

Time Heals All Wounds

English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in A Defence of Poetry, “Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins were as scarlet, they are now white as snow: they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and the redeemer, Time.” Although the quote was referring to the reputations of nineteenth-century poets, it directly relates to the themes in the classic novel, The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The Scarlet Letter embodies the idea that penance brings redemption and that time is the universal redeemer of all sins.

Hester Prynne was an adulteress who was forced to wear a scarlet letter ‘A’ on her dress. The garment was her apparent punishment for the Puritan community she had lived in. She let out her feelings of guilt through public shame and humiliation. Hester continued to wear her scarlet letter in penance. But the garment, in a sense, was also her redemption. “It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forest-land, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne’s wild and dreary, but life-long home.”(p.55) In time, Hester grew to use her scarlet letter to become a stronger, unbound new woman.

Arthur Dimmesdale, however, could not reveal his guilt to the public as Hester had. He was the minister of the church; a powerful figure in the Puritan community. The people of the church sought forgiveness and absolution for their sins from Dimmesdale. But Dimmesdale could not seek his own forgiveness from another soul. He begged Hester to reveal his sin at the scaffold before the entire town. “Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better

were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life.”(p.47) Because Hester refused to announce his sin, Dimmesdale felt the guilt eating at him, eventually manifesting into a bodily disease.

Under the “care” of Hester’s vengeful former husband, Roger Chillingworth, Dimmesdale suffered for seven years. During this time, the clergyman underwent a severe period of self torture, including fasting, self-flogging, and all-night vigils. Dimmesdale wore a secret letter ‘A’ on his chest and frequently held his hand over his heart.

After seven years, Dimmesdale finally felt a fleeting moment of relief; he had gained personal redemption in the forest with Hester Prynne. “It was the exhilarating effect—upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart—of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region.”(p.138) Hester, who also felt the redemption, removed her scarlet letter and let loose her hair. The two lovers were given the beauty and happiness they had lost seven years ago.

However, the feeling of redemption soon dissipated. Hester called for her daughter Pearl to return from across the brook. Pearl refused to cross until Hester replaced her scarlet letter, thus returning to the way of shame. Dimmesdale, eager to give his Election Sermon before he fled town, reverted back to his own guilt. On Election Day, the minister stepped onto the scaffold and announced his sin. “With a convulsive motion he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed!...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.”(p.175) Although Dimmesdale lost his redemption gained in the forest, he showed penance by confessing his guilt to the public. In a sense, Dimmesdale

received true redemption by allowing himself to be seen without pretense. He was able to die with satisfaction and a heavy burden taken away from his heart.

The tragedy of the minister's death shortly before his departure to Europe could have been avoided if he had left before the Election Sermon. However, Dimmesdale did not want to leave with his guilt remaining a secret. He wanted more than anything to let out the anguish built over a time period of seven years. Indeed, time was the ultimate redeemer in Dimmesdale's case. After seven years of suffering and gradual deepening of the complexities of his fears, the fears turned into strength, courage, and revival. Three days later, he gained realization—realization that his only wish was to free himself of secrets and lies, thus leading to the final victory over himself. Although grievous, the uncovering of Dimmesdale's sin was his true redemption.

In The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne used narrative structure to define penance and redemption. Penance was defined by the irony that the degree of acceptance from the community correlated with the degree of repent each sinner felt. Hester, who was the outcast of the community, felt the least penitence and used her shame to elevate her position. Dimmesdale, however, was one of the most highly regarded figures in the community and perhaps felt the most penitence of all in the town, inflicting severe pain upon himself for atonement.

Redemption also was well-defined during the description of Hester and Dimmesdale's meeting in the forest. The symbolism of the sunshine appearing at the very moment of revival illustrated its meaning very well. "Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full

of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world. Had the forest still kept its gloom, it would have been bright in Hester's eyes, and bright in Arthur Dimmesdale's!"(p.139)

The legendary scarlet letter was a mark of truth, appearing at every moment of revelation. It served as a means of penance and an omen for the bittersweet redemption of lost lovers. Yet time rendered the symbol a means to an end—an end to pretense, life, and suffering. Time brought justice to every injustice and redeemed every repentant character's sins.