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Penitence through Sunlight

In his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne effectively uses the archetype of light to symbolize both guiltless purity and the shameful revelation of dark truth. Thus, Hawthorne portrays Pearl as an untempered and sinless being, who the sun fully illuminates in a good way. When Mr. Wilson sees her at the governor's house, he remarks that she shines like the sunlight in the stained-glass windows with colors of gold and crimson (Hawthorne 98). This image contrasts with the way in which sunlight shrinks from Hester in the forest, revealing shame and sin. For example, when she wears the scarlet letter, her radiance departs "like fading sunshine" (Hawthorne 194). Hawthorne also uses this archetype to emphasize her impurity and shame on the scaffold, where in the daytime, she cannot hide her sins. Hester's realization that meeting her former husband would be even worse with the "hot, mid-day sun burning down upon her face, and lighting up its shame", helps to show her fear of God's purity and judgment (Hawthorne 57).

Hawthorne also uses the absence of light, or darkness, to emphasize the novel's themes of purity and sin. Thus, Dimmesdale performs his vigils on the scaffold at midnight, when the witches congregate and the sun is furthest from its zenith. Hawthorne shows that his malaise and illness cannot be purified as long as he conceals himself from the light. Dimmesdale remains impure and guilty because he has not repented his sins before God, and he likens his nightly vigils on the weathered scaffold to a "mockery of penitence" (Hawthorne 134). He fears the morning sunlight's approach, which would illuminate his sins to the townspeople and expose the dark truth. Dimmesdale only repents under the light upon realizing that he has become a shadow of himself and that he will only be saved by admission of the truth. This truth is revealed by the

sunlight, which Hawthorne uses as a powerful symbol of holy revelation before God in his novel.