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Moral Crimes and Cursed Punishments

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Romances, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* are subversive texts in the sense that through the themes of crime and punishment Hawthorne comments on society's ethics and morality by cursing his characters in both an external and internal manner. Hawthorne comments on these crimes by exploring his character's morality, which reflects American morality as a whole. We can use these romances to understand how Hawthorne felt about issues of crime and punishment not only in colonial and puritan times but also today. Hawthorne focuses on moral crimes in both romances and how suffering does not only come from public punishment but can also develop deep inside a person's mind and soul in a psychological and sometimes fatal way. Characters in both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* commit some sort of crime, both moral and societal, and suffer externally, internally or both. Hawthorne uses different tactics in his writing to explore the different issues in society through the crimes his characters commit and the punishments they receive. After in depth reading and analysis, it is concluded that the character's punishments have deeper meaning and Hawthorne's intentions in these romances was to examine society's ethics and moral in his time as well as in ours.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne explores crime and punishment in an internal manner as well as an external one. Both Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale commit a sin, or moral crime, of adultery but the one who suffers punishment from society is Hester. She is cursed with the scarlet letter "A" to wear on her breast as an external, public punishment in order to seclude her from society and make her pay penance for what she had done. Reverend Dimmesdale on

the other hand suffers internally due to his extreme guilt. Dimmesdale is cursed with the burning secret that he is Pearl's father and adulterer along side Hester Prynne. This secret literally and figuratively burns Reverend Dimmesdale, which symbolizes that he indeed is being punished mentally and physically. Dimmesdale becomes so ill that he eventually dies moments after confessing his sin. While Hester wears her punishment, we see how her character develops and society begins to see her in a new and positive light. Although she still suffers internally and externally, Hester grows as a person, mother and role model for society. Hester is punished for her crime by wearing a symbol that initially represented her sin, adulteress, but then evolved into something that represented her positive attributes, able. Since Hester suffers from an earthly punishment and reveals her sin in the daylight, she is mentally and spiritually strong in character. Reverend Dimmesdale was not initially punished on earth, but rather suffered from a heavenly punishment. Because he kept himself hidden from the situation, only confessing in the dark of night, his concealed and internal penance exposes the reality of his weakness. Where at first it seemed as if Dimmesdale got away with the adultery, we come to realize that his punishment is even greater than Hester's. His punishment is psychological dismay and eventually death.

In the House of Seven Gables, The Pyncheon family crime is greed and they are punished for that in a different way than in The Scarlet Letter. The romance opens with the story of how Colonial Pyncheon desired Old Matthew Maul's land before the House of Seven Gables was even built. Colonial Pyncheon then decided that the way to get the land he wanted was by accusing Maul of witchcraft therefore sentencing him to execution. On the scaffold, moments before his death, he pointed out to his enemy proclaiming, "God will give him blood to drink". This is the foreshadowing of the Pyncheon family's punishment and the moment where the curse begins on the Pyncheon family and lasts over centuries. Throughout the romance we see that the

curse only comes out when a member of the Pyncheon family is greedy or proud. Hawthorne expresses through the theme of crime and punishment in this romance that the crimes of ancestors will continuously affect future generations. The future generations of Colonial Pyncheon are the ones who are being punished for his crime.

It is crucial to understand the meaning Hawthorne places behind the curses in both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* because it is the ultimate representation of how Hawthorne sees society. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the most obvious curse is the letter "A". On the surface, we understand that the letter is a symbol of her moral sin and is to be worn on her breast as a reminder of her adultery. After looking deeper into the psyche of Dimmesdale, it is clear that the letter "A" represents how punishment is more severe when suffered internally, privately and mentally rather than externally and in public. Hawthorne may be commenting on the fact that a person's guilt is punishment enough. Even though Dimmesdale was not punished publicly for adultery, he was given a fatal punishment for not just committing adultery but even more for keeping it a secret. We also see in later chapters that Hester begins to use her voice more often and becomes a woman of thought. As for Dimmesdale and his weak character, Hawthorne comments that even though the Reverend had power in Boston society, his character was weak and his secret guilt slowly made him go insane. This mental insanity therefore leads to his lack of intelligent thought process. As years pass throughout the romance, the letter soon becomes a symbol for intelligence. Over time, the letter gave Hester clear thought and intelligence while at the same time taking that very thing away from Dimmesdale. It is almost as if the letter "A" on her heart fueled an inner power in her. The lack of the letter "A" on Dimmesdale represents the emptiness in his mind and soul resulting in overall destruction.

In the House of Seven Gables, The curse on the Pyncheon family lasts generations after Colonial Pyncheon accused Old Matthew Maul of witchcraft. The meaning behind the Pyncheon curse is seeped into the walls of the house as if it is watching the residents there at all times, waiting for their next immoral and greedy move. The house's walls were "stained" with Maul's supposed crime of witchcraft where Colonial Pyncheon said he'd be forever haunted.

Throughout the romance we see how Hawthorne describes the house in a grotesque manner. He personifies the house giving it a bleak and creepy character. We understand that the house is the symbol for the family's curse because it is haunted with the greedy ghosts of their past ancestors. The looming image of Colonial Pyncheon that hangs in the house is also a constant reminder of their ancestor's sin. Fear and misery control the Pyncheon family over generations and it is contained in the dark gothic House of Seven Gables. Holgrave mentions that it is important that they tear down the structures of their past to not only free them politically but also to free them from the curse. We see how the house is the curse holder especially when Hepzibah and Clifford flee from on the train after the judge's death. Since the Judge's death is symbolically the official end of the curse we see how there is a connection between Clifford physically leaving the House of Seven Gables behind but also leaving the curse behind with it.

In both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne uses these themes of crime and punishment and the curses that go along with them to comment on certain aspects of society. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne is concerned with the issue of gender roles and in *The House of Seven Gables* his concern is on societal greed and desire for high social class. Where at first, the cursed "A" placed on the woman's bosom was a punishment, we see Hawthorne's opinion of women and how in the end, Hester was not alone in her moral flaw, but shared it with a man. This gives us insight into Hawthorne's thoughts on how women are not the

tempting cause for sin at all times, but are just as guilty as their male counterparts. Throughout the romance we see how the curse of the “A” is transformed into something positive and endearing for Hester, but quite the opposite for Reverend Dimmesdale. This transformed curse gives us an idea of how Hawthorne might have questioned society’s idea of gender roles. The letter helped Hester become the woman she is by giving her strength and confidence, which eventually lead her to wear the letter even after her public penance was up. Having this female hero in the romance is significant and telling to how Hawthorne felt about women and their right to be independent and strong. Eventually, we see how Dimmesdale desperately needs Hester, calling her his “better angel” exposing a vulnerable and very feminine condition. Hawthorne flips around the typical gender roles by making Hester the level headed, masculine character and Dimmesdale the weak feminine character.

Hawthorne criticizes the issue of society’s need for high social ranking in *The House of Seven Gables*. The romance is a comment on society’s greedy nature how people are always wanting more than they have. It is especially greedy when one steals unjustly from an innocent person for the sake of acquiring land. Old Matthew Maul curses the family after Colonial Pyncheon accuses him of witchcraft and steals his land. This was a greedy and selfish act and is the start of how the curse only appears in future generations when a Pyncheon is greedy or overly proud. The deaths that occur throughout the romance happen after or due to a greedy action. In *The House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne emphasizes the theme of heredity and how the curse is passed on from generation to generation. The Pyncheon family not only inherits property but more importantly inherits the curse. Hawthorne’s comment on society’s greed is clear here because as the family continues to live in their high status estate, they are punished for it through the curse, which kills many family members throughout. Hawthorne is expressing to

his readers that in order for a family to not be cursed by past generations crimes, they must let go of any animosity they may have towards those ancestors. The physical departure and eventual break of the curse from the house is what lets the Pyncheon family move on from the misery of their cursed lives.

Hawthorne is concerned with moral crimes in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* and intermixes the fantastical and reality to comment on American society. He is trying to express that the political and social life is very much on the surface but when you dig deeper, there is much more we can discover about the inner psychology, emotion and moral disruption going on in society in his time. In Hawthorne's time, society was focused on concealing all fault and sins were punished harshly to teach a lesson. Moral crimes were just as important to society and were punished harshly along side crimes such as stealing and murder. In Hawthorne's time, citizens were punished for private crimes like Hester was punished for her adultery. In modern society law does not punish a moral crime having to do with sin being that church and state are separate entities. The colonial society though connected moral crime with the law because of their strong religious state. Society made sure that those who committed a moral crime were punished as a threat to others that they would not only be damned to hell but would have to suffer on earth as well. Hawthorne is trying to prove through his romances *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* that those who commit a moral crime suffer enough in their heart and mind and do not need to be punished by law, made clear through Reverend Dimmesdale's character and the Pyncheon family as a whole.

Works Cited

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