself than men with secrets in general, but he cannot be dead certain yet. The reader, however, starts to commiserate the minister and sympathize with him.

Just like Hester, Dimmesdale does not only suffer from his sin, but also benefits from it in a particular way. He becomes able to pursue his profession better and more articulate than ever before. “[T]his very burden it was, that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself, and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence” (94). His tribulations allow Dimmesdale to perform his sermons more true-to-life and empathetic than he used to. Since his preaching is more persuasive and comprehensible, the community of Boston commends and venerates him even more. “It is by his very sorrows that Dimmesdale is able to achieve his extraordinary success as a minister.
The destruction comes, but first Dimmesdale receives positive benefits from his suffering” (Clark 27).

The destruction comes indeed. All the while, Dimmesdale “longed to speak out […] and tell the people what he was” (95). However, his craveness hinders him from doing so. It is not until he leaves the forest, where he met Hester and her child, that Dimmesdale finally is vigorous and changed enough to make up his mind to confess his original sin. After a last touching sermon, he adheres to Hester and what he has done. “With a convulsive motion, he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! (162). After his confession, Dimmesdale praises the Lord, makes his farewells, and dies as he has been physically and emotionally weak all along. His sorrows have destroyed him veritably.

Hawthorne probably pursues a purpose by making Dimmesdale confess his blame in public. It is quite possible and reasonable that Hawthorne wants to declare public confession as a requirement for forgiveness and inner peace. “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! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!’” (163). According to Hawthorne’s narrator in The Scarlet Letter, one should not play-act or hide mistakes and flaws.

IV. Adultery as an Unpardonable Sin?

Hawthorne’s description of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s handling of their sin clearly shows that he strives to create sympathy for the sinners in his work. The German scholar Klaus P. Hansen argues that Hawthorne does neither completely agree with the strict attitudes of the Puritans nor on their classic theological views. Instead, he creates an own religion – at least an own moral – through his works. The basis of this own moral is sympathy. “Sympathy provides a moral standard by which we can deal with sin: how the sins of others should be treated; what attitude one should adopt towards one’s own sinfulness; and how one should react to the potentiality of evil” (Hansen 53). In other words, sympathy is able to provide principles and directives concerning the handling of the sin – an equivalent alternative to the instructions of Puritan religion. “Sympathy is an instrument of understanding between human beings” (Hansen 57). Hence, empathy is more important to Hawthorne than judgment. The author somehow invites his readers to try to empathize with Hester and Dimmesdale and especially the inducement and handling of their sin. It almost feels like Hawthorne wants the reader to forgive his protagonists in place of the Puritans who somehow refuse or simply do
not manage to show understanding and offer honest and complete forgiveness. The Puritan community will always continue to bear grudges.

Now, Hawthorne probably does not say that sin can be completely forgotten once it is committed. “Sin remains sin and adultery remains adultery yet for Hawthorne […] sin can educate, and so in Hester and Dimmesdale […] we can see the ‘humanizing effect of guilt.’ It is the paradox of the ‘fortunate fall’ that Hawthorne’s sinners become superior human beings precisely through their flaws” (Hansen 29). Sin cannot be forgotten, but it can be forgiven, because it is not only something bad, but also something rewarding. As we have seen, Hester and Dimmesdale benefit from their guilt. Hester becomes a really helpful and wise lady and Dimmesdale’s sermons are more eloquent and touching than ever before. Consequently, the community benefits from their sin as well – even though they do not recognize this occurrence. This is one reason why Hawthorne “introduce[s] the idea of possible redemption of sin” (Clark 24).

As already mentioned, Hawthorne creates sympathy for the sinners in The Scarlet Letter as he describes their suffering and inner repentance. “Though Hester’s ‘sins’ is never openly announced, the text cleverly alludes to adultery […] throughout, creating a kind of fascination with the ‘nameless’ crime” (Egan 27). The reader of The Scarlet Letter is indeed fascinated by the sin of adultery and its consequences. Hawthorne’s detailed description of how Hester and Dimmesdale are influenced and eventually changed by their sin creates a strong sympathy for their crime and character. This conjunction can also be regarded reprehensibly. Arthur Cleveland Coxe, author of a review of The Scarlet Letter, is rather negative about Hawthorne’s creation of empathy for Hester and Dimmesdale. Coxe is censorious about the fact that “the whole tendency of the conversation is to suggest a sympathy for their sin” (Coxe 259). Hawthorne’s sympathy for adultery can of course be seen critically, because it opposes Christian virtues.

Nevertheless Hawthorne invites the reader to forgive Hester and Dimmesdale in the place of the Puritans and other opponents. “We can say that sin and forgiveness are interdependent aspects of Hawthorne’s view of human life. […] It can be said that Hawthorne is more concerned about people forgiving each other than [he] is about God forgiving people. Forgiveness is doubtless among Hawthorne’s most cherished values” (Hansen 62).

Henceforth, the question is: why does Hawthorne think that Hester and Dimmesdale deserve forgiveness? First, because he does not regard adultery as an unpardonable sin. The adulteress and the minister do not reject the Holy Spirit, they do not separate the intellect from their heart, and they do not live in complete isolation. They were driven into their sin by human
instincts and desires. Second, because he probably would not put so much effort in creating sympathy for Hester and Dimmesdale, if he wanted to condemn adultery. When working with the Hyper-Concordance to the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, one can quickly figure out that Hawthorne never uses the words unpardonable, inexcusable, unforgiveable, or indefensible in The Scarlet Letter. However, he uses the word sympathy twenty-eight times, the word mercy fifteen times, and the word pardon eight times. Also, the words grace and forgiveness are used. Simply due to the application of these words, Hawthorne’s attitude towards adultery becomes clear. He does not legitimize the sin itself and would not say that committing adultery is to be approved, but he does legitimize human instincts implying that adultery is a pardonable and not an unpardonable sin.

**V. Conclusion**

In conclusion, evidence suggests that Hawthorne considers adultery to be venial. In The Scarlet Letter, he introduces the idea and moral of sympathy and contrasts with the classic Puritan traditions. He covertly suggests forgiving Hester and Dimmesdale for their sin, because their inner suffering and repentance is punishment enough and because they atone for what they have done by their role in the Boston community. In Hawthorne’s view, adultery highly likely is not considered to be an unpardonable sin, as it is not in conformity with the Christian concept that stems from a warning in the New Testament. Hester and Dimmesdale become erring, but they haven’t committed a crime that can never be forgiven. They are stigmatized by their sin to some degree and are never able to shed the ramifications of the adultery. Nonetheless, there are other qualities and experiences that shape their character and worth.

A follow-up research could examine Hawthorne’s attitude towards sin in his other works, but also the character of Roger Chillingworth in The Scarlet Letter. His sin is quite different from the passionate act of adultery, as it is more driven by an intellectual will and decision. To what extent is his demeanor an unpardonable sin?

However, one thing is certain: in The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne creates sympathy for Hester and Dimmesdale by simply humanizing them. In his work, he shows what King accentuates in his sermon more than a hundred years later. Sin is all too human and therefore to be forgiven. “Within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals” (King).
Bibliography


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Marisa Flöttemann