

# An Abundance of Sins in Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand*- But None Unpardonable

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## Abstract

In this study, the author examines the theme of sin and its impact on the lives of the characters. Through an analysis of the various types of sin depicted in the short story, the author delves into the sin of the protagonist, Ethan Brand, and analyzes its significance in relation to the title of the short story and its interpretation from a biblical perspective. The concept of the unpardonable sin is also explored in relation to the themes of the story. The author concludes that Brand may have been pardoned for all of his sins, including suicide, if he was mentally unfit, suggesting that there is no trace of the unpardonable sin in him. This conclusion is significant because it highlights the idea that redemption is possible for all sins, as long as the person committing them is not fully in control of their actions due to mental instability. Overall, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the role of sin in Hawthorne's writing and its impact on the characters and themes of the novel. By examining the specific types of sin depicted in the story and their effects on the characters, the author sheds light on the complex and multifaceted nature of sin in literature. This analysis helps us to better understand the characters and the choices they make, and it also prompts us to consider the role of sin in our own life.

**Keywords:** Hawthorne, Ethan Brand, Abundance of Sins, and unpardonable sin.

## الكثير من الذنوب في رواية هوثورن الموسومة إيثان براند، لكن ليست لا تغتفر

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## المستخلص

في هذه الدراسة، يدرس الباحث موضوع الخطيئة وتأثيرها على حياة الشخصيات، بتحليل أنواع مختلفة من الخطيئة المعروضة في الرواية، يتناول الباحث خطيئة البطل الرئيسي، إيثان براند، ويحلل معناها في الإتجاه المعنوي وصيغتها في النص العهد المقدس. ويستعرض مفهوم الخطيئة التي لا يمكن الغفران لها في الإتجاه الرئيسي للرواية. واستنتج الباحث أنه قد يكون قد غفر لإيثان جميع خطاياهم، بما في ذلك الانتحار، إذا كان لا يتمتع بعقلية كاملة، مما يدل على عدم وجود لأي علامة من الخطيئة التي لا يمكن ان تغتفر فيه. هذا الاستنتاج هام؛ لأنه يسلط الضوء على الفكرة أن الغفران ممكن لجميع الخطايا، طالما كان الشخص الذي يرتكبها لا يتمتع بسيطرة كاملة على أفعاله لأسباب عقلية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعميق معرفتنا بأهمية الخطيئة في رواية هوثورن وتأثيره.

الكلمات الدالة: رواية هوثورن، إيثان براند، الخطايا المصنفة، الخطيئة التي لا تغتفر

## 1. Introduction

Hawthorne's recurring themes define his style of writing and thinking. These themes carry moral purposes. He has focused many of his stories on sin and its consequences such as *Ethan Brand*, *the Scarlet Letter*, *Young Goodman Brown* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. There are numerous references to sin in both his early and later works in Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing. His paternal ancestors being Puritans enforced his interest in this concept. However, most of his works contain elements of novelty that somehow soften the sin-obsessed Puritan world, for instance, he presents several types of sins as sub-divisions of the "original sin", "secret sin", "Unpardonable sin" and "knowledge as sin". Oswald Chambers, a well-known theologian, defines original sin as so "the disposition of sin is not immortality and wrong-doing, but the disposition of self-realization- I am my own God. This disposition may work out in decorous morality or indecorous immorality"[1].

If Hawthorne's earliest works was to be analysed, we will find out that he interpreted the original sin in connection to the sin of the forbidden knowledge acquisitions. According to the Christian doctrine ,the original sin of the first human beings was knowledge. Adam and Eve conquered their independence by deciding to use the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The first sin they became accused of was the acquisition of knowledge. Ethan Brand was also thirsty for the knowledge of the unpardonable sin, which eventually caused his death. That is to say that his fiction is mostly about knowing the unknown and many of his characters are obsessed with the idea of discovering a secret. For instance, rev. Hooper's acquaintances, friends and family in *The Minister's Black Veil* find it difficult to observe Mr. Hooper's veil because it hides his awareness and understanding of many sins. The characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing who engage in sin become distant and isolated, keeping their wrongdoing a secret. This secrecy harms their physical and spiritual well-being. Brand, the protagonist, spends 20 years searching for the unpardonable sin, but ultimately does not find it. His true sin is his preoccupation with sin, which distracts him from living his life fully. This becomes his main mistake.

Any attempt of analyzing the types of sin in Hawthorne's literary works, will not be complete unless *The Scarlet Letter* is mentioned. In this work he presents sins of several different kinds in numerous people, as well as the consequences and remedies of their sins. Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, two of the main characters of the novel, each possesses their own sins which begin to show themselves in their outermost features, each brought upon themselves for their own various reasons. Dimmesdale did not confess until seven years after the sin took place his dying words were the confession "it is done". On the other hand, Chillingworth, the husband, dedicated his life to finding and exposing Pearl's father, which in itself is the unpardonable sin. He alone suspects Dimmesdale to be Pearl's father ;therefore, he devotes himself to the apparent "sickness" of Dimmesdale, which he believes to be a guilty conscience.

## 2. Ethan Brand

*Ethan Brand* is a short story centering on psychological and ethic condition of man that who has spent eighteen years trying to discover the one sin that God will not forgive.

### 2.1 A Biblical View of the Unpardonable Sin

The short story only reports what Brand sees to be unpardonable. But this sin is differently interpreted by the Bible or researches.

“a sin that grew within my own breast.... A sin that grew nowhere else! The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything it recompense of immortal agony!” [2].

Paul Moore views Brand’s sin as being “...the sin of banishing from the breast of all those natural, spontaneous in the pursuit of an idea” [3]. Terence Martin, on the other hand, says: “the definition and focus of the tale are precise; an obsession with one idea has completely vanquished the heart, turning into marble” [3]. Hawthorne’s Brand resembles a Jewish sect in the NEW TESTAMENT known as the Pharisees. They were historically the spiritual guide for the Jewish populace; however, under the era of Christ, many heartless practices were done. In the novel, Brand’s heart was slowly hardened. Over time, he lost concern of his friends, travelling the world manipulating and using them for his own selfish purpose, condemning their soul in the process. In comparison, Jesus says to the Pharisees;

“woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” [4].

In the end their hearts, like Brand, becomes stone like, calloused and diseased.

“woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you one like white washed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones are all uncleanness” [4].

In the OLD TESTAMENT, King David states, "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart - these, O God, you will not despise [4]." This suggests that the unpardonable sin is not necessarily a specific act, but rather a heart that becomes so hardened over time that the person cannot repent. In the case of Brand, his heart becomes so consumed with his obsession with sin that he is unable to repent and seek forgiveness.

### 2.2 The Significance of Title

According to the Longman dictionary, the word "brand" can have several meanings. It can refer to a burning piece of wood, a mark burned into the skin to identify a slave or criminal, or a symbol of shame or disgrace (meanings related to the story). Each of these definitions suggests a sense of branding as a mark of identification or a mark of shame. Brand literally burns when he jumps into the kiln and figuratively speaking burns with an unholy desire during his eighteen-year quest. On the other hand, being interpreted as a slave to his own desires is the second meaning of the name he carries. Thirdly he bears the disgrace of having committed what he believes is the unpardonable sin. Ethan ,on the other hand, is found in the Bible as the famous Ezraite, a supremely wise man who was

eclipsed in his wisdom by King Solomon. Brand also sees himself wise but the villagers regard him as a fool. The subtitle of the novel also carries a reference to the presumed romance between Brand and the daughter of Humphrey (Esther) whom he has wasted her as being one of his psychological experiments in search of the unpardonable sin.

### 3. Non-Unpardonable

In Hawthorne's short story, the enigmatic character Ethan Brand returns home from an eighteen-year quest and immediately proclaims he has "produced the Unpardonable Sin"[5]. Such a sin as described by Brand is distinct from what the Bible teaches regarding the only sin that is unforgivable (blasphemy against the Holy Spirit) [4], since Hawthorne's story depicts Unpardonable Sin as abandoning fellowship with humanity and hardening one's heart. However, even allowing such a low bar to establish the definition of an unpardonable sin, a careful reading of the story provides evidence that, while Brand indeed committed many sins, it was also true for most of the townsfolk that arrived to mock him, none (with perhaps one exception) rise to the classification of unpardonable.

Nathaniel Hawthorne incorporated the topic of sin into many of his most famous literary compositions, including *Ethan Brand*. In his discussion of the various ways Hawthorne used sin in his works, Donoghue acknowledged that the author never provides his characters with a fully developed sense of sin. Rather, he allows the concept of sin to remain "all general and vague" for the most part, while "none of the characters has a convincing sense of sin", at least from the Bible's perspective of sin 5 [6]. Indeed, in many of his writings, including *Ethan Brand*, it must be admitted, when Hawthorne referenced sin "...he seemed to assume a force of evil so pervasive that it did not need to be embodied in anyone or in any particular action"[6]. This is true in *Ethan Brand* since, although Brand's tries to convince his former friends-and to some extent, himself-that he identified and embodied the Unpardonable Sin, the narrative of the story conveys an entirely different reality.

First, it must be acknowledged that every character introduced in the story (with the notable exception of the young boy, Joe) is guilty of some obvious sin, as explained in the text. In most cases, the sin relates directly to overindulgence in alcohol, inasmuch as the "station agent", the "lawyer", and the "doctor" are all described as shadows of their former selves-and no longer engaged in their previous careers-as a result of over drinking. This same sin applies to Bartram-the current tender of the same limekiln that Brand tended prior to leaving on his quest for the Unpardonable Sin-since he, too, is described as a drunkard and prone to partaking of the "black bottle" [5]. Also significant, is the fact that, when Bartram sends his son, Joe, to fetch men from the town to see the returned Ethan Brand, he is sent to the tavern, not to individuals' homes [5]. The story of *Ethan Brand* is similar to other Hawthorne tales since the author revels in presenting multiple categories of sin, some obvious and others less well-defined, with the overall goal of presenting an atmosphere reflective of a sense of foreboding, at times depicted by physical characteristics [6]. However, the physical characteristics that paint Brand as obviously sinful are only discerned by young Joe and, for a brief time, Bartram. Hawthorne's narrator remarked: "there was something in the man's face which he was

afraid to look at". Everyone else Brand encountered upon his return failed to recognize anything at all exceptional about the man.

The Puritan concept of sin, was something well known to Hawthorne, based on his upbringing and the time period in which he lived. He would have shared similar opinions like those expressed by Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan minister who opined that humans were "born into the world with a tendency to sin"[7]. Moreover, while explaining the seriousness of sin, he noted humankind could only expect "misery and ruin for their sin, which actually will be the consequence unless mere grace steps in and prevents it" [8]. Throughout much of his writing, Hawthorne accordingly acknowledges the hopeless state of humans unless they take advantage of God's mercy. While not actually finding or committing the unforgivable sin, one of Ethan Brand's greatest sins was his failure to recognize that his sins were actually forgivable.

Ethan Brand also sinned by seeking greater personal and scientific knowledge rather than seeking God. Brand's obsession was to discover the nature of sin, which was an ironic and misguided task since all he sought after was readily available in Scripture. Yet, based largely on his inflated opinion of himself and his knowledge, he attempted to find something that was out of his reach and beyond his understanding [8]. Hawthorne thus described Brand as committing the "sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims" [9]. The impossibility of his quest for the "Unpardonable Sin" was clearly established by the author who noted, regarding Brand, that "never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained" [9]. While Brand claims to have succeeded in his search for the Unpardonable Sin, his level of confidence begins to waver almost from his first encounter upon returning from that eighteen-year journey.

Perhaps the most perfectly placed analogy provided by Hawthorne to indicate Brand's ultimate failure is the dog chasing its too-short tail. No matter how diligently that dog attempted to achieve the goal, the dog remained "as far from his goal as ever" [5], and, upon observing the scene, Brand, "moved, it might be, by a perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of this self-pursuing cur...broke into the awful laugh which, more than any other token, expressed the condition of his inward being"[5]. Thus, Brand also sinned by claiming to have identified a great truth, while being no closer to that goal than was the dog. Unlike the dog, however, that was ultimately content to return to its former state of mind and contentment, Brand was incapable of confessing failure.

In his analysis of this passage and, in particular, Brand's laughter upon viewing the futile actions of the dog, Dahl claimed that Ethan Brand was exhibiting "proof of his understanding of his terrible and ironic predicament [10]. Brand's understanding of his sin-lack of love and moral sympathy with others-is itself very close to a revived sympathy"[11]. Whether or not Brand fully understood his genuine sins is debatable, but there is little doubt that he desired sympathy and recognition from the people of the town, albeit he was unable to reconcile himself to that reality. This is due to Brand's inability to fully develop and exhibit the full range of human emotions. Brand entered into self-imposed loneliness that left him cold. If Brand had truly found the Unpardonable Sin-

regardless of its definition-he would not know he was cold. Once Brand realized his life's goal was an utter failure he felt the weight of that failure and ultimately encompassed by the sin of pride exemplified in his unwillingness to acknowledge failure.

Further evidence that Brand is delusional in his belief he committed the Unpardonable Sin is Hawthorne's carefully constructed event regarding the old man Humphrey's question to Brand about his daughter. Humphrey is one of the townspeople intents on discerning whether or not Brand had succeeded in his quest. Brand had a special connection with Humphrey, however, inasmuch as Brand had engaged in some type of psychological experimentation on the man's daughter that negatively affected her. When Humphrey asks for news of his daughter, Brand is noticeably distraught and does not wish to discuss the matter[5]. This small act indicates a sense of remorse, which belies his claims of Unpardonable Sin.

Hawthorne develops Brand as a character intent on providing the ultimate treatise on sin while rejecting all other concerns common to humanity. At the same time, the author also provides numerous clues to confirm that Brand's search was not only unsuccessful but also not important to anyone other than Brand. This point was explained by Thorslev who observed that Hawthorne's

*usual method of de-emphasizing the 'moment' is to have it occur antecedent to the story's main action. Ethan Brand's decision to succumb to the particular "Idea that possessed his life," as well as most of the action dictated by that compulsion, are all antecedent to the action told in the tale[12].*

Brand is clearly prideful, arrogant, and similar to many other individuals that perceived themselves as of much greater worth than was merited. One passage that notes this is "Ethan Brand (stood) erect, with a pride that distinguishes all enthusiasts of his stamp"[5]. His sense of self-grandeur and selfishness placed him squarely in company with other misguided zealots who were recognized by others as something much less than their personal perceptions allowed. As mentioned earlier, the true nature of Brand's sins must be understood from the Puritanical perspective, and this was highlighted by Colacurcio who observed, "In psychological practice, a wild, desperate, overly willful embracing of unconditional and irrevocable reprobation is probably no easier to protect from doubt or change of mood than the astonished and relieved acceptance of one's election"[13]. This description certainly applies to Brand who willfully embraced the wild pursuit of a goal he was convinced he could attain. Interestingly, the narrative of *Ethan Brand* also implies that he was fully convinced he had found the Unpardonable Sin, at least until he returned to Graylock and started to interact with the villagers. Brand confidently introduced himself to Bartram with the words "I come from my search!... For, at last, it is finished"[5]. Brand was so convinced of his own legendary status that he believed everyone he encountered would automatically recognize him and laud his amazing accomplishment. Bartram's failure to be amazed by his mere presence was Brand's first clue that his quest was unimportant to anyone but himself. Nearly all of Brand's actions upon returning to Graylock and, indeed, the very act of returning, served as notice that he was just as far from finding the Unpardonable Sin as before he left on

his quest. An individual completely devoid of the need for human sympathy or human relationships would have no need for verification of his alleged accomplishments. Brand clearly doubted his own assertions.

Much of Hawthorne's storytelling throughout *Ethan Brand* is comprised of a series of intentional and carefully exploited misdirection weaved into the narrative. The narrator serves as an all-knowing source of correct information related to Brand and his sins and specific characters are also used to provide accurate assessments rather than personal thoughts or myths. Thus, any perception that Brand found the Unpardonable Sin, as explained by Baym [14], is derived solely from Brand's own words or thoughts-but never from any of the other characters. Baym further highlights that Brand's vehement rejection of his former friends and neighbors, following their expression of disbelief in his success, provides evidence that he realizes his own failure but chooses to lash out in reaction to that knowledge rather than acknowledging it.

In reality, Brand's quest was more quixotic than profound especially in light of the fact that no one in the village was interested in Unpardonable Sin, much less Brand's claim to have found it. The villagers were fully content to live out their relatively meaningless lives while trying to deal with their individual sins without feeling a need to gain a greater knowledge of the ultimate nature of sin. This mentality was made clear by Hawthorne from the outset of his story when Bartram laughingly referred to Brand as "The man that went in search of the Unpardonable Sin"[5]. It is possible to read *Ethan Brand* from a variety of perspectives, depending on the reader or the purpose of the analysis [11],[15],[16],[17]. However, regardless of the context, the story details a man who was intent on his own self-destruction...and that was a task he accomplished well. Brand's desire to obtain the ultimate knowledge of sin and with it, one must assume, a greater understanding of the nature of humankind, drove him away from normal human fellowship and contentment with the fundamentals of life. Brand was willing to give up everything in his pursuit of knowledge without boundaries, and Hawthorne clearly revealed that such a pursuit was destined to failure.

## Conclusion

Ironically, although none of Brand's sins prior to the end of the story would be classified as unforgivable even from the Puritanical perspective, his final act of rebellion-committing suicide by plunging into the limekiln-could be deemed Unpardonable. He chose suicide based on his realization that his ultimate quest was a failure as was his desire to gain recognition from the villagers. While claiming to have removed himself from all human sympathy, he ultimately was affected by the negative attitudes of the people of Graylock. The only redeeming quality for Brand may be in his perceived insanity, a diagnosis made more than once by the village "doctor"[5]. Potentially, then, Ethan Brand may have been pardoned for all his sins, even suicide, if he was mentally unfit, which would mean there is absolutely no trace of Unpardonable Sin in *Ethan Brand*.

**CONFLICT OF INTERESTS****There are no conflicts of interest****References**

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