

Another View of Arthur Dimmesdale: A Profound Lesson in Scapegoating from The Scarlet Letter
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Near the end of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold of shame and tears away his shirt to reveal something to the community. The narrator exclaims: "It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation" (*Novels* 338). The actual manner in which this revelation is manifest is hidden, which allows readers to fill in the details. What is presumed, however, is that there indeed was some mark on the minister's chest, and the narrator provides three explanations, derived from eyewitnesses, as how it came into existence. It was either the result of Dimmesdale's self-flagellation, the effects of Chillingworth's evil potions, or the seemingly supernatural transference of spiritual guilt onto the hypochondriac minister's body. Curiously, the narrator discounts the testimony of the few witnesses who claimed not to see anything significant on the minister's chest. Noting that most people saw the semblance of a scarlet letter, the narrator adds that

it is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and who professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's. Neither, by their report, had his dying words acknowledged, nor even remotely implied, any, the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter. According to these highly respectable witnesses, the minister, conscious that he was dying, – conscious, also, that the reverence of the multitude placed him already among saints and angels – had desired, by yielding up his breath in

the arms of that fallen woman, to express to the world how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man's own righteousness. After exhausting life in his efforts for mankind's spiritual good, he has made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike. (340-341)

On this account, the minister was preaching a grand sermon, complete with dramatic visual embellishment, and showing the community that even the loftiest among them still suffers the effects of original sin. The narrator continues, however, by explaining away this one particular interpretation of the revelation of the scarlet letter:

Without disputing a truth so momentous, we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale's story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends – and especially a clergyman's – will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the dust. (341)

The narrator seems to be saying that, although the interpretation of these stubborn folks might indeed contain a momentous truth, it is nonetheless a misapplied one. After all, one would be deluded in thinking that Dimmesdale is anything but guilty of adultery.

Could the narrator be mistaken in his assessment? The momentous truth to which he alludes cannot be swiftly dismissed, and the claim that Dimmesdale is guilty of adultery is not as obvious as it seems. The stubborn dissenters who resist the imputation of literal guilt were, after all, not present in the deep forest of the supposed lovers' confession. The narrator's presentation of Hester and Arthur's private forest dialogue – which, according to Pearl herself, “only the trees could hear” (315) – gives readers verification of what at this point in the story they have all but confirmed for themselves:

Dimmesdale is Pearl's earthly father. The Salem community, however, has only ambiguous public words and actions upon which to determine the true intent of the minister's swan song. It is thus reasonable for some people to choose not to convict the minister. There is no sunshine-proof of Dimmesdale's adulterous guilt, only the spectacle of a beloved preacher garnering his energy in order to express some "deep life matter" (ref).

What is this deep life matter that Dimmesdale wished to communicate? The traditional assumption is that the minister is confessing his adulterous sin, which, through the effects of the scarlet letter, has finally pronounced itself fit for public consumption. One cannot dispute such a momentous truth, namely that even Puritan ministers sin and must disclose themselves to the public eye, even if this has the appearance of dishonoring their office. One also cannot discount attempts to find an even more profound truth in Dimmesdale's final spectacle.

Sympathizing with the dissenters, I offer that the minister's final sermon is based not necessarily on the acknowledgement of a private transgression of his, but on a passionate reading of Matthew 25: 31-46, and a profound notion of personal responsibility. Dimmesdale points to Hester's opprobrious symbol, which he says has "cast a lurid gleam of awe and horrible repugnance roundabout her" (338), and places himself within the evil aura. *What you do unto the least of me, you do unto me!* "Ye, that have loved me! – ye that have deemed me holy!" he says. "Behold me here the one sinner of the world" (337). The minister's message is that those who shun Hester are also shunning he whom they all love and revere so dearly. The people are shocked. *When did we persecute you?* they might ask.

It must be noted that, at least according to the narrator's gloss, the dissenters do not understand Dimmesdale's message in exactly this way. Their denial of *any* connection between Hester and Arthur is an overstatement. Such people are, however, wise in suspecting that the minister's message might not be a disclosure of personal sin. His intimate association with Hester and the letter might not be derived from the dark necessity of personal sin working its way to the surface. It might be rather a demonstration of a deeper message: that all are responsible for all, that we all are indeed our brothers' and sisters' keepers. This is much like the idea of infinite responsibility offered by Emmanuel Levinas, who ties subjectivity to the concern for others. He says that

responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, humanly, I cannot refuse. ... I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: "*We are all responsible for all men before all, and I more than all the others?*" (101).

While standing on the scaffold where Hester first faced the crowd, Mr. Wilson tells Dimmesdale that "the responsibility of this woman's soul lies greatly with you" (Hawthorne, *Novels* 174). Readers are quick to jump on this as an early indication of adulterous guilt, and believe that Wilson is ironically implicating Dimmesdale in the adulterous deed. One should not discount the more official interpretation, however. As the community's moral leader, Dimmesdale is responsible for all men before all. Wilson likely intends to refer not to the sin but to its confession, but the devoted minister surely could have regarded these words as an exhortation to take profound responsibility for

the transgression. He associates himself with the letter not because of a *biological*, but rather because of a *genetic* connection to it. Arthur Dimmesdale is Adam, who assumes the sin of Eve not because he follows her in committing an individual sin, but because sin cannot be completely individuated.

This is perhaps the momentous truth to which the scaffold skeptics are alluding when, in a reactionary gesture, they outright deny the minister's guilt. Apart from the testimony of these witnesses, can the minister indeed be found guilty? The answer to this question is not obvious.¹ For the message to indeed contain a momentous truth, it seems to me that the minister would have to be innocent of adultery, the charge that occasions the scarlet letter. Otherwise, Dimmesdale becomes a hypocrite who preaches a profound notion of responsibility by which all are responsible for all and I more than the others, but whose personal connection to that responsibility comes not from obedience to such a tough ethic, but from the acknowledgment of ordinary biological fact. If he is guilty by virtue of biological fact alone, then he becomes a hero only among those of common morality, for whom it is perfectly obvious that he who dances must pay the piper, even if that person is a dignitary. If Dimmesdale's connection does not come from common morality, but from the duty of infinite responsibility, then the minister is *one who lives truth*, rather than just one who preaches it. This would accord with the narrator's assessment of the story: "*Be true! Be true! Be true!*" (341 emphasis added).

¹ Sandor Goodhart takes an approach similar to that presented here – an approach that inspired this paper – when he argues that "Oedipus may not have killed Laius" (*Sacrificing* 15), and that readers themselves supply what they take to be damning evidence. Although the testimony of the Herdsman is inconclusive, readers go with their instincts anyway, and accuse the king of murder. "Shall we allow ourselves," says Goodhart, "the luxury of believing that the Herdsman's testimony has been lost and that we might reasonably supply it ourselves?" (16).

By taking on infinite responsibility rather than just confessing personal transgression, Dimmesdale is embodying the message of Matthew 25. There is relatively little irony in the minister associating himself with the worst of sinners if he were connected to it in a way that, once revealed, would be seen as obvious by his worshippers. After Jesus' essential connection to the outcasts is revealed to his followers, they do not understand their mistake to be simply an unwillingness to see what should have been clear as sunshine. Even after it is revealed, the connection between Jesus and the outcasts is not obvious to the onlookers. Jesus did not associate himself with the outcasts because he *deserved* to be associated with them. Why should we insist that Dimmesdale did?

Readers have been unanimous in agreement that the minister is drawn to proclaim his association with the letter out of a biological connection to its source, the sin of adultery. Even if they were to admit that the community is reasonable in withholding judgment on Dimmesdale, readers still insist that, after all, the minister is guilty. But are readers in a better position to judge? The information to which they have access might be considerably less ambiguous than that of the community, but even in its clarity it is not beyond suspicion. In "The Custom House," the narrator explains that he fabricated his story of *The Scarlet Letter* of Surveyor Pue's only "reasonably complete explanation of the affair" (146). This six-page narrative is derived from the actual testimony of witnesses, interviewed by Pue himself. As the narrator explains:

I must not be understood as affirming, that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveyor's half a dozen sheets of foolscap. On the contrary, I have allowed

myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline. (147)

The narrator draws attention to the fact that in composing historical fiction, an author must speculate about the inner lives of the characters. He continues by claiming an expansive poetic license for creating a story out of what he admits are certain facts of the case. It is likely, though, that the facts in Pue's record must be based nonetheless on relatively public events, and not derived from the testimony of Hester, Arthur, Roger Chillingworth or Pearl. Either because of death or egress from the community, none of these people could have been interviewed by Pue.² Given this, it is evident that there are certain parts of the story, most notably the secret forest rendezvous, where the narrator's imagination takes over. If it is not the narrator's own, then it is the imagination of either Pue or his interviewees, neither of whom spied on the private moments of the central characters.³

² The narrator does say that Pue's document contains "many particulars respecting the life and conversation of one Hester Prynne" (32), but this narrative appears to consist of the conversation *about* Hester by others. Louise DeSalvo aptly notices that the writing of patriarchal history is involved here. Noting that the narrator and Pue are said to have a pact between them regarding the telling of Hester's tale, she says that "Hawthorne does not perceive the function of telling his tale as serving the causes of women's history; rather, Hawthorne is using one woman's story to serve the purposes of *male* history, both his own and men in general" (62). DeSalvo also notes that this history, despite common belief, is creatively reworked by Hawthorne, who modified Puritan laws and practices in creating the premise for his novel (64).

³ Perhaps the narrator believed in Dimmesdale's guilt only because he was following Pue's own narrative (in the form of a private rather than public document) which added to the facts the supposition of Dimmesdale's adultery. And actually, when describing Pearl's interaction with the forest animals, the narrator says the following: "A wolf, it is said, -- but here the tale has surely lapsed into the improbable, -- came up ..." (294-295). Here, the narrator seems to be commenting on Pue's record. If the imagination of Pue, or his interviewees, is the source of the forest scene, this would perhaps exonerate the narrator (although the characters' inner thoughts are still his responsibility) but would not weaken the possibility that scapegoating was involved in the creation of the tale. It just shows, in the fact of his reflection on the verity of the story, that the narrator is not at this point completely caught up in it. A similar situation of the narrator using his critical faculties comes up when he is unsure whether Mistress Hibbins really visited the minister upon his return from the forest (310).

The narrator's admission that he blends "the Actual and the Imaginary" (149) is significant if one considers his history. He confesses to having a "home-feeling" familiarity with his family's "first ancestor," the Quaker-hunter William Hathorne, as well as Hathorne's son, "who inherited the persecutory spirit" (126). The narrator expresses a desire to rectify past evils through something like substitutional atonement: "I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them ... may now and henceforth be removed." This sacrificial gesture is noble, yet the narrator soon notes that his storytelling endeavor – that through which, apparently, ancestral guilt will be expiated – would be a source of ridicule for the hard-labor Puritan patriarchs. "Let them scorn me as they will," he concludes, "strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine" (127).

The storyteller has a difficult time separating the threads that weave him to his past.⁴ Does this mean simply that he will have a difficult time overcoming the notion of natural human depravity with which the old Puritans toiled the earth, or does it mean more? The narrator notes that the scarlet letter, a symbol of Puritan scapegoating, has lingering effects on him. After presenting the various opinions offered for the significance of Dimmesdale's public revelation, he concludes of the symbol that "we have thrown all the light we could acquire upon the portent, and would gladly, now that it has done its office, erase its deep print out of our own brain; where long meditation has fixed it in very undesirable distinctness" (340). Perhaps the persecutory spirit that

⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch says that, for Hawthorne, irony "reveals the good we derive from evils past" and "exposed the evils we do as we try to improve upon the past" (43). *The Scarlet Letter* does not just show us the problems we have surpassed with the end of the morally rigid Puritan culture; ironically, it also shows us the persistence of such problems now, as is represented in the novel's 'contemporary' narrator. Though weakened by the process of critical reflection, the scapegoating mechanism is still subtly at work today.

haunts the narrator's ancestry also haunts his own imagination. Perhaps the brain-burned symbol imposes itself on that which he sees.

Readers should not judge the narrator too harshly, especially since he asks for "kind and apprehensive" friends (121). Dimmesdale should be treated equally charitably, and not unreflectively subject to the harsh judgment of the crowd. According to Rene Girard, a "persecution text" is an account "of real violence, often collective, told from the perspective of the persecutors, and therefore influenced by characteristic distortions" (*Scapegoat* 9). The chosen victim, often one who is weak or sickly, is made to appear guilty by the community. This victim, up against a community united in its condemnation, even comes to believe that he himself is guilty of the imposed crime. The narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* is not trying to advocate violence. Even the verbal violence that comes with the imputation of unjust guilt would be abhorrent to him. But maybe he knows not what he does. He creates a scapegoat out of Dimmesdale, and, with the help of the persecutory kinsmen who haunt him, discharges the disturbing symbol onto the sickly minister. Readers of the novel naturally follow along.

Among the public scenes are the first and last scaffold spectacle, as well as Hester's visit with Governor Bellingham. It is obvious that these scenes contain ambiguous references to adultery; if they did not, Dimmesdale's cover would be blown. Although readers familiar with the story are quick to point out the references to adultery in these scenes, those who are unfamiliar with the story should be reluctant to judge. What is made evident in these scenes is not adultery, but rather the growing power of the crowd. From his balcony position, the preacher asks Hester to identify her fellow sinner, who should step down from a high place and stand with her (175). Her ultimate reply to the imperatives of the clergymen and the crowd is that "my child must seek a Heavenly

Father; she shall never know an earthly one!” (176). The ambiguity here is plain, and a charitable reader would see only conventional moral preaching from Dimmesdale and an expression of religious faith from Hester.⁵ One thing becomes clear, namely that the effects on the community of the minister’s appeal to Hester were thorough. “The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy” with the minister. The narrator believes that the sympathy thus created would cause the father to be “drawn forth by an inward and inevitable necessity, and compelled to ascend the scaffold” (175). Mass sympathy takes place during a mimetic crisis within a community. A sense of determinism brings forth the scapegoat before the unanimous condemnation of the people. Contrary to conventional interpretations, the irony of the first scaffold scene is not that the lofty Dimmesdale is the father; the irony is that Dimmesdale is the scapegoat.⁶

Readers who interpret this scene as an intimation of Dimmesdale’s adultery are, curiously, in sympathy with Chillingworth. Arriving from the forest, Hester’s husband inquires about her, and is told by a townsman that she has scandalized “a land where

⁵ Arguing that Dimmesdale’s guilt is ambiguous does not constitute either a marginalization or degradation of Hester. In fact, if Dimmesdale is not her lover, then the matter of paternity becomes a significant mystery, and Hester’s refusal to disclose the name of the father shows her to be heroically independent. She is no longer just the patient woman waiting for a fire-side reunion with her lover. What’s more, she remains true even despite the narrator’s presumptuous impositions. Responding to Pearl’s queries about the source of the letter, Hester says, “What know I of the minister’s heart? . . . I wear [the letter] for the sake of the gold thread.” Despite her refusal to judge the minister, the narrator quickly judges her, noting that Hester “had never before been false to the symbol on her bosom” (274). On the interpretation offered here, however, Hester is both respectful of Arthur and true to herself.

⁶ Betty Kushens says that Dimmesdale “suffers by implication not merely for his own unconfessed sin, but for the secret sins of the entire Puritan community” (111). If we take seriously the phenomenon of scapegoating, we have to look at Dimmesdale’s suffering as deriving not from a personal transgression, but from the thoughts of the community. To say that Dimmesdale was a community scapegoat, but was also nonetheless guilty, is to talk about a weaker form of the scapegoat mechanism. In its most significant form, the scapegoat mechanism victimizes the innocent.

iniquity is searched out, and punished in the sight of rulers and people” (170). Soon to take on devilish characteristics, Chillingworth tries to bring a scandal to light, and disclose the one sinner for whom the community searches. He also voices the first suspicions of Dimmesdale, noting that the young minister “speaks with a strange earnestness” (216) in his arguments to Governor Bellingham in favor of Pearl not being taken from Hester’s care.⁷

The narrator’s imposition of the scarlet letter is not a singular event, but rather is the result of the gradual working of the symbol upon his mind. This process first becomes evident in Chapter 10, when the suspicious Chillingworth makes a dramatic discovery. Richard Copley argues that the scene in which Chillingworth discloses Dimmesdale’s chest is a modified version of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Both stories involve one man dramatically sneaking up on another, and committing an evil act while the victim sleeps, somewhat fitfully. Disclosures take place that involve “a seemingly supernatural heart” that “lays open a man’s sin” (Copley 31), as well as an old man’s evil eye, which in some way motivates the act. (The old victim has an evil eye that troubles the murderer; the old man has an evil eye with which he stalks Dimmesdale.) The similarity between the stories is not weakened by consideration of certain differences, which largely involve Hawthorne inverting elements of Poe’s story. As Kopley explains:

Hawthorne switched the young man and the old man – the former becomes the sleeper and the latter the intruder. And he switched the time, as well – midnight

⁷ According to Nancy Tenfelde Clasby, Dimmesdale participates with Chillingworth, his fellow intellectual, in a mimetic rivalry. The object of such rivalries, as Girard notes, is often forgotten. “It is plain that their struggle, whatever its occasion, is not for Hester’s love,” says Clasby. “She has become a mere pawn played in a game for its own sake” (249).

became noon. Furthermore, he modified the motive of the intruder – the narrator’s desire to alleviate his nameless terror became Chillingworth’s desire to determine definitively his wife’s lover. And he modified the nature of the helpless victim – the terrified old man in “The Tell-Tale Heart” became the remorseful minister in *The Scarlet Letter*. (31-32)

Kopley notes that “unlike the sin of murder in Poe’s story, this sin in Hawthorne’s novel is never confessed – though Dimmesdale does confess his adultery and duplicity” (32). It is here that Kopley’s analysis can be taken one step further. The victim in each case is indeed helpless, but in the case of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the victim is also clearly innocent. Poe’s narrator, deranged though he is, can at least acknowledge this fact:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture -- a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me my blood ran cold, and so by degrees, very gradually, I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

(121)

The disturbance resulting from the man’s flawed eye enters the narrator’s mind, and is rationalized into a belief that an innocent man must be sacrificed. Dimmesdale is generally thought to be victimized only by Chillingworth’s violation of the sanctity of a human heart, which should be permitted to disclose sin on its own volition.

Dimmesdale is generally considered a victim, but never an innocent victim. This haunting fact about the innocence of Poe’s victim cannot be overlooked, since it is what

makes the story so *morally* horrific. The innocence of the victim is an important part of Poe's story, and there is some justification for applying it analogously to Hawthorne's, in which case, Chapter 10 depicts not just a sneaky disclosure based on an obsession with guilt, but a sneaky disclosure based on a *delusion* about guilt. Readers can only imagine what Chillingworth sees while looking at Dimmesdale's chest. Perhaps the problem lies in this act of imagination, which readers share with Chillingworth. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" has a delusional imagination that he regards as an acute awareness of "all things in the heaven and in the earth" (121). The throbbing heart he hears later is likely his own, projected into the earth below the floorboards. The case is similar with Chillingworth, who sees what the "The Tell-Tale Heart" murderer hears: his own condemnation.

After Chillingworth's ambiguous revelation – one that came from Heaven *or* Hell (Hawthorne, *Novels* 238), that is, from truth or deception – the process of imposing the mark accelerates. The initial ambiguity of the text begins resolving itself, and readers are more comfortable in assuming Dimmesdale's adulterous guilt. Chapter 11 contains the narrator's comments about the minister's "burden, whatever it might be, of crime *or anguish*, beneath which it was his doom to totter" (240, emphasis added). At this point, the minister could still be suffering from something other than his own adulterous guilt: He could be suffering existential anguish at the deep responsibility with which he is being confronted. Soon, however, the narrator has Dimmesdale acknowledge that he is "a pollution and a lie" (241). There is also an unrecognized wisdom in those who declined to hear the minister's sermons about being "a viler companion of the vilest" as anything other than noble humility. There is an unrecognized fallacy in the narrator's

assumptions that Dimmesdale must be scourging himself in a “secret closet,” and that he must be fasting out of penance rather than as a way to foster spirituality (242).

Adultery and paternity appear incontrovertible facts when the narrator creates a forest rendezvous between Hester, Arthur and Pearl. Hester proclaims that “what we did had a consecration of its own!”, (286) and presents “our little Pearl” (293), a girl who has Arthur’s brow (296). It is still possible to cast suspicion even on the statements here. Hester’s reference to a private act of consecration is not just an Antinomian justification for a sexual transgression. The reference here could be to some kind of *secret* between her and Arthur. The two could be merely the keepers of the mystery of paternity through an act of *con-secration*, that is, an agreement to set aside the truth from public view. The reference to “our little Pearl” can most clearly be explained by the girl’s close association with the scarlet letter, which connects Hester and Arthur as objects of shame in the eyes of the community. Further – and most curiously – Hester’s claim that she knows whose brow Pearl has is not a conclusive admission of Arthur’s paternity. The narrator indicates that her father has an “impending brow” (174), but also that her mother has “a marked brow” (163). These pieces of information could have been included to explain why the riddle of paternity could not be disclosed by an examination of physical features. It is nonetheless curious that Hester refers to such ambiguous evidence, almost as if she were trying to establish a biological fact where there is none. In that case, Arthur’s seeming acceptance of fatherhood is not a matter of confessing individual responsibility, but rather an acceptance of a more general, yet more profound responsibility for Hester and Pearl, the lowest members of the community. If the forest scene remains unclear on the matter of paternity – and an acknowledgment of this comes only from a charitable reading of Dimmesdale and Hester – then it appears that the narrator’s process of

imposing the symbol on the minister is incomplete. Some ambiguity remains. The title of this chapter is, after all, simply “The Pastor and his Parishioner.” Must readers supply the irony here, or may they take this description at face value? If they take Arthur and Hester’s relationship to be only that of solicitous pastor and his troubled parishioner, then they are placing themselves within the community rather than as a reader outside of it, and thus assuming a more appropriate position of judgment.⁸

Dimmesdale’s midnight trip to the scaffold scene contains little public evidence of the minister’s guilt. No one heard his scream as one of remorseful anguish; no one save Hester, Pearl, and Chillingworth saw him on the pedestal of shame. Dimmesdale is later presented with his own lost glove, which the sexton says was found “where evil-doers are set up to public shame. Satan dropped it there, I take it, intending a scurrilous jest against your reverence” (254). Satan’s most ancient name is “the accuser,” the one who encourages the community to ascribe guilt to an innocent victim. As Girard notes, “Satan is the violent contagion that persuades the entire community, which has become unanimous, that this guilt is real” (*Satan* 35). The sexton’s interpretation is usually considered to be an almost comical ignorance of the obvious. On another view, however, he is thwarting the work of Satan: he for one – as “I take it” – counteracts the unanimity that leads to scapegoating. He is wisely apprehensive about the seemingly natural supposition that goes with the discovery of the scaffold evidence.

Everything comes together during the Election Day scaffold scene. The weakened Dimmesdale rises up and demands that the anxious spectators look upon “the

⁸ The narrator is a mythological storyteller, whose descriptions are based on his own assumptions about the case. If it is acknowledged that there is not complete ambiguity in these descriptions, one can still wonder why there is not also complete disambiguity about the matter of an adulterous relationship. Jamie Barlowe follows other scholars in assuming that Hawthorne’s personal “temperament, fears, sexual guilt” explains omission of sex and birth in the novel (108). I am not disputing this so much as addressing the significance of this reticence as manifest in the novel itself.

one sinner in the world! At last! – At last! – I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood” (337). This is not a confession of adulterous guilt. If Dimmesdale were assumed to be preaching on Matthew 25, then this statement is not as condemnatory as it seems. After all, the preacher would understandably regret that he did not present his message years earlier, when the scorn against Hester was new and lively. Hester has spent those years winning over her community. Her “A” has now become “Able,” and many have forgotten that she once was considered the least among them. Dimmesdale’s message now lacks some power, but he nonetheless draws the attention of the community to Hester’s scarlet letter, and says that “with all its mysterious horror, it is but the shadow of what [that one sinner] bears on his own breast.” Dimmesdale’s final statement is revealing: “Stand any here that question God’s judgment on a sinner? Behold! Behold a dreadful witness of it!” (195). The one sinner to whom Dimmesdale refers is taken to be the enemy of God, and the community is made one with its sympathies against it. The narrator describes this climactic moment:

With a convulsive motion he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation. For an instant the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle; while the minister stood with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory. Then, down he sank upon the scaffold! (338)

Pearl kisses the minister’s cheek, not necessarily as an acknowledgment of his paternity, but perhaps as a reward for a victory greater than the mere acknowledgment of personal sin. “A spell was broken” (339). This victory is similar to what Girard refers to as the triumph of the cross. Christ nails the false accusations, rather than the accused, to the

symbol of shame. In similar fashion, Dimmesdale reveals the condemnation of the crowd – among whom the readers now stand – rather than the mark of his self-condemnation. Some spectators, however, are resistant to this ironic Election Day, in which a scapegoat is chosen from on high.

The meaning of the preacher's final sermon pivots between personal guilt and community accusation. Dimmesdale's dying words, and the possibility of a mysterious mark on his chest, does not provide sunshine proof of his adultery. As the narrator himself seems to admit, the romantic coupling of Hester and Arthur requires imagination, rather than just the perception of a blatant fact. Chapter 22 closes with the question, "what imagination would have been irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching stigma was on them both?" (331). The crowd makes the connection by an imaginative act of common sympathy, one felt only among themselves, and not with the solitary figure standing before them. When Hester last bears the gaze of masses upon her scarlet letter, the people's interest in it is renewed "by sympathy with what they saw others feel" (330), that is, through an act of mimetic desire.

The revelation of the scarlet letter, then, is the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism, from which the narrator himself never fully extricates himself. Hawthorne the author was well aware of the process of scapegoating. He explores the phenomenon not only in *The Scarlet Letter*, but also in "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux." In this short story, Robin, a young man from the country, enters a town in order to meet his uncle Major Molineaux, a potential benefactor. The outsider enters town and inquires about Molineaux's whereabouts, but is met with disparaging remarks and laughter from any crowd who hears of his request. When he finally is led to Molineaux, he sees that the old man is a scapegoated governor, being proceeded through the town in a late night

revolution led by a devilish leader. The story's details show the extent to which its author understood mimetic contagion. As the procession draws nearer, Robin sees an uncovered cart carrying his kinsman, "in tar-and-feathery dignity" (129), with eyes "red and wild, and the foam hung white upon his quivering lip" (130). Now in a state of "mental inebriety," Robin gives up all familial piety:

The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he set forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street, --every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there. The cloud-spirits peeped from their silvery islands, as the congregated mirth went roaring up to the sky! ... When there was a momentary calm in that tempestuous sea of sound, the leader gave the sign, the procession resumed its march. On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery around some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony. On they went, in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man's heart. On swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind. (*Tales and Sketches*, 86)

The chain of events is guided by the advance of the scapegoat mechanism, set against a leader who has been weakened enough, politically and physically, so as to do little more than feign composure. His eyes are pale reflections of the anger of the crowd, and his mouth issues foam like that of a beaten dog.⁹ Robin himself gets caught up in the sinister revelry, mimicking the crowd's actions with the fervor of a new convert. He has

⁹ Girard interprets what he calls the "horrible miracle of Appolonius of Tyana," in which a beggar is scapegoated in order to stop the plague epidemic, as a case of scapegoating. The beggar is said to have gone from being blind to staring red eyes of fire at the crowd before being stoned. The myth indicates that after the stoning, the crowd discovered under the rubble only a hound who was "vomiting foam as mad dogs do" (*Satan* 50).

been initiated into the community, which now has attained a temporary peace through its high-level expulsion.

Daniel Hoffman presents two interpretations of this story. One involves considering, on the political level, how this is an allegory for American self-definition in the face of outsider British rule; the other explains it on the personal and psychoanalytic level, showing how Robin's motives waver between surface-level love for a father figure and a deep-seated desire for that father's destruction. Hoffman sums up these two interpretations in a way that at first seems to indicate an acceptance of their mythological nature. "The truth of these tales includes both these theories and more," he says. "Robin is indeed a representative American, first as a witness, then as a participant, in a cultural-political experience of archetypal significance to our national identity. He is also a representative young man who must come to terms with his feelings about his father, about the past, about authority, in order to pass from adolescence into maturity" (136). Hoffman adds to these mythological interpretations – one, part of the nationalistic mythology that glorifies the violence upon which it is founded, and another, part of the Freudian mythology that attributes violence to innate drives – a consideration of the psychology of sacrifice. Molineaux is the "Sacrificed King, the Royal Scapegoat" who has "two functions, the expulsion of evil and the sacrificial death of the divine ruler whose declining potency is renewed in his young successor" (136). This successor is Robin, who, like the now deposed governor, is an outsider to the community. "If you prefer to remain with us," says a man who watched the scapegoating spectacle with Robin, "you may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineaux" (131). In other words, if Robin were to rise in the deposed governor's place, he would be placed in similar peril by the ritualistically scapegoating community.

There is an important connection between this story and the climactic Election Day procession in *The Scarlet Letter*. In the final scaffold scene, Dimmesdale discloses what appears to be a dark secret of his. According to Gordon Hutner, this disclosure is part of the “rhetoric of secrecy” with which Hawthorne tells his tale.

Secrets signify the ambiguous, perhaps indeterminate, nature of experience; they do not so much stimulate the plot as contribute to a psychology of representation, one that works through Freudian categories of displacement and condensation. Secrets do not operate here as they might in a detective story or a realistic novel, the missing clue in the action, the ultimate cause of the literal results to follow, the motive of desire that generates and predicts closure. Instead, they provide and protect that element of mystification Hawthorne deemed necessary for both engaging and frustrating his readers’ apprehensive attention, as is so markedly the case at the novel’s close. The activity, the pressure, of keeping secrets, prevents the world from seeming knowable or readily explicable, even as it arouses readers’ desire to know. In this, it establishes a screen through which imitations of the truth can be advanced as being as reliable as the naked truth, where metaphor exists on equal footing with the literal, thus preserving the ground where the Actual and the Imaginary might meet while requiring readers to find their footing there. (34)

Hutner says that the purpose of Hawthorne’s rhetoric of secrecy is to destabilize the distinction between fact and imagination, and allow readers to guess a subject’s undisclosed sins out of sympathy with the one who cannot bring himself to full disclosure. In so doing, there is a secret connection, and the tragic isolation of the sinner is thereby removed (59). Hutner also believes, however, that “the literal facts of the case

are never really in doubt, though every student of the novel can wonder that whatever confirmation readers get that Dimmesdale really is Hester's lover comes only after one has lost interest in that question" (34-35). For him, ambiguity ends at what are assumed to be the literal facts of the case. Yet whatever these literal facts are, they are derived only from Surveyor Pue's brief document, which readers never see¹⁰. Even on the matter of Dimmesdale's adultery, then, the place where the actual ends and the imaginary begins remains a mystery.

It is quite significant that readers arrive at their own confirmation of Dimmesdale's guilt before they are provided with any proof. The Freudian operations that Hutner mentions, those by which readers infer the existence of a secret sin, are both explained by the scapegoating mechanism. Mimetic rivalries within a community are displaced and condensed onto one subject during a process that is subsequently mystified. The narrator participates in this mystification when he retells the story of Hester and Arthur, adding psychological details and secret dialogues indicating that, despite the ambiguity of the public evidence, the matter of Arthur's guilt is beyond question. His formulation of the moral of the story, however, contains a significant instance of ambiguity: "Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (341). The inferred secret is either the repressed sin of the subject, or the mystified process by which the community imputes guilt to the subject. The worst is shown in either the subject, or in the victimizing community.

¹⁰ The narrator says that he still has the original papers, and they "shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them" (147). Readers do not seem interested in taking him up on this, perhaps because they are inclined to accept the story as presented.

When an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed (226).

The narrator is here referring to the growing belief in the community, based on questionable evidence, that Chillingworth is a devil sent to torment the spiritually eminent Dimmesdale. This comment might mean that those who see Chillingworth as the devil are, after all, just warm-heartedly defending the minister as he suffers from a troubled, guilty conscience, which they vaguely suspect is his problem, and which they believe needs to work itself out on its own schedule. But it also suggests a warning: those who are caught up in the great sympathies of the crowd tend to assume that the judgments based on their sentiments are supernaturally verified. According to Girard, mythic cults equate the sacred with the crowd (*Satan* 117). The narrator's assumption is that the intuitions of the multitude are *often* able to apprehend truth. It is also known, however, that these common apprehensions can also result in an imagined sin – a Satanic revelation. In this case, the truly sympathetic ones are those who resist the irreverent imputation of guilt by providing a charitable interpretation of the subject. According to the dissenters, what is revealed is not the sin of the person in question, but the presumptuous act of imputing guilt to that person. What is revealed is not so much a truth imagined, but the fact that, in the case of great multitudes in scapegoating sympathy, imagination passes for truth.¹¹ The office of the scarlet letter is the disclosure

¹¹ “Hawthorne’s crowds are almost always wrong,” says Agnes McNeill Donohue. “Fickle, protean, and cruel, they are remarkable for their obliquity” (40). This, she believes, is part of the author Hawthorne’s tragic vision of human nature, which is informed by a Calvinist notion of total depravity. “Certainly

of the scapegoat mechanism. The innocent Dimmesdale, setting himself up for sacrifice, is the truth at the heart of it.¹²

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Hawthorne suggests that those who sit in judgment on Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth – the Puritan magistrates and crowds (and even, perhaps, the reader) – are hypocritical, self-righteous, and uniformly wrong in their judgments” (38). Perhaps it is because of this that those reputable, instructed witnesses of stubborn fidelity make a point of disengaging themselves from the crowd’s opinion.

¹² The 1995 movie version of *The Scarlet Letter*, starring Demi Moore and Gary Oldman as romantic partners, is interesting in that it does not even attempt to maintain suspense regarding the mystery of Pearl’s paternity. The movie, set for the most part as a prequel to the novel, spends most of its time developing the romantic tension between Hester and Arthur, and then gives viewers what they want by depicting a passionate sex scene. Aside from its choice to completely dis-ambiguate the text in this regard, the movie has its merits. Barlowe credits this movie version with resisting “the containment of a radical woman by Hawthorne,” as well as by most scholars (92). Its version of Hester as an independent, assertive woman who unrepentantly breaches overly-strict Puritan law is an appropriate departure from the Hester that readers traditionally create: a woman of quiet resolve who scandalizes the community for a while, but who also is devoted to the man in her life, and who ultimately accepts her place within a patriarchal culture. The movie indicates that the lovers consummate only after Hester receives evidence that her husband was killed by Indians on a ship to the Colonies; thus the only adultery law she breaks is the one requiring spouses to wait seven years before remarrying in cases where there is no absolute proof of death. We are encouraged to believe that her disobedience is reasonable given the strength of her love and the unfair restrictions of it by Puritan law. (Her violation of fornication law is justified simply by noting the antinomian love that she and the minister professed for each other.) Yet in choosing to fill in the details that Hawthorne has hidden, the movie restricts the reader even as it liberates Hester. The guilt of the minister must be accepted: the film has Arthur proclaim straightforwardly that he is the child’s father during the final scaffold scene. There is no need for kind and apprehensive readers here; they have the whole truth of the matter hammered into them.

The movie begins by assuming that the mystery of paternity has been solved and then taking the liberty of filling in the details of the affair. To its credit, however, is its focus on the Puritans’ precarious relationship with the Native Americans – a marginalized aspect of Hawthorne’s text. This, along with the revisioning of Hester – and along with the fact that it so beautifully displays the presumptuous reading of the text criticized here – make the movie worthy of serious attention.

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