PUBLIC CONFESSION AND
THE SCARLET LETTER

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IN The Scarlet Letter, Dimmesdale's story ends with the public confession of his sin, the acknowledgement of Hester as his partner, and the recognition of Pearl as his child. The confession knits up the story strands of the four major characters; and it further affects the lives of the remaining characters. The psychological necessity for Dimmesdale's confession has been established beyond doubt long before it occurs. As the author has managed the plot, no other ending is possible. However, Hester's treatment by colony and church authorities in the first pillory scene implies that public confession was customary for certain crimes in Massachusetts Bay Colony, and it suggests that Hawthorne may have been using a historical as well as psychological and dramatic necessity. If such a tradition existed, the novel takes on an added dimension of fidelity to seventeenth-century theology, ethics, and law. If the tradition of public confession had a broader base than Massachusetts Bay between 1642 and 1649 (the time of the story), this dimension becomes even more important and adds greatly to the meanings of the actions of the major characters.

The questions, then, are these. What was Puritan practice regarding public confession at the time of The Scarlet Letter? What authority for it existed in church discipline, traditional or written? Did it have a scriptural basis? Did it have legal as well as church enforcement? Had it been taken over from Plymouth Colony, or had it been developed because some kind of discipline was necessary after leaving Anglican forms behind? Did it have English roots? And was a person expected to confess secret crimes or sins to civil or church authorities? If we can find answers to these questions, we shall be better able to interpret Dimmesdale's need for confession and we shall be more able to place in perspective the effects of his confession on Hester, Pearl, and Chillingworth.

Literary evidence for required public confession is scant. In
the novel both colony and church officers urge Hester to confess. And Dimmesdale and Chillingworth argue about whether one must confess an unknown sin during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{1} Samuel Sewall’s \textit{Diary} records that in January 1696/7 he publicly confessed his errors in the Salem witchcraft trials. Sewall’s confession, like Dimmesdale’s, was voluntary; however it occurred about fifty years after Dimmesdale’s; and it was a confession of error, not of a crime.

As a matter of record, public confession was required by both church and state for a variety of sins and crimes in the Massachusetts Bay Colony from the very beginning, in the Plymouth Colony at least as early as 1624, and—more surprising—in Virginia thirty years before Hester’s humiliation on the pillory. Most surprising of all to those who have depended on literary sources for our history, the Puritans, the Pilgrims, and the Virginians were simply continuing a tradition as old as the England of Elizabeth (and for notorious crimes even older). Not only is the tradition old, it continued in fairly common use in New England into the nineteenth century and in Scotland until fairly late in that century. It is still in use today in some denominations in this country.\textsuperscript{2}

A noteworthy feature of the English tradition is that punishment for civil crime often (as in America) included confession of the crime in church. A. H. A. Hamilton reports of the age of Elizabeth: “A favourite punishment for small offenses, such as resisting a constable, was the stocks. The offender had to come into the church at morning prayer, and say that he was sorry, and was then set in the stocks until the end of evening prayer.”\textsuperscript{3} He reports the same practice during the reign of

\textsuperscript{1} Nathaniel Hawthorne, \textit{The Scarlet Letter}, The Centenary Edition (Columbus, Ohio, 1962), 131-137. Subsequent citations to this edition will be in parentheses following the quotations.


\textsuperscript{3} A. H. A. Hamilton, \textit{Quarter Sessions from Queen Elizabeth to Queen Anne: Illustrations of Local Government and History Drawn from Original Records (Chiefly from the County of Devon)} (London, 1878), 31-32, 86.
James I. In 1776 one James Beadwell was sentenced to do penance at Stokesby church in the following way: “In the time of Divine service, between the hours of ten and eleven in the forenoon of the same day, in the presence of the whole congregation assembled, being barehead, barefoot and bare-legged, having a white sheet wrapped about him from the shoulder to the feet and a white wand in his hand, where immediately after the reading of the Gospel, he shall stand upon some form or seat before the pulpit or place where the minister readeth prayers and say after him as forthwith, etc.”

Typical crimes for which confession was required were immorality, cheating, defamation of character, disregard of the Sabbath, and heresy.

Of the Protestant confessions of faith in Great Britain before 1630, only the Scotch Confession of Faith of 1560 required public avowal of sin. The Westminster Confession of 1647 allows either private or public confession.

Andrew Edgar’s Old Church Life in Scotland describes four Scottish cases between 1671 and 1788: two for irregular marriages so that the children could be christened, one for overcharging for services, and one to regularize an irregular marriage (that of Robert Burns and Jean Armour).

The American tradition had its beginnings at least by 1611. The Laws of Divine, Morall and Martiall, etc., promulgated by Sir Thomas Dale as governor of Virginia, contains four items listing offenses for which part of the punishment was confessing in church. The offenses include deriding the scriptures or ministers, detracting, slandering, calumniating, murmuring, mutinying, resisting, disobeying, or neglecting the commands of colony officers. For refusing to repair to the minister for religious instruction, one would be treated thus:

4 Earle, 107-108.
5 Hamilton, 32.
7 Schaff, 632-633.
The Gouernour shall cause the offender for his first time of re-
fiussall to be whipt, for the second time to be whipt twice, and to
acknowledge his fault vpon the Saboth day, in the assembly of
the congregation, and for the third time to be whipt every day until he
hath made the same acknowledgement, and asked forgiuenesse for
the same, and shall repaire vnto the Minister, to be further in-
structed as aforesaid.9

That some of the penalties were enforced is made clear by the
following parish records related by Bishop William Meade:

In examining the early history of Hungar's Parish, we find that
in the year 1633 the offense of slanderling the first minister, the
Rev. Mr. Cotton, was punished in the following manner:—"Or-
dered by the court that Mr. Henry Charlton make a pair of stocks
and set in them several Sabbath-days during divine service, and
then ask Mr. Cotton's forgiveness, for using offensive and slander-
ous words concerning him." 10

Parenthetically, Hester Prynne might not have fared any bet-
ter in Virginia than in Boston, for Bishop Meade notes, "I find
that, for the violation of the seventh and ninth command-
ments... the most frequent and disgraceful punishments were
inflicted."11

The first New England account I have found is from 1624.
One John Lyford of Plymouth confessed that he had sent lying
letters to the company officials in London and that he had used
intemperate speech during his trial.12

The most abundant evidence for New England practice and
for the overlapping of civil and church punishments between

9 For the Colony of Virginia Britania. Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall,
e tc. (London, 1612), reprinted by Peter Force, editor, Tracts and Other Papers
Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement and Progress of the Colonies
of North America from the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1771 (New

10 William Meade, Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia (Phil-
delphia, 1872), I, 254.

11 Meade, I, 254.

12 William Bradford, History of Plymouth Plantation, W. C. Ford, editor
(Boston, 1912), I, 397.
1630 and 1650 comes from John Winthrop's Journals. An account of 1640 presents a situation somewhat relevant to Dimmesdale's. Captain Underhill, like Dimmesdale guilty of adultery, returned to Boston after a long struggle with his conscience during his excommunication and banishment.

The Lord after a long time and great afflictions, had broken his heart, and brought him to humble himself night and day with prayers and tears till his strength was wasted; and indeed he appeared as a man worn out with sorrow, and yet he could find no peace, therefore he was now come to seek it in this ordinance of God. (Winthrop, II, 12-14, September 3, 1640)

The Journals describe sixteen such cases handled by the courts, the church, or both. Adultery is central in four, contempt for authority in four, suspicion of heresy in two. Heresy, assault, overcharging for goods, disorderly conduct, and violent language appear in single cases. The accused make public confessions in all cases. The insistence on public confession is inescapable in these accounts; however, the procedures and the lines of authority between the civil and church actions are vague. Some generalizations about these matters will appear later.

Because both the courts and the churches required public confession, we should expect to find statutes and church rules making the practice official. I have found no such statute; however, The Court of Assistants specified eight such penalties between 1632 and 1644. Because this court had both judicial and legislative functions, a decision was quite probably the equivalent of a law.

Church usage was regularized in the first printed discipline in New England. The Platform of Church Discipline appeared in 1648, one year after the adoption in England of the Westminster Confession. It differs from the English model in that it

13 John Winthrop, Winthrop's Journals, James K. Hosmer, editor (New York, 1908). Several of Winthrop's cases will be quoted below with citations in parentheses.

14 Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay 1630-1692 (Boston, 1904, 1928), II, 24, 65, 92-93, 131; III, 74-75, 137.
specifies public confession. We can assume that it regularizes the practices that had existed in the Colony from the beginning. The following excerpts are from Chapter XIV "Of excommunication & other Censures." (I have modernized the spelling.)

2 [For private offenses (between brother and brother) if the offender] hear the church and declare the same by penitent confession he is recovered and gained; and if the church discern him to be willing to hear, yet not fully convinced of his offense, as in case of heresy; They are to dispense to him a public admonition; which declaring the offender to lie under the public offense of the church, doth thereby withhold or suspend him from the holy fellowship of the Lord's Supper, till his offense be removed by penitent confession. If he still continue obstinate, they are to cast him out by excommunication.

3 But if the offense be more public at first, and of a more heinous and criminal nature, to wit, such as are condemned by the light of nature; then the church without such gradual proceeding, is to cast out the offender, from their holy communion, for the further mortifying of his sin and the healing of his soul, in the day of the Lord Jesus.

7 If the Lord sanctify the censure to the offender, so as by the grace of Christ, he doth testify his repentance, with humble confession of his sin, and judging of himself, giving glory unto God; the Church is then to forgive him and to comfort him, and to restore him to the wonted brotherly communion, which formerly he enjoyed with them.15

The capital crime of adultery of Hester and Dimmesdale would come under Paragraphs 3 and 7 of the above regulations.

Other cases of public confession in New England are to be found in the records of the Court of Assistants, the writings of Joseph Barlow Felt, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., and Haw-

thorne himself. Of these, it is necessary to comment on the thirty cases from South Braintree (later Quincy) given by Charles Francis Adams for the light they shed on Pearl's religious status in the novel. Adams discovered that eighteen of the cases were confessions of fornication before marriage by couples then married and the parents of a child. He surmised that the confession was to clear the way for the baptism of the child. The following minute from the Groton church records corroborated his surmise of the existence of a "seven-months' rule."

June 1, 1765. The Church then voted with regard to Baptizing children of persons newly married, That those parents that have not a child till seven yearly months after Marriage are subjects of our Christian Charity, and . . . shall have the privilege of Baptism for their Infants without being questioned as to their Honesty.17

This rule of the Groton church continued in effect until 1803. Adams' comments on the rule provide a definite basis for Pearl's outcast state and for understanding Hester's and Dimmesdale's parts in it.

With the church refusing baptism on the one side and with an eternity of torment for unbaptised infants on the other, some definite line had to be drawn. This was effected through what was known as "the seven-months' rule"; and the penalty for its violation, enforced and made effective by the refusal of the rites of baptism, was a public confession.18

Though the Adams cases are largely from the eighteenth century, several cases tried by the Court of Assistants indicate that the same practices were followed in the seventeenth century.

Before analyzing the importance of the practice of public confession in the novel, we should make what generalizations

17 Adams, 494.
18 Adams, 495. For Scottish cases of withholding baptism in 1671 and 1694, see Edgar, 183, 224.
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seem warrantable. (1) In most cases of the early seventeenth century, the court dealt with the offender first; it might or might not require public acknowledgement of error by the offender. (2) After the court had passed sentence, the congregation heard the evidence and dealt with the offender, determining whether to accept his confession or to cast him out. (3) After confessing in church, a member guilty of a civil or criminal offense was required to stand trial. He could be executed. He could not confess privately and receive absolution as an Anglican or Catholic could. (4) An erring member brought before the congregation for specific misconduct or suspected misconduct might be dealt with in four ways: he could be admonished to mend his ways; he could be suspended from participation in the Lord’s Supper; he could be excommunicated; or he could be cleared either if he confessed or if adjudged innocent. (5) Confession was mandatory if one suspended from the privilege of the Lord’s Supper or one excommunicated wished to be received back into the church. (6) Apparently confession was mandatory for all parents guilty of fornication before marriage if they were church members or if they later applied for church membership (the “seven-months’ rule” affected both groups). (7) The dual jurisdiction of church and court was common in England and Scotland long before the seventeenth century; it was common in Massachusetts and Virginia during the seventeenth century.

Hawthorne could easily have known of the Puritan emphasis on public confession from various sources including oral tradition.19 The emphasis on public confession in the accounts given above helps us understand the importance of confession for Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl. Confession is more than a

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skillfully used plot device: it is basic to the fabric of the novel because it is an essential of church discipline and civil law. On a purely social level, it is the means by which an individual can remain a part of society: lacking confession, the sinner ceases to be a part of that society, or he is so much at odds with it that his functioning is seriously impaired. Confession is, in Hawthorne's words, "The proof and consequence" of repentance. (66)

Because Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale's confession for the denouement of The Scarlet Letter, we should first consider his problem in light of the Puritan tradition. His being led to confession is the problem of the novel, the one dramatized; and because of the time and the place, the confession must be a public one.

Dimmesdale's guilt is known only to Hester and Chillingworth, neither of whom will disclose it. His defense for not confessing is his contention that public confession of sin is not required by Holy Writ; he also argues that his capacity to do good (by serving God as a minister) would be lost if his guilt were known. He almost certainly knows that his position is false. Though the authority for mandatory confession of secret sin is less clear than that for known sin, he has no grounds for a distinction between secret and known sin. Sin is sin and must be confessed. The Puritans took quite seriously the admonition of James: "Confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed." (James 5:16.) Dimmesdale is too weak to do what he knows is required of him. Today we would say that he rationalized; Hawthorne said, "He had a faculty, indeed, of escaping from any topic that agitated his too sensitive and nervous temperament." (133)

The fullest statement of his defense in the novel is addressed to Chillingworth:

There can be . . . no power, short of Divine mercy, to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried with a human heart. The heart, making itself guilty

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20 James Britton confessed voluntarily to guilt of adultery and was executed with his partner Mary Latham. Winthrop, ii, 161-163 (March, 1644).
of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed. Nor have I so read or interpreted Holy Writ, as to understand that the disclosure of human thoughts and deeds, then to be made, is intended as a part of the retribution. (131)

A little later in the same interview, pressed to reveal the source of his sickness of soul, he makes an impassioned refusal and rushes from the room:

No!—not to thee!—not to an earthly physician . . . Not to thee! But, if it be the soul's disease, then do I commit myself to the one Physician of the soul! He, if it stand with his good pleasure, can cure; or he can kill! Let him do with me as, in his justice and wisdom, he shall see good. But who art thou, that meddest in this matter?—that dares thrust himself between the sufferer and his God?

Dimmesdale could have made such statements to no one but Chillingworth (or Hester). "Thrusting oneself between the sufferer and his God" is exactly what a good Puritan was expected to do. Nevertheless he holds to his position until he is able to make the confession. During the seven years of silence he adds the sin of hypocrisy: in his sermons, in his plans to flee with Hester, and in refusing to admit that anyone besides Chillingworth has violated the sanctity of a human heart.

If we can assume that Dimmesdale completely believes his position on confession (though if he did, he would have no problem; and there would be no novel), we may ask whether he is culpable in any other actions. One that should immediately come to mind is his complete disregard for the state of Hester's soul—or Pearl's—until the very end of his life. The words of Governor Bellingham remind us of this unconcern: "... the responsibility of this woman's soul lies greatly with you. It behooves you, therefore, to exhort her to repentance, and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof."

A second source of culpability is Dimmesdale's receiving and administering the Lord's Supper during the seven-year hypocrisy. The main requirement of one engaging in the rite
is that he be truly repentant. St. Paul is unequivocal: "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." (I Corinthians 12:27-29.) Dimmesdale has to know that he is unworthy of receiving the sacrament; he is probably even less worthy of administering the rite. He is guilty of a capital crime according to both colony and scriptural law. He has not made his "confession as a proof and consequence" of repentance.

Though he resolved to repent many times, as the chapter "The Interior of A Heart" attests, he could not. Several of Winthrop's cases shed light on Dimmesdale's problem: cases in which the confession is voluntary. That of Mr. Batchellor suggests Dimmesdale's problem with the Lord's Supper. A minister, he had attempted adultery with a parishioner and had slandered her when she accused him. "But soon after, when the Lord's Supper was to be administered, he did voluntarily confess the attempt, and that he did intend to have defiled her." (Winthrop, II, 45-46, November 12, 1641.) The weight of unconfessed sin is evident in three similar cases in which secret confession to God has been fruitless.21 The case of one Turner who committed suicide because he could not bring himself to confess is perhaps applicable to Dimmesdale's situation. (Winthrop, II, 55, January 1642.) The whole chapter "The Minister in a Maze" indicates that he must do something desperate if he does not soon find release in confession.

Perhaps the most applicable case, after all, is that of Judge Sewall who rose to a tragic triumph when he confessed his errors in the witchcraft trials. The weight of tradition in both church and state demanded public confession. Hawthorne put the decision squarely where he wanted it to rest: on the conscience of the guilty man. No outside agency forced it. When it finally came, it was complete and genuine. Gone were the

21 Winthrop, II, 12-14, 29, 161-163.
rationalizations about his usefulness as a minister and his insistence that Chillingworth's crime was greater than that of Hester and himself. In fact, he acknowledged their guilt in the same terms he had earlier used to describe Chillingworth's crime. "It may be, that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows; and he is merciful!"22 He asked for nothing but God's mercy, indicating the condition of the true penitent.

As the plot is handled there can be only one solution. If Dimmesdale had confessed privately, to the Rev. John Wilson for example, he would need to confess publicly; he would be excommunicated, and he would stand trial for the crime of adultery. He could have been executed as Mary Latham and James Britton were in 1644. Although Hawthorne once considered having Dimmesdale confess to a Catholic priest, the difficulties of this ending are so obvious that we hardly need consider his rejection of it, though he was later able to use a somewhat similar confession in The Marble Faun.23

Although Hester's problem of repentance is different from Dimmesdale's, it must be examined in the same context. The same rules of public confession apply to women as to men in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. A possible prototype of Hester had confessed in court in Salem in 1668.24

The changes in Hester that seem to be most emphasized by Hawthorne (and by modern readers) are her improving reputation and her growing speculative tendency; however, the author also holds constantly before the reader the unsatisfactory state of her soul and her need for repentance. At her first appearance in the book, Governor Bellingham addresses the minister: "Good Master Dimmesdale . . . the responsibility of this woman's soul lies greatly with you. It behooves you,

22 Italics mine. For the importance of violating the reverence for another's soul, see James E. Miller, Jr., "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," PMLA, lxx, 91-114 (March, 1955).
24 Boewe and Murphey.
therefore, to exhort her to repentance, and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof." After Dimmesdale's exhortation, Rev. John Wilson addresses Hester directly: “Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy. . . . Speak out the name! [of her partner] That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast.” She is urged by a voice from the crowd to speak the name of her partner and give her child a name. In her refusal to repent and confess, she accepts the sentence of the scarlet letter and all of its responsibilities: she refuses to give her child a name; and she accepts the responsibility of keeping Dimmesdale’s secret. Most important for herself, in refusing to repent and confess, she refuses to be reunited with the church. She has cut herself off from God. Though Hawthorne has not said so, she would have been excommunicated at the time of Pearl’s birth, or earlier. The ceremony centering on the pillory (often referred to as “Hester’s humiliation”) must be regarded as her opportunity to be reunited with the church.25 She refuses because her confession would implicate Dimmesdale and because she hopes somehow for a life with him at some time.

It is true that Hawthorne often speaks ambiguously about her sin and of the results (the Madonna description, for example); he also constantly reminds the reader that she is guilty of a crime and a sin, as in the following lines: “She knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be for good.” In Chapter XIII, after indicating Hester’s growing acceptance by the community, her growing freedom in speculation, and the desperation driving her almost to the murder of Pearl and to suicide, Hawthorne, speaking as the author, says flatly: “The scarlet letter had not done its office.” Early in Chapter XV, the author asks: “Had seven long years, under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of misery, and wrought out no repentance?” Hawthorne, again speaking as the author, uses two pages at the beginning

25 See Rudolph Van Abele, “The Scarlet Letter: A Reading,” Accent, xi, 214 (1951). “The public scaffold offers the opportunity, at least, for the offender to make his peace with society in terms of punishment which has a personal ritual significance for every member.”
of Chapter XVIII, "A Flood of Sunshine," to elaborate un-
ambiguously on her lack of change and to caution the reader
about the proposed flight of the lovers—to point out, in effect,
that she has become a temptress for a second time. These au-
thorial comments deserve examination:

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity,
and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed, from
society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as
was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, with-
out rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate
and shadowy as the untamed forest. . . .

The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free.
. . . Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern
and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her
much amiss.

Thus, we seem to see that, as regarded Hester Prynne, the whole
seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a
preparation for this very hour.

Here we find the reason, alluded to once before, for her staying
in Boston after her sentence when she might have removed
elsewhere: she still loved Dimmesdale and hoped that some-
where at some time they might have a life together. Admirable
as this constancy is, it is not the way to repentance. The au-
thor's warning to the reader is unmistakable; the planned
flight will not occur. Nor will a change toward repentance or
confession be possible to her as long as she conceals Dimmes-
dale's secret, or as long as she nourishes her hopes. (Her repre-
tation has improved; but so has Dimmesdale's.) A change toward
repentance is not discernible in Hester until after Dimmes-
dale's death; it is strongly implied in the last chapter.

Hester, like Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, has violated
the sanctity of the human heart, Hawthorne's unpardonable
sin, though both lovers deny it in the forest while accusing
Chillingworth. In concealing Dimmesdale's sin, she has taken
a responsibility for his soul that could not possibly be justified
in Puritan practice. Possibly it is this lapse, as much as the
circumstances of the adultery, that Dimmesdale had in mind
when he answered her as we have noted earlier: "When we violated our reverence each for the other's soul. . . ." Her responsibility to Pearl's soul will also have to be examined.

To twentieth-century readers, Hester is the most attractive character in the novel; we are astonished at her strength; and we applaud her heroism in insisting on her own truth: that love transcends all God- and man-made limits—the heroism of fallen angels. However, she is a Puritan, and her salvation (a state that fallen angels do not seek) must be found within the system of Puritan belief and practice. She too must be led to repentance, not held up as the model of the "new woman." Here again the author speaks unambiguously: Hester had once had the gifts to become the new woman, "the destined prophetess." However, she "had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow." While he has shown an enormous sympathy for Hester (and while he obviously sees the need for a new dispensation for womanhood), Hawthorne has been as consistent in his treatment of Hester as he has been with that of Dimmesdale in working out her problem in accord with Puritan practices. He has not been as specific about the working out of her destiny, but we have his word that she will achieve penitence.

The change in Pearl is dependent on the changes in both Dimmesdale and Hester. Pearl must somehow lose her unnatural wildness and her complete isolation from other human beings. Hawthorne's statement of her change is brief and cryptic:

Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were a pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.

26 For a study of Pearl as a part of the Puritan world see Chester Eisinger, "Pearl and the Puritan Heritage," College English, xii, 323-329 (March, 1951).
It is clear that Hawthorne intends for Dimmesdale’s acknowledgment of her to change, to humanize Pearl. But by what means? Critics have puzzled over the change and its abruptness without suggesting much more than the author already has. Especially puzzling is the end of her errand as a messenger of anguish to her mother.

Some light may be shed on Pearl’s change by the materials discussed earlier which show the withholding of baptism from children whose parents have been guilty of fornication before marriage. There is no mention in the story that Pearl has been baptized. Instead, she is described thus: “Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened infants.” The Adams materials and those from the Court of Assistants indicate that she could not have been baptized until both parents had confessed. If she could not have been baptized until she had been recognized and both parents had confessed, we have more of a basis for understanding her change to come. Quite bluntly, until Pearl can be baptized, she is damned. “Mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society.” After Dimmesdale’s confession there would be no bar to her baptism except her mother’s repentance and reuniting with the church; once baptized, she would cease to be an outsider.

Two difficulties with this interpretation arise. One, the most serious, is the time of Hester’s confession. Hawthorne’s only statement about it, on her return from abroad after Pearl’s marriage, can be interpreted in two ways. “Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence.” The critical word is penitence. If Hawthorne means that Hester will not confess until some unspecified time after her return, my interpretation is groundless. If by penitence he means simply penance (the two words are interchangeable in Protestant usage), then it is possible that Hester had confessed and that Pearl had been baptized before the two went abroad. The latter meaning seems the most likely because of the last part of the statement describing Pearl’s change when she was
recognized by Dimmesdale: “Towards her mother, too, Pearl’s errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.” These words must mean that Hester’s confession will not be long delayed; they have little or no meaning otherwise. After Dimmesdale’s death, Hester’s hindrances to confession were gone. She could then meet her full responsibility to Pearl: Pearl must be allowed baptism. Indirectly, then, Pearl is “freed” by Dimmesdale’s confession, not by his death.

The second difficulty with such an interpretation is our lack of direct evidence that Hawthorne was aware of the practice of withholding baptism. We can say that he knew enough about the period from documents and other sources to have been aware of it. If, as Earle and Adams indicate, the practice continued well into the nineteenth century, it is entirely possible that the practice was generally known at the time The Scarlet Letter was written and that he would have felt no need to elaborate on the point or to be more explicit than he was in describing the change in Pearl.

The other character affected by Dimmesdale’s confession is Chillingworth. Hawthorne first says that within a year Chillingworth withered, died, and went to the devil, who had enough work to keep him busy. At the end of the paragraph, however, he hints that even Chillingworth might not have been damned: “In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love.” In this surprising compassion for Chillingworth we see perhaps best of all Hawthorne’s sense of the tragedy of The Scarlet Letter: the only solution to the central problem of the novel is Dimmesdale’s confession and death. The problems of the other major characters can then be resolved without violating the essential beliefs of the period.

This study began with questions of the historical necessity of Hawthorne’s use of public confession. We can say that he was on sure historical grounds at all times: a tradition of public confession existed, not only in New England, but in Old England, Scotland, and Virginia for a variety of offenses
handled by civil or church authorities or both. In New England the requirement seems to be customary for all offenses that isolate the individual from the fellowship of the church. Hawthorne's recognition of Dimmesdale's needs for confession keeps the story always on the track where it needs to stay if it is to be true to its times—if it is not to be anachronistic even in small details. The dark necessity that follows the first step awry flowers as it does because all of the major characters live outside the prescribed practices of the church, which are known to every church member. We may say that all exist outside the Christian frame of reference, even Dimmesdale. They must return to the church's way. While Hawthorne was obviously not in sympathy with some of the zeal and the extremes of the Puritans, his handling of characters is always consistent with the thought and practice of the times though, until the end, much of their conduct is at odds with the tradition.

He was on sure theological ground too when he refused to assure the reader of a happy reunion in heaven for Hester and Dimmesdale or to state that they will surely be redeemed. He suggests the possibility, but only the possibility. A Puritan could have no absolute hope of salvation: predestination is a basic Puritan tenet. Hawthorne would not say that salvation is guaranteed even to truly repentant sinners; he knew Puritan doctrine too well to be definite. To the critics who have said that the ending of The Scarlet Letter is not Puritan, not Calvinist, not Christian, one can only answer that—on the basis of the evidence—the ending is in complete accord with Puritan belief and practice, if we remember that American Puritanism contains a generous addition of Covenant-Theology hope.


28 The partisans of hope are Darrell Abel, "Hawthorne's Hester," College English, xiii, 303-309 (March, 1952) and "Dimmesdale: Fugitive from Wrath," Nineteenth Century Fiction, xi, 81-105 (September, 1956); Anne M. McNamara, "The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in The Scarlet Letter," American Literature, xxvii, 537-553 (January, 1956). Bariss Mills, "Hawthorne
The hope is only suggested, it is true; but few authors have been as successful as Hawthorne in using suggestion as a technique of fiction. "God knows; and He is merciful!"

_The Scarlet Letter_ is a story of guilt, its effects, and its expiation. A measure of Hawthorne's artistic achievement is his ability to present in a story, severely limited by its time and traditions, "the dark problem of this life." It is our first major novel to have used William Faulkner's principle: "the human heart in conflict with itself."