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## OPEN GUILT AND SECRET SHAME – THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GUILT AND SHAME IN “THE SCARLET LETTER”

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### ABSTRACT

This essay attempts to analyse and discuss the difference between guilt and shame as depicted in *The Scarlet Letter*. Since the surrounding norms and conventions affect people's actions, thoughts and feelings, it is necessary to take a closer look at the specific society depicted in the novel, which is that of Puritan New England. The philosophical overview forms the basis of the theme of guilt and shame to the novel 'The Scarlet Letter'. A definition and discussion of the terms "guilt" and "shame" are essential in order to see the difference between them. The main interest is therefore to discuss questions such as: What is guilt? What is shame? What are the differences between guilt and shame? Where do guilt and shame come from?

**Keywords:** Shame, Guilt, Adultery, Sin.

### Open Guilt and Secret Shame

"She took of its fruit, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her and he did eat. And the eyes of both were opened, and they felt that they were naked." Genesis 3:6 – 7

The first person to differentiate between guilt and shame was Psychoanalyst Franz Alexander. He said in the year 1938, feeling of Guilt is a reaction of having performed some disapproved act or having wished to perform such act. When it comes to Shame, he says that, it is a reaction to a feeling that, one is weak and inferior to others. Michael Lewis, a Psychologist, emphasized on the terms of Guilt and Shame in such words.

"The phenomenological experience of the person having shame is that of a wish to hide, disappear or die. Shame is highly negative and painful state that also results in the disruption of

ongoing behaviour, confusion in thoughts and inability to speak."

Guilt and Shame comes from childhood, the rules, values and standards of the family and culture starts to be imposed. Certain behaviours are rewarded and other are punished. According to, Stephen Pattison in his book *Shame: Theory, Therapy, and theology*, Shame and Guilt exists emotion of social control in all cultures. However, they are differently interpreted, experienced and regulated according to social contexts, norms and structures.

Pattison claims that all societies and groups need to control the attitudes and behaviours of their members, so order can prevail. Shame and Guilt are two important mechanisms by which this is accomplished. Different societies use shame and guilt in different ways. Some cultures use these emotional experiences much more to control behaviour than others. The puritan society

characterised by group dependence and perfectionism, used guilt and shame in order to uphold the strict way of life. One can draw the conclusion that Patisson finds guilt and shame as socially constructed emotions. In other words, according to Patisson and Lewis, a person cannot feel guilt or shame without knowledge of the rules, values and regulations of his or her society. Therefore one can argue that there is no specific situation which produces guilt or shame because all societies do not have the same rules and do not always share the same values. This conclusion is confirmed by Michael Lewis as he states that "shame is not produced by any specific situation but rather by the individual's interpretation of a situation."

Hester Prynne is described as an attractive young woman. She is tall, with dark luxuriant hair that surrounds her face "beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion." (50) Her movements reflect a natural dignity and personal strength. She is depicted as strong, self-reliant, and freethinking, but in the world of the Puritans, these are problematic personal traits. This beautiful young woman has committed adultery. Hester's misdeed appears as a disturbance of the moral structure of the Puritan society. As the punishment for her sin, Hester is forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" upon her clothing at all times to identify her as an adulteress. She is publicly humiliated when she must march to the market-place and stand on the scaffold with her baby for several hours of public humiliation in the centre of town, and present her sin to the entire city. Hester is subjected to the glares, snobbish remarks, and disapproving stares of the townspeople. These responses from her peers and neighbours trigger the guilt that she has felt since her transgression. She then becomes a social outcast of the Puritan society and is forced to live on the outskirts of the town with little Pearl since she is not accepted by the society.

Hester's partner in adultery, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, is a young minister "torn between rebellious and conforming impulses." (124) As minister of the local congregation, Arthur Dimmesdale is the leader of the Salem community. He is an ordained minister and highly educated at

the best universities of Europe; nevertheless, he is not perfect despite what many of his parishioners may believe. Because his self-image is dependent upon how those in the community see him, Dimmesdale conceals his relationship with Hester and his paternity of Pearl. He denies his responsibility for either of them and avoids being seen near them. Although he accuses himself inwardly and inflicts physical tortures upon himself in secret, he cannot bring himself to publicly confess his sin. Dimmesdale watches Hester as she confesses, while he still remains innocent in the eyes of all. Hester symbolizes the guilty one while Dimmesdale represents the shamed counterpart. Hester never questions the quality of her own person, but she questions whether she has acted wrongly. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, judges his own self and finds himself to be a person worth nothing. Hester is forced to become a legal example, continuously condemned in the Puritan churches and streets. The scaffold becomes a central "agent in the promotion of good citizenship" (52), a place for the transformation of individuals in their relation to the state. Hester Prynne is a victim of such a transformation as she fulfils the part of her sentence that calls for exposure on the scaffold to the piercing eyes of the public. Even an uncomprehending "crowd of eager and curious" (51) has been given a half holiday to join in Hester's affliction. Hester takes her punishment. Yet, she never succumbs to the community's thoughts about her. She is feeling guilty about her action, but she is not ashamed of her own person or self.

The morals instilled in the Puritan society cause Hester much pain long after the public humiliation. Each member thinks alike and makes remarks concerning Hester and her child. The two become objects of cruel jokes, and are made fun of every time they go into town. Unlike Hester, the townsfolk and officials of the church and state rely for their concepts of self on social norms. They judge and scorn Hester because she violates the way of life in the community, thus her act of individuality threatens their very identity. The punishment received by Hester is based upon the Puritan religious, social, and governmental beliefs, structured into a single ideology. The Church and

the government, one and the same, sentence Hester to a life of embarrassment, first upon a scaffold, and later with the letter "A":

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. (50) Even when condemned to wear an A on her bosom for her crime, Hester creates a beautiful scarlet letter. The way it is done leads the community to believe that she is not sorry for what she has done. It shows that she has not conformed to their puritanical ideals. Though her punishment causes her guilt and suffering it does not appear to bring her to any clear state of repentance, which is shown by the transformation of the scarlet letter throughout the novel. Originally intended to be a mark of shame. The "A" represented Hester as the adulterer, Dimmesdale commits the same offence that Hester commits, adultery. The difference between Dimmesdale and Hester is that Dimmesdale is not publicly punished for his crime while Hester is. Because of this, he feels great shame. Pattison describes shame as "the affect of indignity, of defeat, or transgression, of inferiority, and of alienation." He continues by saying that "shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul... Shame is a wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another." (31) This feeling of shame is so terrible that it mentally and physically withers Dimmesdale, as he feels a very strong need to repent and cleanse his soul.

Dimmesdale is living in anguish, tormented by his shame and by his weakness in not bringing himself to confess. His public image makes Dimmesdale's private self intolerable to him. He knows the truth and longs to announce it. The "subtle" "subtle disease" Dimmesdale suffers from, which has "long since begun to eat into the substance of his character" is a growing confusion of identity: "No man, for any considerable period, can

wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true." (188) The contrasting characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale ideally exemplify the differences between guilt and shame.

In order to clearly show this difference in the two main characters, both of them were involved in the same offence: adultery. Although they were both guilty of committing the same crime, these two individuals differed in that Hester openly showed her guilt while Dimmesdale was tormented by his secret shame. In these ways, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale were not equal in status as they began to deal with the consequences of their affair. Hester did not hide her past and was able to transform her guilt to help others. Arthur's approach to his shame could almost be considered selfish because he refused to tell the truth to save his name and reputation. Through describing the life of Hester and Dimmesdale in both society and nature, one can draw the conclusion that Hawthorne condemns the society as contradictory to natural human instincts and emotions, while presenting nature as a free domain where individuals are allowed to live true to their innermost identity.

### **Conclusion**

Judging by their actions and thoughts, Hester symbolizes the guilty individual while Dimmesdale represents the shamed counterpart. Hester never questions the quality of her own person, but she questions whether she has acted wrongly. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, judges his own self and finds himself to be a person worth nothing. Guilt and shame are emotions, sometimes hard to distinguish from each other. But as the story of *The Scarlet Letter* shows there are a lot of differences between these emotions, here presented through Hester and Dimmesdale, the passionate woman and the minister, the guilty and the shamed, the spirited and the tortured, the heroine and the hypocrite, as the two opposite poles: open Guilt and secret Shame.

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