Open Guilt and Secret Shame

The Difference between Guilt and Shame as Depicted 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 first chapter, therefore, presents a description of the Puritan society. The Puritans lived by strict codes which encouraged the confession of sin and public repentance.

The philosophical overview which forms the basis of the theme of guilt and shame to the novel under discussion is focused on the questions: what is guilt? what is shame? What are the differences between guilt and shame? Where do guilt and shame come from? Through the theories of different philosophers and psychologists it is argued that guilt arises from a negative evaluation of a specific behaviour, somewhat apart from the self. Shame is more about the quality of our person or self, which is found to be undesirable. In other words shame is about the self and guilt is about actions and laws.

After having established a working understanding of some important aspects of what the conditions known as guilt and shame appear to be, the second part examines the nature and effect of these two terms, and the difference between the concepts through a detailed character analysis of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. These two characters experience guilt and shame, and the effects of the public’s opinion on their own personal sins.
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1. Introduction

“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 of them were opened, and they felt that they were naked.” (Genesis 3: 6-7)

We recognize the opening quotation as a part of the biblical story of Creation, and specifically as the Genesis version of the origins of shame. Shame has a close connection to the feeling of guilt. But what is shame and what is guilt, when and how do these emotions occur, and how do they develop?

In regards to literature and the nature and effect of guilt and shame, Nathaniel Hawthorne is a writer who has studied this theme in detail. By analyzing Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* this essay aims to examine and discuss the difference between guilt and shame.

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 first chapter, therefore, presents a description of the Puritan society, although it must be said that the theme of guilt and shame is by no means confined only to Puritan New England and is valid for all times and all places. The second chapter of the essay gives a brief synopsis of the story, which circles round Hester Prynne’s and Arthur Dimmesdale’s action of adultery and their way of dealing with their feelings of guilt and shame. The third chapter of the essay provides a philosophical overview which 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?

After having established a working understanding of some important aspects of what the conditions known as guilt and shame appear to be, the second part examines the nature and effect of guilt and shame, and the difference between these
two concepts through a detailed character analysis of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. These two characters experience guilt and shame, and the effects of the public’s opinion on their own personal sins.
2. Puritan New England

The world of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, where the actions of the novel take place, is 17th century Puritan New England. Puritanism is the name for the way of life brought to America by the founders of the settlement in Boston, Massachusetts. At the beginning of the seventeenth century a small group of English men and women sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to New England in order to establish a godly community, a “Holy Commonwealth”, in which their way of life could flourish. The Europe that the Puritans left behind was torn by religious quarrels. The Roman Catholic Christianity had been the religion of most people in Europe. By the 16th century, however, some Europeans had begun to doubt the teachings of the Catholic Church. They were also growing angry at the wealth and worldly pride of its leaders.¹

In England many people believed that the Church of England was too much like the Catholic Church. They disliked the power of the bishops, the highly structured ceremonies and the rich decorations of the churches. They also questioned many of its teachings. Such people wanted the Church of England to become more plain and simple, or “pure”. Because of this they were called Puritans. These people left England to escape the rule of the king, Charles I, who persecuted people who did not accept his ideas on religion, and headed for America.²

The men, women and children who arrived in New England hoped to build villages, towns, churches and establish a government that reflected their own vision of godliness and order. One of the Puritan’s first leaders, John Winthrop, said that they should build an ideal community for the rest of mankind to learn from. “We shall be a city upon a hill,” said Winthrop. The Puritans of Massachusetts believed that governments had a duty to make people obey God’s will. They passed laws to force people to attend church and laws to punish drunks and adulterers. Their identity as puritans would come to define not only the religious organization but also the cultural climate, social environment, and political structures of New England. The puritans

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² Tindall, Shi 32.
were united, dedicated religionists governed by leaders who were always in control of their society.³

Roger Williams, a Puritan minister, believed that it was wrong to run the affairs of Massachusetts in this way. He objected particularly to the fact that the same men controlled both the church and the government. Williams believed that church and state should be separate and that neither should interfere with the other. Williams’ repeated criticism made the Massachusetts leaders angry so they sent some individuals to arrest him. However Williams escaped and went south, where he was joined by other discontented people from Massachusetts. Williams and his followers set up a new colony called Rhode Island. Rhode Island promised its citizens complete religious freedom and separation of church and state.⁴

The puritans of Massachusetts were not prepared to accept the slightest deviation or even speculation on basic matters. Many of the puritan leaders were strongly opposed to democracy, were against any independence of religious views, and had no trust in the people at large. This kind of unquestioning belief, and lack of toleration, led to paranoia about “the enemy within.” Anybody who failed wholeheartedly to uphold the dominant beliefs of the society was seen as a threat or traitor. David Hall, author of the book *Puritanism in Seventeenth-century Massachusetts* writes that Samuel Eliot Morison, professor of American history, claims that “puritanism was an enemy to that genial glorification of the natural man with all his instincts and appetites.” Morison argues that Shakespeare’s: “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god!” is the antithesis of puritanism, which taught that natural man was wholly vile, corrupt, and prone to evil.⁵

Social historians have remarked that harsh legalism was a characteristic of the Puritan theocracy. To make the people “good” became the supreme task of the churches, and legalism followed as a matter of course. For example the law required

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³ Tindall, Shi 34.
⁴ Tindall, Shi 35-36.
settlers to build their houses within a half mile of social control. Critics declare that the Puritans were intolerant, and cite their persecution of religious dissenters. Puritanism, say its critics, was also intellectually backward, and refer to the Salem witch trials in 1692, when the colonists hanged nineteen persons for practicing witchcraft. Puritanism was a grim affair, the theocratic historians concluded, because it was narrow-minded. H. L. Mencken, summed up the image of the colonists in his quip that Puritanism was “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

By the beginning of the 19th century, however, many New Englanders had come to feel that the colonists had left a valuable heritage. The historian John Gorham Palfrey insisted that the charge against the Puritans being legalistic disciplinarians having little compassion and finding even less enjoyment in life was not supported by the historical evidence. Palfrey is of the opinion that the Puritans can be seen as the founders of American democracy. He claims that the Puritan preoccupation with sin and personal immorality, which today is perceived as a barrier to social progress, actually serves as a part of the inspiration for the foundation of America’s legal system. Palfrey points out that taking the reality of sin seriously, the Puritans struggled to establish social order, which must prevail in order to establish democracy.
3. The story - *The Scarlet Letter*

*The Scarlet Letter* begins with the story of Hester Prynne and her public humiliation and condemnation by the community. In the opening scene Hester emerges from her prison cell, proudly making her way through a crowd of scornful onlookers to the scaffold where she will be publicly condemned, holding her child, the product of adultery. This scene is very important because it shows how the weight of values and morals influenced and affected each individual in 17th century puritan society.

Hester Prynne is a young woman living in a Puritan community in the "New World." Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, is said to be lost at sea, and Hester assumes that he is dead. Hester and the Minister Arthur Dimmesdale fall in love with each other. The result of this extra marital affair is the birth of young Pearl, an "elfish child".9 When the townspeople become aware of what Hester has done, they force her to wear a sign of punishment, the scarlet letter. This cloth letter "A" for adultery is to be worn on Hester's bosom at all times. The townspeople demand that she should reveal the man with whom she has committed the sin of adultery, but Hester refuses. Because Dimmesdale has no outward sign that he has committed a sin (a sign such as Hester’s pregnancy), the minister is tempted to conceal his shameful action. He surrenders to this temptation and allows Hester to accept the punishment alone. By not making his relationship with Hester public, Dimmesdale is suffering inner torment. His secret shame gnaws so deeply inside him that he views himself with contempt. Dimmesdale’s mental stress also causes him physical deterioration. His health is therefore at risk because of not confessing his bond to Hester and her daughter Pearl.

Hawthorne offers an interpretation of life in seventeenth-century Puritan society. The first chapter explains that every new settlement recognized the need to set aside land for a prison. Melissa McFarland Pehnell, author of *Student Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, claims that by focusing on this symbol of punishment, Hawthorne declares that “one of the major roles of the state is to coerce individuals into obedience and conformity to the laws established by the social order. This may be

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9 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; New York: Penguin, 1986) 157. All further references are to this edition and will be inserted in the text.
necessary to maintain order and to ensure the survival of the community, but it also implies that little room exists for individual expression in a community as legalistic as that of the Puritans.”

Those who violate the laws or social codes, and even those who merely question them, face a punishment of rejection and isolation.

In his description of Hester Prynne’s experience in this strict and unforgiving atmosphere of Puritan New England, Hawthorne reveals the power of human emotions and the need for connection. Hawthorne invites the reader to sympathize with Hester’s troubles when she is condemned by her former neighbours, and he uncovers enough of Dimmesdale’s inner struggle to bring understanding for a man torn between his need to accept responsibility and his fear of punishment and rejection.

*The Scarlet Letter* centres round the nature and effect of guilt and shame. It is to be noted that the sin of adultery is, in itself, not the subject matter of the novel. In fact, the novel opens after the sin has been committed and Pearl, the offspring of the affair, is three months old. Hawthorne’s focus of attention is the effect guilt and shame has on Hester and Dimmesdale. One of them, Hester, suffers from guilt while her partner, Dimmesdale, suffers from shame. This is due to the way in which they deal with the act of adultery.

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4. A Philosophical overview

A definition and discussion of the terms “guilt” and “shame” are essential in order to see the difference between the two terms. A basic description of the differences between shame and guilt, valid for most philosophers, as well as psychologists, who have examined and documented the differences and similarities between guilt and shame, is presented here. Another way of exploring the psychological characteristics of guilt and shame is through a study of dictionary definitions of the terms. The use of dictionary definitions as a source of philosophical understanding is based on the fact that the dictionary meanings reflect common usage at least among people speaking the same language. The dictionary used here is The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary – Encyclopaedic Edition.

4.1 What is guilt?

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary- Encyclopaedic Edition defines guilt in four principal meanings as follows: “1. a failure of duty, delinquency, offence… 2. responsibility for an action or event… 3. the fact of having committed or of being guilty of some specified or implied offence; guiltiness… 4. the state of having wilfully committed a crime or heinous moral offence; criminality, culpability.” The first dictionary meaning of the term “guilt” is not necessarily an emotion: “a failure of duty, delinquency, offence.” It can take a judge, and a jury to weigh the evidence to determine whether there is guilt. Moreover, in each of the definitions of the term “guilt” there is an implication of an action, or an omission of action. Guilt, therefore, refers to acts or failures to act rather than to a painful emotion about oneself.11

4.2 What is shame?

The first meaning of the term “shame” is given as follows: “painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous or indecorous in one’s conduct or circumstances or of being in a situation which offends one’s modesty or

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decency.” In this definition of shame, it is apparent that shame is a painful and negative emotion. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary – Encyclopaedic Edition quotes from Darwin’s Expression of Emotions the following: “under a keen sense of shame there is a strong desire for concealment.” This relates something about the word’s origin, in which many linguistic scholars assume a connection to an early form of the word meaning to “cover”, on the basis that covering oneself is a natural expression of shame. There are many synonyms of shame, for example it’s connection to mortification, which is described as “the action of mortifying the flesh with lusts; the subjection of one’s appetites and passions to the practice of austere living, especially by the self-infliction of bodily pain or discomfort.”

4.3 What are the differences between guilt and shame?
The first psychoanalyst to differentiate between guilt and shame was Franz Alexander. In 1938 he described feelings of guilt as a reaction to having performed some disapproved act or having wished to perform such an act. Alexander described shame, on the other hand, as a reaction to a feeling that one is weak and inferior to others.

A main contrast between shame and guilt in the dictionary definition is that shame is a painful emotional state while guilt may not involve an emotional reaction. Guilt is more about things in the real world, while shame is a personal emotional state. In other words shame is about the self and guilt is about something objective which may or may not involve the self. This dictionary definition of the terms guilt and shame are emphasized by psychologist Michael Lewis’s words:

The phenomenological experience of the person having shame is that of a wish to hide, disappear, or die. Shame is a highly negative and painful state that also results in the disruption of ongoing behaviour, confusion in thought, and an inability to speak. The physical action accompanying shame includes a shrinking of the body, as though to disappear from the

12 Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary – Encyclopaedic Edition see shame
13 Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary – Encyclopaedic Edition see shame
14 Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary – Encyclopaedic Edition see shame
15 Ullalina Lehtinen, Underdog Shame (Göteborg: University of Göteborg, Department of Philosophy, 1998) 124.
eye of the self or the other. This emotional state is so intense and has such a devastating effect on the self system that individuals presented with such a state must attempt to rid themselves of it.\textsuperscript{16}

Here Michael Lewis argues that shame is about “the self” and continues by claiming that guilt is about “the action”:

Guilt on the other hand, from a phenomenological point of view, makes the individuals pained by their failure, but this pained feeling is directed to the cause of the failure. Because the focus is on the action rather than on the self, the feeling that is produced is not as intensely negative as shame and does not lead to confusion and to loss of action. Whereas in shame the body is hunched over itself in an attempt to hide and disappear, in guilt we see individuals moving in space as if trying to repair their action.\textsuperscript{17}

4.4 Where do guilt and shame come from?
From childhood, the rules, values, and standards of the family, and culture start to be imposed. Certain behaviours are rewarded and others punished. Children are the recipients of standards and rules from the beginning of life. According to Stephen Pattison, author of the book \textit{Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology}, shame and guilt exist as emotions of social control in all cultures. However, they are differently experienced, interpreted and regulated according to social contexts, norms and structures. Thus in a culture that prizes individual independence such as America, shame occurs when people are dependent. On the other hand, in cultures where dependence between people is valued, such as Japan, shame occurs when the views and expectations of others are unmet. To avoid guilt and shame, individuals need to have a sense of meeting social norms and expectations.\textsuperscript{18}

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

\textsuperscript{17} Lewis (1992) 76.
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 which it believed in.\textsuperscript{19} One can draw the conclusion that Pattison finds guilt and shame as socially constructed emotions. Helen Block Lewis, who has written the book \textit{Shame and Guilt in Neurosis}, is of the same opinion as she claims that to feel guilt or shame requires the existence of what she calls a “judging companion”. However the person must accept the “other’s” standard of judgement if guilt and shame are to be felt.\textsuperscript{20}

In other words, according to Pattison 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.”\textsuperscript{21}

If one attaches this discussion to the society in which Hester and Dimmesdale live their lives, it could be said that the one place where Dimmesdale and Hester can be true to themselves and their feelings is outside the society, in the woods. Nature does not obey the law of men. In a nature untainted by the domineering principles of the society, Hester and Dimmesdale are able to reject the guilt and the shame and finally allow their love to blossom.

By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich… There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and

\textsuperscript{19} Pattison 55.
\textsuperscript{20} Helen Block Lewis, \textit{Shame and Guilt in Neurosis} (New York: International UP., 1971) 64.
\textsuperscript{21} Lewis (1992) 75.
the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past… (176-177)

During this scene, Hester undergoes a reincarnation into her past self, once again glowing with energy. The feeling of being out of reach of the rules and regulations of the society makes possible a similar transformation in Dimmesdale’s character. As soon as the tortured preacher draws in a breath from his surroundings, his character changes altogether:

A glow of strange enjoyment threw its flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast. It was the exhilarating effect- upon the prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart – of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed unchristianized, lawless region. His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound, and attained a nearer prospect of the sky…. (176)

When Dimmesdale takes a breath of air in an atmosphere free of all rules and regulations, he at once becomes revitalized. His emotions change from unenergetic to rejoicing: “Do I feel joy again... I seem to have flung myself – sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened - down upon these forest-leaves, and to have risen up all made anew, and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been merciful!” (176) Finally, Dimmesdale is freed from his weighty burden, and feels joy once again. Free from the prison of the society, Hester and Dimmesdale lovingly and passionately embrace: “All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold...” (177) In the society they feel like two individuals isolated and condemned, but in the forest they exist as two lovers.

Lauren Berlant, professor of English at the University of Chicago, is of the opinion that The Scarlet Letter is an analysis and a representation of the way dominant cultures control the machinery of power and the construction of individual
and mass consciousness. This means that, in the Puritan society, the individual’s personal identifications, for example bonds of family, class, ethnicity, or gender, have to come second after the more important project of acting in the colony’s interests. Elmer Kennedy Andrews, editor of *Icon Critical Guides: Nathaniel Hawthorne – The Scarlet Letter*, claims that Hawthorne acknowledged the dependence of the individual for nourishment upon organized society, and he believed that it was vital “to open an intercourse with the world.” But Hawthorne knew that the society could destroy as well as nourish and was able to destroy the person most in need of nourishment.

Can guilt or shame occur when there is no one who makes the individual guilty or ashamed, when no one has attempted to attack our personal self, when nothing has happened to expose us to ourselves? Unlike Helen B. Lewis, psychiatrist Donald L. Nathanson thinks we can feel guilt and shame without a “judging companion”. He believes there are biological disorders of guilt and shame just as there are biological disorders of every other distress. In other words, on the one hand there are individuals who believe that guilt and shame are socially constructed feelings. Yet, others argue that guilt and shame can be felt without a controlling society because these feelings are biological.

With these characterizations of guilt and shame in mind we can now turn to the second part of the essay. This is to examine the nature and effect of guilt and shame, and the difference between these two concepts through a detailed character analysis of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale.
5. Character analysis - Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale

5.1 The passionate and the minister
When she first appears, 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 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.
5.2 The guilty and the shamed

Often shame is confused with guilt, a related but quite different affliction. Nathanson claims that guilt certainly feels different from shame: “Whereas shame is about the quality of our person or self... guilt is about action and laws.”25 Judging by their actions and thoughts, 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.

Even though Hester holds her head up high, her elegant character fades under the influence of the society’s repression: “All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive, had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it.” (142) As the humiliation and guilt gnaw upon Hester’s soul, she is left deprived of her once passionate and loving being: “There seemed to be no longer any thing in Hester’s face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester’s form... that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester’s bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection.” (142-143) Hester’s vitality withers under the guilt of the letter. Temporarily she accepts the role and identity that the community has assigned her.

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 schoolboys” (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.

25 Nathanson 19.
In contrast to Hester’s actions and feelings of guilt, Dimmesdale shows the attributes of emotional shame. Nathanson claims that “for many of us, almost any affect feels better than shame. If we are to convert the experience of shame into something less punishing, we must develop some group of defensive scripts that foster such a transition.” He suggests that there are four basic defensive scripts against shame. These are construed as “the compass of shame”. At the north point of the compass, Nathanson places “withdrawal”, while at the south is “avoidance”. At the eastern point lies the defense of “attack self”. This is opposed at the western point by “attack other”. This “compass of shame” can be applied to Dimmesdale’s way of dealing with his emotions, because he is constantly searching for something to soothe his suffering, which clearly shows that what Dimmesdale feels are emotions of shame.

When shame arises an individual seeks to defend themselves from the experience by withdrawing to safety. The duration and intensity of withdrawal can vary from momentary gaze avoidance to long-lasting isolation and depression. Dimmesdale withdraws to safety not only by momentary gaze avoidance, but by isolation from the people around him, which eventually takes the form of depression.

Avoidance involves various ways of deceiving the self and others as to the real nature of the defective self. A number of strategies can be used to compensate for and to hide the painfully shamed, defective self. One avoidance strategy is to seek perfection. The perfect self obviously cannot be defective. A similar strategy is used by those who show their achievements in order to draw away attention from a imperfect self. Because they involve performance and denial, they are psychologically costly, demanding a lot of energy so that the self is presented in a good light. Some people may be tempted to lie to others about things in order to maintain face, or to develop a false, obedient, conformist self that is supposed to be acceptable to others. Some shamed people may attempt to gain a sense of worth by identifying with a higher cause and being unselfish. Dimmesdale chooses to use avoidance by seeking perfection in order to hide his shamed and imperfect self: “While thus suffering under bodily disease, and gnawed and tortured by some black trouble of the soul. . . . , the

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26 Nathanson 312.
27 Nathanson 315 ff.
28 Nathanson 336 ff.
Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale had achieved a brilliant popularity in his sacred office. He won it, indeed, in great part, by his sorrows.” (123) He identifies himself with a higher cause which is to help the people of the community with their relation to God. Throughout his suffering, Dimmesdale delivers some of his most powerful sermons, in which he speaks out against sin while at the same time commuting sinful thoughts and actions. Dimmesdale hides behind his sermons, because his sermons draw away attention from his imperfect self. This is very psychologically costly for Dimmesdale, because it involves both performance and denial, which drain him of his energy. But he chooses to endure this so that his self is presented in a good light. He is frightened by the thought of not being accepted by others, therefore he does not reveal his relationship with Hester and his true inner self.

“Attack self” can be a useful and healthy response to shame if it is only mild and for a brief period. A little self-attacking can be seen as a sign of appropriate respect or conformity. If this response becomes habitual, however, and someone ritualizes themselves or constantly puts themselves down, it is destructive. This can cut individuals off from wider social relations. The methods used to attack self include self-ridicule, putting oneself down all the time, and always being angry with oneself. The attack self script is associated with feelings of disgust about the self. The self cannot stand itself, rejecting itself as disgusting, smelly and undesirable.29 Dimmesdale’s attack of self is not brief, but constant, not mild, but destructive. His method is to torture himself with the thought of being exposed by his misdeed in front of the entire community. He cannot stand himself and finds himself to be a coward for not confessing his relationship with Hester, naming himself “a pollution and a lie!” (125)

“Attack other” as a response to the escape of shame is perhaps the most obvious. Some people keep away from their own sense of painful shame by externalising their discomfort. They push uncomfortable feelings outwards on to others. This can have costly results as relationships may be sacrificed. Nonetheless, many people use them much of the time.30 Dimmesdale initially blames Hester: “O

29 Nathanson 326 ff.
30 Nathanson 360 ff.
Hester Prynne, thou little, little knowest all the horror of this thing! And the shame! -the indelicacy!... Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!” (169) By blaming Hester, Dimmesdale pushes away his own feeling of shame on to her.

5.3 The spirited and the tortured
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. The community’s intention for the A to be a portable penal machine is now simply one of many coexisting definitions of the letter. Its original meaning is changed into its opposite. “They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (141). Hester, through her fantastic embroidery of the scarlet letter, escapes the authority of the puritan fathers and recreates her identity. By making the letter beautiful, Hester is denying its literal meaning and thereby subverting the intention of the judges who condemn her to wear it. In other words “the scarlet letter had not done its office.” (145)

In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. (76)

With this text, Hawthorne illustrates once again Hester’s painful relationship with the society. At one time in the forest Hester wants to free herself from the past by throwing off the scarlet letter. “See!” she proclaims, throwing off the scarlet letter, “with this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!”(176) This leads to Pearl’s rejection and her refusal to recognize Hester without the scarlet letter. Pearl’s demand that Hester continue to wear the scarlet letter underlines the strength that social authority has in determining personal identity, particularly within the most intimate of relations.

Although Hester has a painful relationship with her society, she does not take the opportunity to leave for her homeland England and start a new life where her past is unknown; she would rather stay. “Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment…” (73)
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 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)

According to Pattison, if shame becomes a dominant mood or character trait, its effects can be very negative. The shame-bound person becomes trapped, self-rejecting, paralysed, passive, and often depressed.³² This is what happens to Dimmesdale as the shame he feels becomes a dominant mood in him. He feels paralysed and miserable. His burden of shame tortures his soul so extensively that his internalized suffering becomes apparent in his physical characteristics. His spiritless character is described by Hester: “There was a listlessness in his gait; as if he saw no reason for taking one step farther, nor felt any desire to do so, but would have been glad, could he be glad of any thing, to fling himself down at the root of the nearest tree, and lie there passive for evermore.” (164). Shamed by his past actions, Dimmesdale lacks any motivation to continue living when his inner soul is tormented daily. He has lost all signs of vivacity in his personality.

Pattison claims that “the loss of love of the self experienced in shame decreases the self’s sense of its own value. It is dehumanising to the extent that it

³¹ Pattison 1.
³² Pattison 7.
changes the person into excrement – something low, stained, unpleasant and unwanted in their own eyes.”33 This is truly what has happened to Dimmesdale. He describes himself as an “emaciated figure”, with “thin cheek” and “white, heavy, pain-wrinkled brow…” (189) He becomes so physically pathetic from the shame which tears at him internally and physically. Retaining his secret causes him to develop ill health and he undergoes continuous mental torment. By taking this emotional punishment, Dimmesdale demonstrates the consequences of shame. This secret shame is the centre of his tormented conscience.

Whereas Hester has grown stronger, the minister has grown weak. Dimmesdale’s illness is so internal, that he wishes he had an outward sign such as Hester’s scarlet “A” so that he would no longer be able to deceive people. He believes that the pain of his private suffering is worse than Hester’s public humiliation. Dimmesdale speaks to Hester of his inner suffering: “Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is, after the torment of seven years’ cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am!” (167). When he says that it is a relief to see someone who knows him for what he is, he is referring to the false impression his congregation has of him. Dimmesdale’s congregation sees him as a sinless saint and a model citizen. When he tries to hint to them that he is not as perfect as they think, the congregation only thinks he is trying to relate to them.

Dimmesdale is the opposite of Hester, he suffers great agony and fails to admit his sin until minutes before his death. While Hester Prynne gains freedom from her guilt, Dimmesdale’s failure to admit his crime slowly destroys his life. At several instances in the story Dimmesdale holds his hand over his heart. He is "often observed… to put his hand over his heart… with indicative of pain". (106) This is his only outward appearance of the pain that the secret shame and resulting torment is causing his soul.

Pattison claims that “it is not possible to address shame in individuals if its presence is unrecognised. Shame is a condition that is closely associated with the wish to hide or to conceal oneself in the face of unbearable psychological pain. The

33 Pattison 76.
experience of shame, because it is so painful, is often avoided, denied or defended against." Other people are unable to see that Dimmesdale is tormented by shame because he hides and conceals himself in order to avoid public humiliation. One time he hints at his sinfulness in the pulpit, but his congregation simply assumes he is being humble and honours him even more, and this only increases his sense of shame. On another occasion Dimmesdale goes to the scaffold and stands before an imaginary audience in order to pay for his sin. This payment, however, does not suffice. The pain that he feels over this heart remains. Pattison says that shamed persons need to come out of hiding. Only if shame is brought out into the open can people begin to be healed of it. The shielding of the affair from the town becomes a great burden on Dimmesdale’s heart and ultimately leads to self-inflicted torture.

Finally, Dimmesdale can bear the shame no longer. On Election Day (a religious holiday about the “elect” or “saints” of the Puritan church) he finds courage and climbs the scaffold with Hester and Pearl and publicly confesses his sin to the townspeople, calling himself “the one sinner of the world!” (220) When he decides to confess, he is filled with elation and joy. The heavy burden that has weighed him down for so long is finally lifted. Confessing drains the last bit of life out of Dimmesdale, and he dies on the scaffold in the arms of his love, Hester Prynne.

5.4 The heroine and the hypocrite

According to Pattison guilt arises from a negative evaluation of a specific behaviour, somewhat apart from the self. The focus lies on the specific behaviour (rather than the self) which is found to be immoral, lacking, or otherwise defective. The self, however, remains intact. Hester never criticises her own inner person, but she confesses her participation in adultery, thus she feels guilt because of her specific behaviour not because of herself as a person. Hester’s self remains intact, though from the beginning she feels the punishment, so that “her imagination was somewhat affected.” (78) As she spends more time in thought, Hester develops independent ways of thinking which make her reject the world’s laws. Out of this thinking comes her strength, so that

34 Pattison 156.
35 Pattison 164.
36 Pattison 126.
Hester believes herself capable of meeting the challenges that confront her. During her period of life on the margins of the community, Hester appears as an obedient and submissive woman, one who has accepted the punishment meted out to her and who will make no demands upon the community. She acts charitably toward those around her, even when they scorn her. Beneath this surface, however, Hester has become an intellectual rebel who questions the authority of those who govern. Hester is certain that she has violated no natural law as opposed to social. Her relation with Dimmesdale has been the result of her own nature, not a violation of it. It is evident that Hester does not feel that she has sinned against the community. Hester never does admit that in her deed she sinned with Dimmesdale, as the community would have her admit:

In her inmost heart she can never accept the Puritan interpretation of her act. To her, the act is inseparable from love, love for Dimmesdale, love for Pearl. Because she does not believe that she did an evil thing, she retains her self-respect and survives her punishment with dignity, grace, and ever-growing strength of character. (xviii)

Pattison continues by saying that: “Because behaviour, not the self, is the object of approbation, the self remains mobilized and ready to take reparative action to the extent that circumstances allow.”37 Hester is “mobilized and ready to take reparative action” which she shows by regaining the respect of the other members of the community by carrying out acts of charity and kindness for other people. Her acts of charity as a “self-ordained...Sister of Mercy” (141) cause many in the community to reinterpret the letter, “that it meant Able. (141) The state has, after seven years, lost control over the A’s original meaning. The letter lost its negativity and took the form of sacred purity, spotlessness and invulnerability. What accounts for this change of heart on the part of the community is Hester’s faithfully playing the part of the regretful woman. She “submitted uncomplainingly” to the “worst usage” of the public and “made no claim upon it” until finally “the blameless purity of her life...was

37 Pattison 126.
reckoned largely in her favour.” (140) Meeting people in the street, she “never raised her head to receive their greeting…she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on.” (141) Showing remorse, Hester finally wins the respect of the puritan society, but this is the public Hester. While the town’s view of Hester reflects an aspect of outward change, she also undergoes inner changes. Furthermore Pattison points out that:

The guilty person may feel bad because of having committed some offence. However, he or she has the possibility of maintaining self-esteem by taking appropriate action. The shamed person is likely to feel a sense of personal collapse that implies the loss of self-esteem. Guilty people feel that they have done some specific thing that is wrong or bad; their shamed counterparts have to face an unbearable sense that their whole self is bad.38

Hester felt guilt but could maintain self-esteem by confessing and making reparative actions. Dimmesdale, her shamed counterpart, felt the emotion of shame because he condemned his whole being. According to Michael Lewis confession can be, at least, a partial relief.39 Hester confesses because she is unable to deny her participation in adultery, and she is forced to accept a punishment that will always remind her and those around her of her act. She is encouraged to name the father of her child, reminded that he, too, should bear the punishment for this sin, but Hester refuses. She realizes that she has sinned and she feels guilt for her sin of adultery and for the circumstances into which her child must be born, but she does not look for an easy way out. Hester is punished and ostracized, but she conquers her guilt and actually becomes stronger because of it, and she is able to recreate her life by creating for herself a new place in society.

Dimmesdale presents one self to his congregation while he reveals another in private. The congregation sees him as saintly and as the perfect husband. Dimmesdale goes to great pains to preserve this image, even though he begins to show

38 Pattison 44.
signs of his inner torment. He feels like a hypocrite preaching to a congregation that views him with the greatest respect and admiration. He acts in ways that are expected of him and is careful in his public behaviour toward Hester and Pearl. Dimmesdale fears the punishment that the laws of his society state for one who has sinned as he has, but even more, he fears the loss of image that he knows will accompany his downfall. He prefers to suffer privately with the knowledge that he is a hypocrite than to suffer publicly by exposing his weakness. Because he cannot confess, Dimmesdale cannot relieve his shame. Even in the final scaffold scene, when all is to be revealed, many people see no sign of his sin at the end. Although people later cannot agree on exactly what happened on the scaffold, Dimmesdale’s confession allows him to end his silent suffering.
6. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to analyse and discuss the difference between guilt and shame as depicted in *The Scarlet Letter*. It began with a closer look at the puritan society. Set in seventeenth-century New England, *The Scarlet Letter* depicts the era during which the Puritans were establishing their colonies. The Puritans lived by strict codes which encouraged the confession of sin and public repentance. They meted out severe punishments to those caught violating the laws of the community, believing that such actions threatened the unity of the settlement. The early settlers thought of themselves as founding a “city upon a hill”.

In form, the Puritan theocracy bears a strong resemblance to our modern democracy. Officials were elected by the people and given authority to rule. They believed, as we do today, that laws once made should be obeyed until those laws were officially changed. There is a philosophical difference, of course, between Puritan aristocracy and modern democracy. The underlying philosophy of the puritans had a serious religious tone not found in modern politics. Today our representatives are looked upon as spokesmen of the people, not as spokesmen of God, and the laws are the reflection of the social and economic structure of society, not the reflection of divine guidance. When we recognize that Puritan aristocracy closely resembles our modern democracy, we may have to consider the hostility of the Puritan leaders to every democratic tendency. In Sweden for example, there is great dislike about those who reach above mediocrity. Deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Swedish democracy is a strong emphasis on equality. Everybody who refuses to accept this view of the majority is not accepted. Everybody who moves away from the norm might produce envy and resentment. In this kind of society, to go beyond the norm, maybe if one tries to win, produces guilt or shame.

The philosophical overview which formed the basis of the theme of guilt and shame to the novel under discussion was focused on the questions: what is guilt? what is shame? What are the differences between guilt and shame? Where does guilt and shame come from? Through the theories of different philosophers and psychologists it has been argued that even though guilt and shame, related but quite
different discomforts, are often confused with each other, they are diverse emotions with different attributes. Guilt arises from a negative evaluation of a specific behaviour, somewhat apart from the self. Shame is more about the quality of our person or self, which is found to be undesirable. In other words shame is about the self and guilt is about actions and laws. But where do guilt and shame come from? Some believe that these emotions are socially constructed, while others claim that they are biological. Whether or not guilt and shame are socially constructed or biological, one could say that the source of guilt or shame differs from one time period to another. What may have triggered guilt or shame during the 17th century may not do so today.

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 Dimmesdale’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.

If the Puritans symbolize the law, then Hester symbolizes the individual person. It was apparent to Hester that there existed no reason in trying to hide herself and what she had done. Having the sin out in the open let her ease her guilt. Hester chose to deal with her guilt by helping others and becoming very productive. Her work was so significant that the letter became to be known as representing “able” as opposed to “adulteress”. Her guilt was out in the open where it could be resolved rather than festering inside like Dimmesdale’s shame. Her sin had been public and her
mind was henceforth not cramped by fears of exposure, as was the situation for Dimmesdale.

While seen as a vibrant and energetic man at the beginning of the story, the novel’s progression demonstrates Dimmesdale’s physical decay due to his secret shame. He was overwhelmed with shame for letting Hester be punished for an act he also participated in. As the shame over his cowardice increased, he suffered total deterioration, both mental and physical. Dimmesdale’s secret shame gnawed so deeply inside him that he viewed himself as a hypocrite. Nevertheless he kept all of his shame and painful emotions inside, because of his fear of being looked down upon by his society. He could not risk being outcast from his high position in the community. He saw and understood the courage Hester possessed and showed by proudly exhibiting her letter, and by taking the punishment. While he could not help but hide his feelings, he envied the way Hester was set free by her confession. He continued to deceive himself thinking that being harsh on himself would make up for his dishonesty. Even though he kept all of his emotions silent, it eventually tore him apart so much that it became noticeable in his appearance. Only when he publicly confessed and stood openly with Hester and Pearl in the final scaffold scene was there relief for him. By admitting his sin, he finally freed himself from his shame. So until his very end, Dimmesdale kept all of his feelings inside. He was hiding behind a character of purity and value, all in fear of being seen for whom he really was.

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.
7. List of Works Cited

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