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Unhappy Puritans

Emotions are powerful. There is an emotion for every situation, and as humans we constantly feel them. Some being good, some being bad, feelings influence everything. Take Britney Spears for example, as a famous celebrity she deals with much stress and anxiety. At one point in her career everything boiled over for her and she shaved all of the hair off of her head. The way one deals with emotions often describes who they are and what type of life they live. Brittany obviously must have been living a very pain filled stressful life to lash out in such a way. Stress, pain, and sadness are all things that can take control of a mind and turn into misery. It's how one deals with these emotions within themselves that tells how they choose to live. A story that involves handling inner struggle is Nathaniel Hawthorne's, *The Scarlet Letter*. In the book three characters face a large amount of stress and hurt during their lives. However, it is how each person deals with their problems inside them that determines their fate and how enjoyable life ends up. The different ways these these three characters handle emotion in *The Scarlet Letter* proves that Hawthorne believed Puritans lived unhappy lives.

As a writer, Hawthorne continually shows a stigma against the Puritan people. This mainly comes from his background. He was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, the same place that held the witch trials in the 1690s. One of Hawthornes ancestors took part in falsely accusing one of the so called "witches". In *The United States Literature* textbook publishers

write, Hawthorne “took the shame upon himself” and “was haunted by this ancestral guilt”(236). Hawthorne’s relative that created the stain on the family happened to be a Puritan. This is where the root of Hawthorne’s dislike of the Puritans came from. From this, Hawthorne describes his prejudice in many of his pieces, especially *The Scarlet Letter*. In the book, three of the main characters are Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth. All three of them belong to a Puritan community, where the books mostly takes place. The story goes that Hester Prynne is being punished for having a child out of wedlock. Her punishment is to be publicly recognized in front of the whole town and must wear a scarlet letter "A" on her shirt at all times. The father of the child remains a mystery until it is revealed that he is a reverend named Arthur Dimmesdale. The reader also discovers that Hester Prynne was married to another man when she had this child. Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, was gone for a year studying in the wilderness and away from home to become some sort of physician. Gathered within this drama filled triangle lies much pain inside each character. It's how each of them handles their emotions that determines their fate at the end of the book.

Starting off, the minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, is a full out Puritan. He is a minister of the church and plays a huge role in the community as a role model and caregiver. He is suppose to be the purest of the pure as a man of the church, however, he commits a tremendous sin in the eyes of his religion. He has sexual intercourse with a woman that is not his wife. Lisa Wade, on thesocietypages.org says that "all non-marital and non-reproductive sexual activities were forbidden" in the Puritan community. Dimmesdale does one of the most awful sins he could do. This major sin that he committed is what haunts him throughout the story and the rest of his life. For years no one knows that he is the father of Hester’s child. His guilt grows on him as time passes. Dimmesdale becomes so hurt by his actions that he falls sick and suffers a "bodily disease, and [is] gnawed and tortured by some black trouble of the soul” (Hawthorne 172 iBook

version produced by Dartmouth College). This trouble over takes him for almost the rest of his life, making him completely miserable. He becomes extremely depressed to the point where he physically starts hurting himself to try and find relief. Some nights, "in Mr. Dimmesdale's secret closet, under lock and key, there was a bloody scourge" (Hawthorne 176). This bloody scourge meant that Dimmesdale was flogging himself trying to get over his guilt. Taking his sadness out physically on his own body brings his depression to the extreme. In the end, Dimmesdale confesses his guilt to the entire town and drops dead soon after. His inability to forgive himself for the rules he had broken shows how he lived an unpleasant life. Through this characterization Hawthorne demonstrates his own belief of how he sees the Puritan lifestyle as unhappy.

Having slightly different emotions, but the same fate, is Roger Chillingworth. He also battles much stress inside of him. After being gone for a year, he gets back and finds that his wife has had a child with another man. Surprisingly, Chillingworth isn't furious or extremely upset with Hester's actions. He understands that they both didn't actually love each other and he wasn't around for her. However, his inner stress comes from wanting to know who the man is that committed the sin of adultery. Hester keeps quiet and refuses to tell him who her partner was. Chillingworth tells Hester that "Between thee and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced. But, Hester, the man lives who has wronged us both! Who is he?" (Hawthorne 91). Tension that should be between Hester and Chillingworth isn't present. They both know they weren't ready for marriage. What bothers Chillingworth is the thought that another Puritan man would commit this sin. Chillingworth expects a man would know better and is very determined to figure out whom he is. The constant wonder bothers Chillingworth making his life miserable. It's not long though until he finds out who the man is that committed the sin with his wife. From then on Chillingworth's whole life revolves around getting revenge on his wrongdoer. Chillingworth is described by "His gestures, his gait, his grizzled beard, his slightest and most indifferent acts,

the very fashion of his garments, were odious”(Hawthorne 171). Chillingworth became obsessed with getting back at Arthur Dimmesdale. It took over his life and he spent years silently torturing the poor man. This life of revenge wasn't a pleasant life to live for Chillingworth. Hester noticed Chillingworth's attitude and saw it to be the work of the devil, like he was possessed. In disappointment, she says Chillingworth has “ hatred that has transformed a wise and just man to a fiend! Wilt thou yet purge it out of thee, and be once more human?” (Hawthorne 212). Prynne sees the evil within Chillingworth. The evil that has taken over his life and now consuming him. Even though Chillingworth has been a Puritan man his whole life evil still over takes him. Being consumed by hate and revenge makes it impossible to live a joyful life. Robert Chillingworth's life of obsessed revenge shows how Hawthorne believes the Puritans had lived unpleasant lives.

On the other hand, Hester Prynne fought through her shameful life and made the best of it. She also isn't classified as a Puritan which shows how Hawthorne didn't favor the Puritan lifestyle. After receiving the scarlet letter she no longer holds on to all of the Puritan values. She accepted the scarlet letter and even earned much respect back with the townspeople. However, she still had to battle her pain and she “was found to be in a state of nervous excitement, that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe” (Hawthorne 85). Hester falls into a state of almost insanity but she still recovers to live a happy life in the end. A die hard Puritan like Chillingworth or Dimmesdale would have let the stress dwell on them until the day they die. Being able to easily forgive herself for her sin shows she isn't a strict Puritan. When Hester was first punished she explained that “I have thought of death, -have wished for it- would have even prayed for it, were it fit that such as I should pray for anything” (Hawthorne 88). Chillingworth and Dimmesdale die in the anguish of their pain, Hester lives long after the ordeal dies in peace with herself. It's no coincidence that the non-puritan character continues to live a peaceful life while the Puritan

characters die from misery. This demonstrates Hawthorne's mind set that Puritans live their lives unhappily.

In the end, the non-puritan woman endures much more pain and stress than either of the strict Puritan men, yet she still lives a happier life. Many may say that this is because women are stronger than men, but in this story it is because Nathaniel Hawthorne believes Puritans were incapable of forgiving themselves and grasping the happiness Hester found. People are different and handle their feelings in their own way but, "we are sinners all alike" (Hawthorne 317).

