The Severity Of Sins In The Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

In his criticism of The Scarlet Letter, Harry Levin discusses the severity of the sins that are committed by Hester Prynne, Reverend Dimmesdale, and Roger Chilingworth. Although all three main characters have sinned in the novel, the ruthlessness of their sins is easily identifiable.

Harry Levin takes it upon himself to rank the three sinners in The Scarlet Letter based upon their sins, and the circumstances that surround them. The least severe sinner is Hester Prynne, followed by Reverend Dimmesdale, and the most severe sinner in Levin s mind is Roger Chilingworth. For Hester, Levin states that her affair with Dimmesdale is pardonable (Levin, 10) because the lull in her relationship with Chilingworth was natural, and there was nothing that she could do about it. Her partner in sin, Reverend Dimmesdale, is stated to be an unwilling hypocrite, who purges himself by means of open confession. (Levin, 11) He also has seemingly been forced into his role, but cannot publicly repent like Hester does by wearing a scarlet letter, or wearing a black veil. Levin continues by saying that by Hawthorne s standard the Reverend has been more sinful than she has. (Levin, 11) Although it is not discussed in the criticism, the point that Levin makes can be proven in the story when Mr. Dimmesdale is returning from the meeting with Hester in the woods. Dimmesdale is described as being so full of energy, that he decides that he wants to commit 4 sins. Although they are not very severe, the basic premise is that maybe he really is more evil than he appears. Finally, the crudest sinner in The Scarlet Letter is Roger Chilingworth. Levin describes him in his criticism as follows: Chilingworth, who s assumed name betrays his frigid nature, plays the role of the secret sharer, prying into his wife s illicit affair, spying upon her lover unawares, and pulling the strings of the psychological romance. (Levin, 11) Basically, this means that no matter how the reader perceives it, Chilingworth is definitely the most evil character in the story. Levin is also quick to say that although Dimmesdale and Hester can atone for their sins, Chilingworth cannot.

Harry Levin is correct in his criticisms of the sinners in the novel The Scarlet Letter. Hester Prynne is easily the least brutal sinner of all. In the novel, when Hester meets with Chilingworth in the jail, the reader sees that she did not commit her sin without reason. Roger left her in the new world for years, and did not attempt to contact her. Hester figured that he had either died or abandoned her, so she fell into love with the reverend, without any thought as to what would happen if her husband ever came back for her. Chilingworth is obviously the cruelest criminal in The Scarlet Letter. As Reverend Dimmesdale states on page 186, Chilingworth has violated in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. This leaves Dimmesdale in the middle of the three, which is exactly how Levin categorizes him. The Reverend, although just as guilty as Hester, is seen as being more vindictive when in chapter 20, he goes so far as to commit more sins. These, although not as important to the plot, show the reader that Dimmesdale may not be so innocent, and he really is a hypocrite in the eyes of Hawthorne and Levin.

Although all three main characters have committed sins in The Scarlet Letter, the spitefulness of their sins is easily identifiable. Harry Levin uses a direct and correct placement of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chilingworth in order from the least to greatest in relationship to the intensity of their actions. In conclusion, it seems one would be in total agreement with this evaluation and interpretation of the characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne s The Scarlet Letter.